

Excerpts from Recycling Pioneers Archives Project: **Penny Hansen Interview**

Penny Hansen was USEPA's first Recycling Coordinator, a post she held for 9 years.

All quotes are from the **Penny Hansen interview**, conducted by Laura Anthony at Blue Mountain Lake in 2007. Headlines in bold are by Dan Knapp. These quotes are intended for use at CRRA's 2019 conference in Rancho Mirage, California.

IS IGNORANCE BLISS?

Gradually over the next few months we began our recycling service. It was relatively easy to start. We didn't know what we were getting into, so we had the optimism of not knowing.

AS A WOMAN, I'LL TAKE STRESS OVER DEPRESSION

I remember someone saying that women traded depression for stress somewhere in the 1970s, and decided that it was a good trade.

TRUTH, VALUES, AND SUCCESS

For anyone trying to get a new movement going, no matter what the topic is, you *have* to be able to articulate both the pros and the cons. You've got to be absolutely honest. You've got to be up front with people. You can't make it look like everything's just peachy keen and great and there are no problems to solve.

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT GETS RESULTS

I came to respect people like Public Works directors who have a hard life. No one ever calls a public works director and says "Hey, the lights are shining beautifully outside my window tonight!" They call when the lights aren't on, or the garbage isn't collected. (laughing) There are a lot of people out there in municipal government who deal with nothing but complaints. These people originally looked at recycling as being another problem. They said, "I've got too much to do as it is right now!"

And yet, over and over again, those people were willing to change their minds. They actually started working *with* us on incorporating a whole new system, and in a way, a whole new ethic.

DOING RIGHT IS UPLIFTING

I think that all people want to feel like they're part of the solution as well as part of the problem. But most don't want to be terribly bothered in the *doing*. Nonetheless, I think everyone who participates in recycling thinks that they're doing "the right thing." Since

there's very little we feel we have control over when it comes to environmental protection, that sense of making even a small difference is uplifting.

MY MOST INTERESTING PROFESSIONAL DAY

My most interesting conversation was with some union drivers and workers. EPA and local government were starting a recycling demonstration in Somerville, Massachusetts. We were testing one of the first multi-material systems.

The federal government was paying to modify collection trucks and for publicity. On the day *before* it was supposed to begin, I got a telephone call from the city manager in Somerville. He said, "The union has decided that they will not do the new program unless they get more money."

We had already spent huge amounts of money publicizing the fact that it was to start the very next day. If it didn't happen, we were going to lose all credibility immediately.

So, I flew up to Boston. At 5:00 o'clock in the morning I was standing on top of a garbage truck talking to 40 guys. I brought donuts. We had an interesting conversation. They asked me a *lot* of questions.

At that point, a 5'2" blonde (laughing) standing on top of garbage trucks was not something that these guys were used to. There were a lot of — shall we say — interesting comments made. In the end, they went out and picked up the recyclables. It worked!

I've always said that was my most interesting professional day, *ever*.

WE'VE COME A LONG WAY

The percentage of Americans that were recycling in the 1970s was *very* small. I think we have forgotten how small it was. A *majority* of Americans are participating in recycling now. That is enormous! Between the 1970s and 2007 we have gained another *hundred million* people. And if 50% of them *are* participating in recycling in some way, the number is absolutely breathtaking!

Penny Hansen, USEPA

More Quotes from Recycling Pioneers Archives Project:

From Gretchen Brewer Remembers: Selections from Her Memoirs. (Gretchen Brewer died February 21, 2014, in San Diego).

I Fell into the Business of Recycling in a Big Way

As a social worker, I found myself thinking more about what people in this big city could be doing in the way of more meaningful work. I was looking for work for them, and for me, that provided both dignity and a livelihood. At a certain point it all clicked together: **recycling could be a good enterprise, a job creation enterprise.**

I hooked up with the founder and head of an organization called the Resource Center, a recycling program that started *really* early, like in 1968 in Chicago. I learned everything I could from the Resource Center's founder Ken Dunn, who is a brilliant guy.

In my first couple of years I was volunteering at the Resource Center and trying to read everything I could find. There wasn't very much. I didn't become aware that recycling was a movement until around 1982 when I went to a Northern California Recycling Association conference and I heard about the incinerator wars.

Right Livelihood

In 1978 I made up my mind that recycling was going to be my career for the rest of my life. It was like a vow. I had been reading Gandhi. Buddhist texts started me thinking about right livelihood for myself.

I didn't want to be like someone who works at a nuclear power plant and who finds later in life that he or she is really sorry because of what they did for a living. I figured with recycling I would never be sorry. Beyond the avoidance of harm, I embraced recycling with great enthusiasm because it was all so new. We had to invent things as we went along. A lot of pleasure can come with that nexus.

