



BP Solar

# S o l a r s t a r

**EDWARD NORTON**, one of the biggest stars of his generation, eschews the trappings of fame but readily uses his celebrity to promote renewable energy and other green causes. Indeed, if anything, he is even more passionate about the environment than about his acting.

Nominated for his first Oscar at the age of 26, he earned his reputation playing psychologically complex, often dark, characters in his early movies *Primal Fear* and *Fight Club*. More recently he's starred in such massive Hollywood blockbusters as *The Italian Job* and *Red Dragon*, as well as smaller productions like his most recent releases, *Down in the Valley* and *The Illusionist*.

Meanwhile, while researching solar energy systems for his Los Angeles home in 2003, Norton came up with a remarkable idea to provide environmentally friendly energy free to low-income families. He negotiated a deal with the energy company BP and the Enterprise Foundation – a non-profit organization that helps people out of poverty by creating affordable housing – where Norton worked before becoming an actor. Every time a celebrity buys a solar system from BP, one is given to a poor family in South Los Angeles. Soon he was convincing other stars – Daryl Hannah, Pierce Brosnan, Brad Pitt – to install solar electricity systems, for the good of both the planet and families in need.

'Each system essentially eliminates the family's electricity bill,' says Norton. 'Solar energy not only benefits the environment, it puts money back in people's pockets for necessities like groceries and school supplies.' In its first year, BP Solar Neighbors – as the programme is called – installed 26 systems and is working on at least 40 more. Norton hopes it will serve as a model that will help convince state authorities to fund similar projects. 'It was so easy,' says Norton. 'It made me wonder: why isn't everybody doing this?'

Norton is a third-generation environmental activist – with the experience and know-how to make a bigger difference than many of the celebrities who lend their names to favourite

causes. His grandfather, urban planner James Rouse, was famous for pioneering the indoor shopping mall and rejuvenating impoverished city centres, using his assets to establish the Enterprise Foundation after he retired.

His father – also Edward Norton – was also a big influence. 'All through my childhood, the environment was my father's work,' Norton says. 'He founded the Grand Canyon Trust, an environmental advocacy group, co-founded the Nature Conservancy's pioneering Yunnan Great Rivers conservation project in China, which works to protect the area's amazing biodiversity and cultural heritage, and now leads the Conservancy's overall Asia-Pacific programme. He talked to my brother, sister and me about environmental policy from a very early age.'

Norton is famously reluctant to embrace the celebrity lifestyle – he doesn't even own a car. 'I ride the subway at home in New York, and when I'm in Los Angeles to work, I go to a place that rents hybrids,' he says. He doesn't often walk the red carpets, court the paparazzi, or make time for TV chat shows. But he does make himself highly visible when it comes to the environment.

Early in 2006, he helped break ground on the High Line, a project to transform an abandoned stretch of elevated rail line in New York City into a public green space. The year before, he hosted and collaborated on *Strange Days on Planet Earth*, a four-part National Geographic documentary that examines humanity's impact on the planet, linking alarming environmental events to each other – such as an asthma epidemic in the Caribbean and dust storms in Africa – showing how everything on Earth interconnects.

Norton hopes *Strange Days* will encourage people to learn about and face the challenges ahead. 'I don't want to be the person saying "the end is near",' he comments. 'But we all tend to deal with everyday needs until something really serious makes us all lift our heads up to say: "This is for real – let's do something about it."'