

"Reduce, Reuse, Re-think"

It wasn't the first time I found myself defending what I've always deemed a worthy endeavor. I'd been in many heated discussions debating the misconceptions surrounding recycling. Some opponents going as far as to argue that my efforts are actually worse for the environment, basing their claim on the allegation that the collecting and sorting of materials from residential waste is more energy intensive than mining and shipping raw materials. This particular antagonist made no account for the depletion of natural resources, habitat degradation by mining techniques, or the environmental impact of the plastic bottles finding their way to a landfill or worse, an incinerator. Among the controversy have been arguments that the plastic I recycle is buried until better technology makes processing post consumer materials a more viable and profitable option.

But this was the first time I found myself speechless. There I was, at a stale mate. The conversation had turned to the question of "what happens to all the bottles and cans that we throw in the recycling dumpster at the transfer station?" It was then I realized I have no idea what happens to the hundreds of newspapers, plastic bottles, glass jars, and aluminum cans that I bring to the local transfer station. I wondered how much of my recycling is actually recycled. I wanted to know where these items ended up and how they got there. My questioning spurred me to track the journey my recycling embarks on from the dumpster I leave it in. This is what I found.

The recyclables are picked up from the transfer stations in both Berlin and Grafton by Waste Management and brought to Waste Management's collection facility in Albany. Once in Albany they are then loaded for transport to Liverpool, NY where they are sorted at a single stream sorting facility run by a wholly owned subsidiary of Waste Management, WM Recycle America. In 2005 the plant was severely damaged by fire and Waste Management invested \$11 million to rebuild what would become the largest single stream recycling plant in New York (94,000-square-foot) capable of processing 20 tons of recyclables per hour. It's one of thirty throughout the US and Canada operated by Waste Management.

Single stream refers to the ability to input multiple materials at one time and separate them using various sorting technologies. Robert Comi, WM Recycle America's District Manager of NY and PA, told me that

items coming into the plant "are generally separated by mechanical means. We have screens that sort paper, magnets separate metal, optical sorters separate plastic and eddy currents separate aluminum. There isn't very much manual sorting in a single stream plant."

I wondered what was usually sorted out as trash at the facility. Mr. Comi said the most common items that come into the plant that are sorted out as non-recyclable are large plastic toys and plastic buckets, along with a fair amount of wood and non-recyclable metal items.

Mr. Comi has also seen a plateau in the amount of materials coming into the plant. Meaning New Yorkers are falling behind when it comes to sorting the wheat from the chaff. There are energy savings hiding in our trash.

On average recycling 1 ton of paper saves up to 17 trees, 380 gallons of oil, three cubic yards of landfill space, 4.2 Megawatts of energy (enough energy to heat and air-condition the average North American home for at least six months), and 7,000 gallons of water. Recycling plastic saves twice as much energy as incinerating it. The energy saved from recycling one glass bottle can run a 100Watt light bulb for four hours. It also causes 20% less air pollution and 50% less water pollution than making a new bottle from raw materials. Recycling one beer can saves 96% of the energy used to make a new can from ore. It also produces 95% less air emissions and 97% less water pollutants; according to the University of Oregon's website.

My search for answers has only reinforced my belief that our efforts to recycle do make a difference. It seems the recyclables we leave at the transfer station end up precisely where we intend them to go, which proves our time and labor spent recycling are sound investments in our future. "Reduce, reuse, recycle" is not just a slogan from the past but the steps towards a sustainable future. We must reduce the amount of "disposable" products and containers we buy. As for the disposable items we just can't do without, we should choose those made from recycled materials. But most importantly we should Re-think. Re-think what we send off to landfills. Re-think what's at stake.