You didn't do it for the financial reward, though. You had first to be a volunteer. It was not possible to get a job that paid anything at first.

A Giant Breakthrough Came from a Hail Mary Research Effort

I found paying work for the City of Chicago. Harold Washington was running for Mayor. A friend of mine was working on his campaign. My friend said to me, "Gretchen, you're always talking about recycling for economic development and job creation. The economic development debate is on in a few days, so why don't you write a position paper and submit it? So, I did. I hurried! I looked up essays that Neil Seldman had written and reread things from California. I pieced together what little data I could to make a case for a plan.

My plan turned into a blockbuster that drew lots of media attention. What I submitted was a citywide waste recycling plan for Chicago that would create around 7,000 jobs.

It was the early 1980's. My friend called me up on the day of the Mayoral debate and said, "Gretchen, you won't believe this! There are a lot of dedicated campaign workers who've been working night and day putting together all sorts of position papers for Harold Washington. Yours has floated right to the top of the stack!"

Candidate Washington got on TV and announced he was going to create a citywide recycling program that would employ local people in the neighborhoods and it would create 7,000 jobs. We were thrilled!

Then Harold got elected. He scored a lot of good press from that announcement. He toppled the machine in Chicago temporarily. I went to Mayor Washington's economic people, representing the Resource Center. I said "We Resource Center people helped you with this concept. Now why don't you fund some pilot programs?" And behold, they did!

A First Recycling Service Disposal Fee Pays Resource Center for Our Work

The Resource Center got a contract and money to pay us to start buy-backs in three other communities in Chicago. Under Ken Dunn's direction, our staff used a Robin Hood type arrangement. The buy-back would be located somewhere inside a poor community where there would be lots of people from Southeast Asia, as well as blacks and Native Americans. At this time, we were also seeing a lot of abolition whites who were migrating up into this one part of Chicago. They needed the work and the money just like the others. So, they'd bring carloads of people, and they would just find a vacant lot, put in a scale, and set up the barrels.

It was the approach that Neil Seldman had described: all hand labor, even featuring a hand operated baler for cardboard. Once that buy-back got established, we'd run, small curbside routes out from the buy-back hub into the adjoining middle-class neighborhoods. So, there were little satellite programs springing up in different neighborhoods of Chicago

This grassroots model became one other city used. It had a lot of things going for it, and it lasted about 10 years.

In the interim, we also helped write the City's first waste management plan. It set a goal of recycling 25%. I co-authored the plan and goal with the planning staff from the city. I was placed on a big commission that Mayor Washington appointed. Our group got into negotiations with the Department of Streets & Sanitation.

We negotiated a diversion credit with them. The diversion credit was based on research. Since garbage disposal was paid for, recycling disposal should be paid for as well. The diversion credit paid us \$15 for every ton we kept out of the landfill.

This greatly strengthened the Resource Center and allowed it to do more good work. Ken Dunn has told me that the Resource Center earned \$10 million over 10 years during the period where that fee was in effect!

My Research Helped Sink a Mass-Burn Incinerator

Mr. Washington, and his predecessors in the Chicago Urban League — particularly Whitney Young — fostered a more positive and pragmatic approach to community organizing. These early community leaders (some called them the Chicago Eleven) dialogued with Richard Nixon to help create the US EPA, the Clean Air Act, and similar legislation in the 1950's and 1960's.

The planning process launched by Mayor Washington in 1983 brought out the big guns — proponents of high-tech approaches such as incinerators. An article at the time compared a \$107,000 consultant study by Envirodyne performed for former Mayor Jane Byrne with the free study I wrote on behalf of recycling for Mayor Harold Washington. The Envirodyne study came first, then mine.

Here is how Bruce Fisher summarized the differences, in part: “When Ken Dunn and Resource Center Development Office Gretchen Brewer watched the candidates debate job development plans and heard that Washington was thinking about recycling..., they got in touch with him.”

“By March 11, 1983, Brewer had submitted a 14-page study/proposal...to Washington's research staff... It is a minuscule document compared to the massive Envirodyne opus, but its very existence — and its contents — demonstrate that the \$107,000 spent on the Envirodyne Report may have been a waste of money.

“What Harold Washington got for free from the Resource Center is a well-researched study of how Chicago mishandles its garbage. Gretchen Brewer's study suggests that...\$40 of every \$100 that Chicago spends to get shut of its garbage goes for “landfill fees, incineration, and long-distance hauling” and therefore each ton of junk diverted to a recycling system would save the city forty bucks.

