

## **Back to the Future with Zero Waste by Maureen McGarry**

It was Senior Discount Day at the market and I went to buy a few items with my cloth bag in hand. Much to my dismay, 6 of the 10 items I purchased were in plastic boxes. These “clamshells” are containers that stack well, hold produce (such as berries) in a see-through, breathable vessel, and end up in my recycling bins along with glass, cans and other recyclable plastic. I know that we all somehow lived without them not so many years ago.

"Individual product packaging only became commonplace in the 1980's. Within a generation, we've lost the knowledge of how and why to buy in bulk; how to conserve resources and avoid disposal costs," says Maggie Gainer of Zero Waste Humboldt.

As soon as a recycling system was developed as a solution for a type of food or beverage packaging, a brand new product (most often plastic) would immediately come onto the marketplace. "It was never-ending. We felt like the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" in Disney's Fantasia. We're looking at a new way. It's not the old recycling we grew up with."

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, plastics accounted for 12.1 percent of the 254 million tons of municipal solid waste in 2007. Of that, only 6.8 percent was recycled.

"We are now re-learning the lessons our grandparents taught us when it comes to waste reduction," says Gainer.

Zero Waste Humboldt is a futuristic approach and a retro approach at the same time. "It's back to the future. We're aiming at finding a higher and better use of materials and diminishing our carbon footprint," said Jud Ellingwood, cofounder with Gainer. "We are more focused on natural resource conservation than recycling. It's all about cutting back on the natural resources that have gone into manufacturing with more efficient, proactive design for products and packaging."

For instance, effective ways to disperse water requires new design ideas. Providing water coolers and hydration stations in public places and at large community events improve convenience and replace single-use plastic water bottles.

Zero Waste Humboldt is collaborating with RSVP and Volunteer Center of the Redwoods to recruit volunteers for a variety of jobs. "Opportunities fall into two main categories," says Gainer, "-the very physical and the not very physical."

For the non-physical, Gainer and Ellingwood are looking for volunteers to do research. Researching facts like 827,000 to 1.3 million tons of plastic PET water bottles were produced in the U.S. in 2006, requiring the energy equivalent of 50 million barrels of oil, is sobering but also useful information. 76.5 percent of these bottles ended up in landfills, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

There are plenty more educational sources to be researched by willing volunteers. A volunteer might, for example, look up "water bars" online and get the specifications and costs and whether it's sold locally. The City of Arcata can use the information to help solve waste and resource use issues for the many large events that take place on the Arcata Plaza.

"It's not just about educating the public. It's important to have the right facts," said Gainer.

Zero Waste Humboldt also needs volunteers to work on and maintain their database, send out an eNewsletter, and serve on their board. Another project that is on the horizon is identifying and celebrating "Zero Heroes," businesses who are champions of zero waste.

"Buying single use products and packaging also means people get used to throwing it away, or inaccurately believing that recycling and composting them is an equal substitute for avoiding them in the first place," says Ellingwood. Zero Waste wants to identify those people and businesses that pay attention to the reality of waste and come up with inventive solutions to the problem.

Zero Waste Humboldt is still going through developmental steps. Many in the waste management/recycling field started out doing the physical activity- actual handling the materials, getting sweaty, and working as a team. Gainer was one of the early staff of the Arcata Community Recycling Center. "Even though ACRC diverted a significant amount of materials from landfill, probably an even more valuable product was its intellectual capital developed over 40 years. Because ACRC was distant from most of the buyers and end-users for the secondary commodities it sold, it developed an expertise and national reputation for collection, processing, and sales in value-added recycling. Today, dozens of leaders in the recycling industry --nationwide, got their start at ACRC."

Volunteers are needed for recycling/compost station monitors at large outdoor events, to greet the public and to show them where to put their discarded materials. Zero Waste Humboldt is currently helping the Arcata Chamber of Commerce to recruit and train volunteer recycling/composting monitors for the 2014 Fourth of July Jubilee on the Arcata Plaza. More help will also be needed at the North Country Fair in September. Last year's Fair had 65 Zero Waste volunteers over the course of the weekend. Zero Waste Humboldt is proud of the fact that its diverse volunteer crews are well trained and include doctors,

attorneys, teachers, high school and college students and people of all ages -- ranging from 14 to 74 years.

The next time I go to the market, I'll think twice about purchasing items in "clamshells." I might just have to buy something else to eat.

Contact Zero Waste Humboldt, at [contact@zerowastehumboldt.org](mailto:contact@zerowastehumboldt.org) to volunteer. Visit "Get Involved" at <http://zerowastehumboldt.org/content/get-involved>. Contact VCOR/RSVP at 442-3763 or email [vcor@a1aa.org](mailto:vcor@a1aa.org) for more information.



Back to the Future with Kate McClain



Back to the Future with Mary Ella Anderson