

## **Reuse: How do they come up with all these great ideas?**

Gary A. Bilbro - NRC, SMART Recycling of SC, LLC, NewGreen Consulting, LLC

Do you remember when you would take a bunch of used popsicle sticks and glue them together to make a fort for your GI Joe or as my sister would do, make a house for her Barbie? Ok, I know I am aging myself here, but as kids, a lot of us used to take all kinds of used products and convert them into something new. Today, this same kind of thinking has brought out the best in the thriving industry of Reuse. In today's every increasing world of thinking "Green," there are some great people doing some great things with products that would otherwise land in one of thousands of landfills in this country. I would like to share a couple of these stories with you.

There are over 5 million graduation gowns worn and later discarded every year. It takes 3.2 million gallons of oil to manufacture these gowns; this is equivalent to 124.8 million plastic water bottles or over 5 million tons of waste. While I have been in the recycling industry for many years, this is one item I never thought about. Thankfully Seth Yon from GreenerGrads not only thought about this, but he is now giving these gowns new life. I bet Yon probably made some great popsicle stick creations as a kid growing up in Michigan!

After attending a graduation in the spring of 2013, Yon noticed a large number of the graduates taking off their gowns and throwing them into trash bins. He quickly collected as many of these gowns as he could fit into the back of his SUV. Yon's first thought was to make graduations more sustainable and affordable for graduates and their families. He reached out to experts in the field, learning all he could from the Polyester industry, and from others knowledgeable in Reuse and Recycling.

Resulting from this research, Yon started a company called GreenerGrads. At GreenerGrads, graduates can rent gowns, which saves them money by providing them with the gowns they need for their graduation ceremonies. Once the graduates have completed their ceremony, they can simply return their gowns and Yon will clean them and prepare them for the next graduate to rent. This reduces the number of gowns ending up in our landfills and it reduces the need for new gowns to be manufactured, thus reducing the amount of oil required to make them.

Yon says; "The response has been overwhelming. We were not sure how they would react, but in Michigan, Kentucky, New Jersey and Illinois we have received a great deal of positive support from some student groups and other organizations like Goodwill Industries." Yon explained, "One aspect of our program that makes most Graduates happy is our bar-coding procedure. This allows previous gown owners and renters to see where the gowns go next." Yon says his goal within the next five years is to be able to keep 1 million gowns a year out of landfills and available for new graduates to rent. Now, that is a pretty cool idea. Much better than my popsicle stick house, that's for sure.

Another really great Reuse story I learned about recently came to me from my friend MaryEllen Etienne, Founder and Executive Director of Reuse Alliance. She told me

about this guy that was deconstructing buildings instead of letting them be demolished into a big pile of rubble. Now just think of that popsicle stick house, but this one is made of brick, mortar, wood, steel, and many other items that can be reused. The construction and demolition industry generates about 136 million tons of debris per year. Luckily reuse can help the building industry graduate to a higher degree of sustainability, too.

ReUse Consulting, a deconstruction firm based in Washington State with clients in 42 States and 4 Provinces throughout North America, helps building owners find sustainable alternatives to demolition while maximizing the benefits to society. It has trained deconstruction teams around the country, helped start new reuse operations and helped divert over 100 million pounds from the landfill. The company focuses on landfill diversion, “green-collar” job creation, historic preservation, and advancing the building material reuse industry throughout North America. Examples of ReUse Consulting’s current work includes managing some of the nation’s largest deconstruction training programs, helping remove 50,000+ sq. ft. buildings, and several disaster or urban blight related deconstruction projects involving over 4000 buildings.

In 2004 Dave Bennink started ReUse Consulting, and has now helped clients throughout North America by promoting sustainability, creating living wage jobs, and measuring the positive impacts of his community engagement, landfill diversion, resource conservation, historic preservation, and reductions in energy use/greenhouse gas emissions. Dave still helps architects and building owners meet their sustainability goals, but also focuses on helping disadvantaged workers such as inner-city youth, homeless veterans, and previously incarcerated individuals. Dave says, “ReUse Consulting is trying to create local jobs that bring money back into blighted areas that desperately need help while helping them become more sustainable. I continue to strive for win-win scenarios and to build up an industry that takes down buildings.” His long-term goal is to share what he has learned by creating as many sustainable businesses as possible.

Dave sounds like the kind of guy we could all learn from. I have another friend of mine that runs a company in Roanoke Virginia called Black Dog Salvage. You may have seen his reality show on DIY or HGTV. He makes a living out of taking items from buildings that are destined to be destroyed and sells these items to people that want to have these precious pieces of history put into their homes or buildings. Once again, this is an example of taking something old and making it new again. This is such a great concept and one that we all should follow.

MaryEllen Etienne of Reuse Alliance said, “Whether we’re talking about graduation gowns or building materials - reuse can help individuals, businesses and entire cities get closer to meeting their zero waste goals. In fact, you can’t achieve zero waste without reuse.”

To learn more about GreenerGrads you can check out their website at [www.GreenerGrads.org](http://www.GreenerGrads.org) or contact Seth Yon directly at [Seth@GreenerGrads.org](mailto:Seth@GreenerGrads.org). To learn more about ReUse Consulting you can check out their website at

[www.ReuseConsulting.com](http://www.ReuseConsulting.com) or contact Dave Bennink directly at [building.decon@gmail.com](mailto:building.decon@gmail.com).

Gary A. Bilbro - Is a Board Member for the National Recycling Coalition (NRC) and President of SMART Recycling of SC, LLC. Gary can be reached at [garyb@SMARTRecyclingSC.com](mailto:garyb@SMARTRecyclingSC.com).