“Given that about 36% of the solid waste produced here is recyclable, all that's needed to save \$109 million over...five years is to come up with a way to collect the stuff that can be resold. And Ken Dunn, as people all over the South Shore know, has such a system in place.”¹

In 1983 and 1984, what I had learned about incinerators from Urban Ore and other Bay Area and East Coast recycling leaders had proven timely and persuasive. As part of the Chicago Waste Management Planning Task Force, I was able — along with the rest of our recycling committee — to counter forces wanting mass burn incinerators. An op-ed I wrote titled “Burning Waste and Money” summarized my argument for Chicago.

¹ Bruce Fisher, “Campaign Watch: Recycling Politics,” in *Short Cuts*. 1983.

I Moved East and Took a Government Job

It was around 1982 when I became a paid member of the staff at the Resource Center. Then I worked for them as the development officer. I started new programs, and did lots of public education. Eventually I found just couldn't live on the low salary. I had an opportunity to apply with Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection in '85. I got the job, and moved east

We Posted Many Firsts in Our Two-State Plastics Recycling Plan

From 1986 to 1988, I designed the plastics recycling plan for Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The challenge we faced was to explain the situation to the public. I saved my own plastic discards for 1 year. Then I measured and projected the results out into the cubic yards of "permitted landfill airspace" for 4 million people over 20 years. With a dense, still-growing population, and little open space for new landfills, it was clear that aggressive plastics recycling was our best bet.

But, plastics recycling was so new at that time! My work group once again was required to create new solutions never tried before. We literally had to start from zero, creating a two-state program.

For starters, we knew we'd need MARKET PULL to assure that collected plastics would be converted, sold, and used again as new products. So, I began searching for ANY company ANYWHERE that was making ANYTHING out of recycled plastics.

It was slim pickings in the US, with only a handful of companies using post-consumer plastics. However, we learned that European and Canadian companies were making recycled plastic products. We knew IT COULD BE DONE.

We looked for ways that state government could become a large customer for recycled plastic products. The prospect of guaranteed sales would be a key incentive we would use to convince manufacturers to retrofit plants or invest in new technology for using recycled plastic raw materials. Massachusetts did not have a Buy Recycled policy, program, or interest. So, we had to choose a recycled post-consumer plastic product over which the Massachusetts Division of Solid Waste could control the purchasing decision.

The Suspense Was On...Us

First, we had to pioneer a product. And where better to begin than with the statewide recycling program? If we were going to COLLECT plastics, then why not also FEATURE recycled plastic products in the program? We chose recycling set-out containers, at the time the well-known "blue box." We thought manufacturers would be motivated by the chance to sell millions of them to state government.

In practice this was a big gamble for us. We did not know for sure if ANY vendors offered, or were capable of producing, recycled content set-out containers. But, we took the leap. **In 1986 we issued the first purchase order in the United States for this product.** We specified 10-25% post-consumer plastic. Boxes with higher content would score higher in the bidding. We required that sample containers be included with all bids.

The suspense was on, then, to see if any bidders would meet our specs. The samples that came in were a motley assortment — mostly off-the-shelf items intended for altogether different purposes, like plastic crates and even a large flower pot! But, thankfully, we also received several promising looking containers.

We Set Standards While Shooting in the Dark

Our next challenge was to rate the samples without benefit of established standards for strength, weatherability, and so on. So, we invented a highly scientific (?) method we called the “stomp test”. We turned each container upside down on the floor, then my boss leaped into the air and jumped on it with his full weight. We figured his weight approximated one to two weeks’ worth of recyclables plus wear and tear.

We disqualified all containers that cracked, collapsed, or did not spring back to their original shape. Fortunately, two passed. We ended this phase by selecting the one with better design features, proof of recycled content, and delivery guarantees.

In this way, **Massachusetts became the first state in North America to issue a recycled post-consumer plastic content standard for recycling set-out containers.** Once 25 percent content was proven, it was an easy step to require 75 percent and then 100 percent.

Getting this one product launched set the ball rolling for what soon became the industry standard nationwide. Indeed, most jurisdictions now specify post-consumer plastic content not only for recycling set-out containers, but for a wide variety of compost and garbage collection bags, bins, and other receptacles.

I Became a Plastics Industry Insider, but it Proved to be Unsustainable

I was hired into the State of Massachusetts Environmental Program because of my success as a recycling movement researcher and a writer of credible and influential reports that delivered measurably better results in the early stages. **I had done little or no work on plastics as a separate market category when I was given the job of writing the state plan for plastics recycling.**

You might think I was unprepared, and in one way I was. I had never even taken a chemistry class! I had to give myself the equivalent of a crash college major in polymer chemistry. I started out thinking plastics were impossible to recycle. Also, I had an attitude against the plastics industry because it had not stepped up to take responsibility for its products via recycling programs.

