

In solar scuffle, big utilities meet their match

By Elizabeth Shogren, High Country News

Near the end of 2005, Louise Helton had one of those life-changing moments that usually only happen in Hollywood movies. Friends had invited her to join Nevada movers and shakers in an ostentatiously decorated Las Vegas casino ballroom to hear former President Bill Clinton speak. He challenged the audience to diversify the state's economy, and to do so in a very specific way. Adopting a Southern drawl, Helton recalls the words that inspired her: "And he said, 'If I were y'all, y'all would be the Saudi Arabia of solar.'"

Clinton's pitch made sense to the 51-year-old Helton. With its abundant sunshine, Nevada was well positioned to become a clean energy leader. Besides, the state lacks its own coal or natural gas reserves, so it has to import those conventional fuels, thus benefiting other states' economies instead of its own. "There is no better or cheaper resource than the sun that is shining down on the sunniest place in the West," Helton says.

Clinton's words percolated away inside Helton for a few years. Then, in 2008, she took the leap. Using savings from the two decades she spent working with at-risk kids, she opened her own company, 1 Sun Solar Electric. She kept costs down by melding it with her life partner's successful tile and stone company, and in 2009, they started attaching solar panels to roofs in Las Vegas. Her timing was unfortunate; the recession hit Las Vegas especially hard and the impacts lingered, but Helton was able to keep her small crew working and her business in the black. By the time Nevada's economy bounced back in 2014, the cost of solar panels had plummeted. Helton's company was ready to ride the wave. "We were making a very

good living and supporting a crew of folks who were able to support their families,” she recalls.

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