But my general training and experience worked to my advantage. **Research methodologies are wonderful tools because they can readily refocus on new**

questions. I spent the next twelve or so years answering key questions about plastics, which became a big issue worldwide at that time.

I had some victories, and some defeats. The victories came early, the defeats later on. Throughout, I entered a new and unfamiliar workspace highly charged with passionate emotion. **At times it was difficult to stay on track with my principles.** I changed employment many times, becoming bicoastal, with a heartland-ish underlayment.

Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, 3 years. This was my debut performance in a to-then neglected subfield of recycling. My research on the Statewide Plastics Recycling Plan covered all elements of full-scale recycling systems as developed at that point in Europe and the US, including plastic discard generation, public health and environmental problems from plastics; collection methods; and market studies for recycled outputs such as pellets and lumber. Through tours, conferences, and consulting with experts, I analyzed Materials Recovery Facilities' processing methods and costs and assessed the performance of competing recycling technologies.

Council for Solid Waste Solutions (CSWS), 2 years. Working for this industry group was to be the pinnacle of my plastics career, but the seeds for a longer-term decline sprouted there as well. In this insider role, I served as strategic advisor to a well-funded plastics industry consortium formed to defend plastics from bans and other restrictions. I educated the public and decision-makers on the benefits of plastics and began building a plastics recycling infrastructure via research, pilot programs, grants, technology development, and other initiatives.

After My Purge by the Plastics Industry, I Returned to Government, Working for the San Diego County Dept of Solid Waste and Recycling, one year, plus two more years as volunteer lead of Plastics Task Force. I designed a plastics recycling action plan for San Diego County. Per a directive from the County Board of Supervisors, I negotiated industry support and evaluated the outlook for a countywide plastics recycling program rather than enacting bans or other restrictions on Styrofoam™ and other plastics.

Earth Circle, 6 years. I became an independent self-employed consultant on various plastics recycling projects. One big one was a plastics waste management implementation plan that involved designing and running a shipboard plastics waste composition study for Naval Station San Diego. I worked on technology transfer for the first plant in the USA that made trash bags from 100% post-consumer plastic film. I performed an agricultural film plastics recycling feasibility study for San Diego growers.

I tried to keep an open mind throughout this twelve-year specialization, recognizing that while I might hate certain plastic products like packaging, I also valued other plastic products like my computer and eyeglasses. My view was that if the plastics industry was going to market an ever-increasing quantity and diversity of products, then they should take responsibility for implementing genuine, comprehensive recycling programs for optimum recovery of this scarce resource.

Eventually, and increasingly, it became difficult to hide my disappointment at some of the tactics I witnessed. **Eventually I became a critic of the industry, based on their actual performance. This had very negative consequences for my financial well-being.**

Here's Some Elder Advice to the Next Generation about the Plastics Industry

The plastics industry is like the multi-headed hydra, always growing more branches, and branches of branches. The more we righteous recyclers mount campaigns against them, the more we will incur their oppositional tactics. **We must beware underestimating their power or thinking we've bested them. Even if we win occasionally, they have the ability to outspend us, outlast us, and most especially to out-evil us.**

Remember that the plastics industry is the petroleum industry, is the chemical industry, is the pharmaceutical industry, is the weapons industry, is the military industrial complex. *The Seven Sisters* describes one phase — the break-up of Standard Oil in the US — and the divvying up of world oil reserves among the main countries — US, Britain, & the Netherlands, originally after World War II. This led to OPEC embargo in the '70s. Later, Mexico & Russia became players too.

Here is a list of common plastics industry techniques that I observed:

- Put words in your mouth.
- Mis-state what you are about and get you so tangled up in a mess of obfuscation that you waste your time and energy trying to clarify your stance.
- “Have sound bite, will obfuscate.”
- Distort your concern by claiming it is really something else.
- Change names frequently, like Native American shape-shifters did, and do.
- Rewrite history – as in claiming falsely that recyclers were wildly happy about the resin codes.
- Deliberately get you outraged and off-balance.
- Trot out “experts” and official sounding organizations, like the Plastic Bottle Institute?, or the Center for Plastics Recycling Research (CPRR).
- The more heated the controversy, the more committees and councils with formal sounding names suggesting scientific rigor: organizations like COPPE and NREL.
- Harp on the safety of plastic food packaging to avoid foodborne disease and guard public health.
- Never underestimate the plastics industry.
- The plastics industry does not play fair.

These techniques constitute a page from a well-worn playbook that's become very familiar since the Citizens United decision, and since G.W. Bush relaxed many other regulations. Now, a corporate bigshot need only wait one year before he can go to work as a high-paid lobbyist influencing the US Congress to favor the big multinationals.

Many former executives are available for this work while hanging safely suspended by their golden parachutes.

Industry, in a 2013 retrospective from American Chemistry Council, claimed resin codes were popular with recyclers, the opposite of the truth. A National Recycling Coalition committee that was convened to get the codes withdrawn was outlasted, out-lobbied, and finally outvoted by the plastics industry in a showdown at a board of director's meeting about a year before the NRC membership collapsed and the organization spent a couple of years reconstituting itself. By phasing in plastics-friendly legislation in the first states, the plastics industry was able to head off more restrictive packaging measures while legislators were convinced to give industry time to phase in codes in more states. Ultimately 39 states adopted the codes, and only 1 state later repealed the codes, I think Vermont.

The plastics industry's claim that burning packaging plastics will improve combustion in incinerators — which they call “borrowed energy or fuel value,” takes advantage of legislators' ignorance of how these high-tech systems work, and a matching ignorance by them of what's really in the discard stream. It's very tempting to government decision-makers to throw big bucks at a black box fix. Incinerators look good because they generate energy, and they are a remedy for anti-landfill NIMBY-ism.

Some arms of the plastics hydra urge governments to adopt flow control rather than allow free-market competition for the discard stream.

More Quotes from Recycling Pioneers:

Ken Dunn interview. Ken Dunn started the first Curbside collection program in the USA, in 1967. His nonprofit Resource Center has reinvented its business model many times, and is still operating in 2019. This interview was conducted by Wynne Coplea of Springfield, Illinois.

DAD TAUGHT ME THE MECHANICS OF LIFE

I think the best thing I learned from my dad was to figure things out on the spot. He never said, "...you can't do this or that" — some aspect of whatever at the time we were doing. And so, when the tractor broke down while I was driving it, I liked to figure out what was wrong and whether I could get it going again before my dad got back. I wanted to learn how to fix things fast.

Sometimes he would tell me "It's remarkable that you could get that tractor running. Not everybody can figure out why a machine won't run, and then fix it." I was never told to call a specialist to help. My father's philosophy was, "When you see a need, see if you can find a connection to something that went wrong and that caused the need. Then repair it yourself whenever you can."

WC: And you didn't call a repair person, right?

KD: No repair person was needed. There were several times in my growing up years when I surprised my father. When I was about 8 or 9, he came out to the machine shed and saw that I had the tractor torn in half. It was all in pieces. He was just so startled! He said, "How are you ever going to get it back together?" And I said, "Exactly how I took it apart."

I dismantled the tractor because it was leaking oil.

Ken Dunn, recycling entrepreneur

Kansas Farmhand Enrolls at University of Chicago

My boyhood experience of living and working in our Kansas farming community was inspirational. We had a highly functioning community. We and all our neighbors were all very responsible with all of the resources entrusted to our care.

So, I was totally startled by the dysfunction I saw when I got to Chicago. In Chicago, away from the Hyde Park enclave, I saw non-functioning communities with needs that nobody seemed to have any notion of how to fix. Not enough was being done to take care of the needs of children.

Ken Dunn

Local Change Can Move the World

As an undergraduate in Kansas, I had been against nuclear weapons and against the Viet Nam war. I noticed back then that most people were thinking, “That war is national politics; there’s nothing we can do about that.” What could we do to get people to think they could change things?

I thought, “What if we got the community involved in changing the most local activity possible? That would be how the community collects and processes its discards.” It struck me that if you gave the community the experience of being able to choose a fair and equitable way to “take out the garbage,” everyone would start thinking, “if we can change this, then maybe we could change things on the city, state, national, and even international level.”

I wanted that change to happen, so as soon as I saw that we were onto something, our message was that together, we could empower communities by testing ways to pick up our discarded materials and redesigning these recovery systems as needed so the materials get conserved and used. As we did that, we could also change a number of other things.

I invented Curbside Collection by Combining it with Buyback

As a University of Chicago student, I had this notion of doing an “intervention” as a class project. My experiment would be an approach to social justice and equality at the same time. I prepared by doing research to find out more about unemployment, and to figure out how to estimate the number of vacant lots in Woodlawn.

I borrowed a van. It was big enough that I could get 6 empty barrels — 55-gallon drums — inside. I drove the van and barrels to a vacant lot next to a liquor store that I knew about. As expected, there were 5 or 6 guys drinking there. They liked to throw their empty bottles over a fence into the vacant lot.

I said, “Hey guys, work with me here! We’ll pick up all these empty bottles, sort them by color, and put them in these barrels. After they’re full, I’ll go sell them. I’ll be back here in two hours after I sell everything. I will split up the money with you. I’ll take one part, and each of you that works will take an equal part.”

They did it. They helped me fill the barrels with recyclables. I got back to them a couple of hours later with the money. It turned out that an equal share came to about \$2.75 apiece. \$2.75 for each of us was at least approaching a fair wage. It had taken us about an hour for to pick up and sort the bottles and cans.

My experiment seemed promising. I realized that building value out of unrecognized resources was not just a theoretical thing, something I could build a PhD on. It was a project that could be done. It would make a difference in social justice terms. And it could grow of its own accord.

As I passed out the money, I saw that the guys were very pleased. Just as I was walking away with my thoughts, one of the guys said, “Hey, man, where do we work tomorrow?”

And when he said that, I thought: “Well! Expanding materials recovery is one way this community can turn itself around by using the neglected resources that have been left there by outside commercial interests.” Still, I was about to say, “No, no, you don’t understand, I’m doing this as a school project. I might even get a PhD out of this! I’m going to go back and write it up. Others will read it. I’ll see some of the results in a few years.”

But I couldn’t bring myself to say that, so I said, “I don’t know right now where we’ll work next. I’ll be back within 2 weeks with an answer.”

Ken Dunn

The First Mobile Buybacks, and How They Grew

A few days later, I came back from the University with a mimeographed map of the area. I put slots into it every two blocks where I would be with a truck at particular times.

I told people that I would be here and here and here with my scales and cash, on a schedule. That way, they could accumulate all the bottles, cans and papers. Then they could bring them to me at those designated locations for pickup and payment. I would weigh them up and pay them cash.

When the first day came, it was a resounding success. I filled the truck and spent all the money I brought along to pay the collectors. Then I got the money back at the scrap yard. It was working! **That’s how the little experiment I tried became a weekly collection route for a mobile buy-back service.**

Either-Or Thinking Replaces Buyback with Curbside

WC: And you started that in 1968, and it’s still going on today?

KD: Well, no. Eventually it became the core of our Chicago Housing Authority’s recycling program. It became our local buy-back program for this part of the city. The reason it became a project of the CHA was that the City of Chicago mandated that CHA had to accomplish the same recycling goal as all the other city departments.

Just recently, the City dropped that requirement. **They said a buyback wasn’t needed anymore, because now we had single stream curbside collection.** Without the mandate, CHA and its partner agencies dropped the buyback service. The buyback closed down on the 1st of July this year, 2018. It did last a long time, 50 years.

The “Diversion Credit” Fueled Resource Center Expansion

WYNNE COPLEA: Tell us some of what you’ve done related to policy and program education.

KD: The “Diversion Credit” comes to mind. After years of not getting anywhere when we asked the City to pay some of the costs for our expanding recycling program, I initiated what I called the Diversion Credit. The Diversion Credit was an amount of money that we would be paid that was tied to whatever tonnage we took out of the waste stream. It would be equal to what the City would pay to dispose of the same tonnage in a landfill, if it were to be handled as waste by their system.

Of course, that was a clear winner for the City. For the tonnage we handled, not only did the City not have to pay what they would pay a landfill, but they also would not need to pay their collection, trucking, labor and transfer costs either.

For years, our recycling was partly paid for by this Diversion Credit.

Ken Dunn

Our Nonprofit has Many For-Profit Subsidiaries

One of the provisions in nonprofit law is that your non-profit status can be revoked if you found yourself in a field that you could profit from. So, every time I had a unit that was turning profitable, I sold it to my manager who ran the appropriate for-profit subsidiary. This group of subsidiaries is why the Resource Center happens to be the parent of a number of other more specialized recycling entities. The nonprofit specialized on developing whatever parts of materials recovery that we could, and when they got profitable enough to sell, we sold them to our for-profit subsidiary.

Everyone reading this should note that a non-profit can have a for-profit subsidiary. Having that subsidiary means the parent can put its profitable businesses into it.

Ken Dunn

So Many Subsidiaries....

WC: I think it’s fascinating that the Chicago Resource Center has either spun off or still manages so many different enterprises. You have curbside recycling. You have commercial collection at several places for typical recyclable materials, right?

KD: Yeah.

WC: And then you have drop-off centers....

KD: Yes, but only two at this point.

WC: And you have the Creative Reuse Warehouse; you have the bicycle repair workshop; you do the composting on vacant lots scattered around the city. We talked at length about the mobile farms. Plus, you have a closed-loop food recovery route where you pick up from restaurants.

KD: Yeah. Our truck driver operates with a cell phone. So maybe a caterer calls us at 11 o’clock and says, “I’ve got 6 turkeys prepared to serve at noon, but the wedding’s been cancelled. Can you come and pick up these turkeys? Our driver knows where lunch is

being served at some nearby pantry. So, he can swing by the caterer's and pick up the turkeys and then drop them off at the pantry or shelter that's serving lunch to homeless people.

This food recovery service is sort of like the one run by the Greater Chicago Food Depository. But we call it the Prepared and Perishable Food Service. It's food that's too good right now to send to a warehouse, stored in a cooler, and then sent out on another truck. You can't keep the turkeys warm or hot that long.

WC: Don't you also do community gardens and use some of the harvest in a restaurant or café?

KD: We participated in most of the community gardens that popped up in Chicago. Often, we'd organize them with help from a block club. Or we'd just be contacted by a block club for some help; we'd sometimes deliver some compost to them to get them started.

Also, we partner with JEM, out of Temple Isaiah Israel. Rolland Neville runs that program. He salvages from community gardens and takes the food to homeless shelters.

Every year, everybody's gung-ho out there planting community gardens in the spring. But come mid-August some of them go on vacation for a month. It's hot, too. Significant production from the community gardens go to waste in the fall because the gardeners can't keep up. JEM steps in and harvests the food while the gardeners are away, or too busy.

WC: Do you have a café that is open regularly?

KD: No. But when we started Blackstone Bikes in our first location, we had a bakery that sold bread. The site also had a Creative Reuse room and a free book exchange. We provided tools for repairing autos plus woodworking and metalworking tools. *That* still operates as a community center. My manager from those early years runs it now. It's called "Experimental Station," and it's at 61st and Dorchester... There has been a coffee shop off and on there, and it is still there now.

It's not easy to run coffee shops in Chicago because of Starbucks and other coffee shop chains. So, Resource Center doesn't operate a coffee shop anymore. But we have, at times.

Our Latest Venture: Food Recovery

I took on a new project three years ago. We bought a 120,000 square foot warehouse! That's a 3-acres big warehouse, with 6 more acres of mature forest now growing on what was formerly the parking lot. The building was built as a street car garage in 1896. The 6-acre outside yard was parking for the street cars. The building had been abandoned. It needs a lot of work.

So, I started a project I called Sustainable Nutrition Institute. The building has 12 truck doors, which are necessary for food recovery expansion.

Having been doing composting for a considerable time in Chicago, I am aware that between 600 and 1,000 tons per day arrives in this food hub of Chicago in an unacceptable condition. For example, take a sea container of bananas. If some of the bananas are brown on the outside, the whole container is written off as a loss. It's either sent to compost or to the landfill. The bananas are not ready to eat by my taste, but they are for a lot of people who wait a little longer for them to get their full sweetness.

So, with this Sustainable Nutrition Institute, we will ask the City of Chicago to enter a new way of operating. Never send any nutritious to landfill or compost directly, but send it to the Sustainable Nutrition Institute instead. There, it will be inspected as it was unloaded.

The bananas that just have a brown spot or two will be re-loaded right into other trucks. They will go out to farm stands and homeless shelters to be eaten that day and the next few days.

Food that comes to Chicago has to have 7 days to 10 days freshness left in it, because that's how long it takes to get from the distributor to Jewel, or to the corner grocery store. Then it has to last a couple of more days on the shelf.

I've received a truckload of onions where the onions on the outside and top froze. We unpacked those boxes that were on the outside and composted the onions that froze. The rest of the onions could just be distributed for eating. I've taken a semi-trailer load of sweet corn that was just too brown but was still quite good animal feed.

So, this 600 to 1,000 tons a day would be routed either back out to be eaten in the next three days or so, or go to industrial kitchens where it would be canned for future use. Or it would be baked into banana bread or made into salsa. It's a four-step process: the first is for food to be sent back out and eaten directly; second to be prepared for being eaten later after a kitchen took it; third would be animal food; and fourth, some would just be composted.

Food Recovery and Composting and Vacant Lot Gardening Could Generate 200,000 Jobs

We worked toward this new project while noticing that with all the vacant lots there's tremendous job potential. But we found that to grow food on the vacant lots we needed to grow only in compost elevated above the existing soil. That's because we've tested over 200 lots in the city over these last 50 years. We've found that none of them have soil that you'd want to grow plants in for human consumption because of lead, arsenic, zinc, cadmium and other contamination.

So, if we need both jobs and healthy vegetables in communities, there are still communities that have 50% percent unemployment and 50% percent vacant lots. If all of

those vacant lots had compost on them, 5 full time jobs could be created on each acre. That would be 200,000 entry level jobs for our city.

Sustainability is going to be achieved by more equality on our communities with quality of life existing both in the north side and south side. We'll use their resources — vacant lots and a high level of job-seeking individuals — to produce food on those farms.

WC: This is just such a logical choice. It's a closed loop; it's a beautiful thing!

KD: We've done job training in urban agriculture with hard-to-place ex-offenders. It's really quite attractive how they identify with getting to work outdoors. They see the results of their labor day-by-day, with beautiful crops growing within weeks of starting. We don't preach to them. They soon notice the parallels between their rebuilding of their *own* lives and us rebuilding the city.

It's quite obvious to you and I, but we've got a way to go to convince others.

There are 40,000 vacant acres in this city. If all those lots were gardens, we could produce 5 jobs that pay between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year for 5 employees. At 5 employees per acre, 40,000 acres is 200,000 jobs.

I've Had Multiple Threats and Intimidation Attempts

I've had multiple threats against me personally. The first came over the phone.

"I'm down here at the Union hall" said a guy on the line, "and I wouldn't recommend any harm to *anyone*. But I'm hearing conversation among some of the guys I work with who are sort of hot-headed. They want to discourage you from developing your recycling program. I hear them saying that they know where your home is, where your kids go to school, who you're working for and where you work. So, this is just a heads-up. I'm concerned that there be no violence."

At one point, they actually got the City to condemn my home. It needed tuck pointing around the bricks in a wall. But the judge sided with me, because I compromised and had a brick company rebuild the entire wall. That got the court case dismissed. That upset was caused by the Union's wanting only the big waste companies operating.

There was another time a few years later. A guy called me on the phone. He was inquisitive about what I was doing, where I could go with a truck to make a pickup. But he wouldn't give me his name or phone number or address. And then he said, "I know you work late. I can meet you anyplace on your route with what I need to offload to you."

I had already figured out that this was a repeat of the first threat. It was fishy. I was scheduled to do a drop box collection early next day in the Village of Oak Park. So, I said, "Well, I'll be doing a collection in Oak Park before the city comes alive. I'll be at this address — I think it was on West Sheraton — at about 5:30 A.M. to meet you." It was a Sunday morning. He said, "Okay, I'll meet you there."

Actually, I'd given him the address of the parking lot at the Oak Park police station. And 5:30 AM was the hour that the shift changed, so there would be lots of police walking around.

I was there at 5:30 AM for the appointment. This 4-wheel drive came in, with 4 burly guys in muscle shirts inside. As soon as they turned into the parking lot, they stopped. Police were walking everywhere. I acknowledged them with a friendly wave, and walked over to their vehicle. I said, "We were supposed to meet here to talk, right?" And they said, "Well, no, we were just passing through. I think we got all that we wanted." And they just drove away.

Ken Dunn

To Be an Effective Steward, Think Like a Farmer

I was in high school by the time my dad became disabled and wasn't working anymore. But he did come out on the first day of harvest, to watch us work. I was combining wheat. I had detected an issue coming from the machine early in the day. So, I stopped harvesting and fixed it before it got bad.

Dad said he had noticed me being very careful to adjust and operate the machines so as to not waste any of our crop. Then he told me this: "You have a real sensitivity towards plants and machines. I hope you keep that and apply the same sensitivity to people, for all the rest of your life."

His blessing was typical of how our community thought and acted. There was no distinction between taking care of the plants, animals, soil, the machines and the community itself. **Taking care of all of them at once involves listening more than expressing yourself, finding out what the plant and the animal and the machine needs are before you emphasize what you need. Hear what is happening before you ask a machine to do things it can't do if the problem persists.**

WC: That's a lovely thing. I wish there were more of that kind of stewardship ethic out there.

KD: There's some pleasure that comes to you if you don't have conflicts between one or another solution being proposed. Conflicts like these typically come up over questions like "...do we take care of the jobs, or the economy? Do we take care of the environment, or industry?" When you think like a farmer, there's no tension between these different interests. They all depend on each other.

The central activity of human life is to find ways to live on the thin surface of this particular planet. Our culture really does need the climate, the plants, and the animals we inherited — all of them — to support us. If we can't retain diversity and pluralism, if we can't operate sustainably in this age, we'll end species upon species.

Eventually, we ourselves will be among the extinct.

Summing Up: Two Stories

Just the other night I heard a storytelling program on NPR called The Moth Radio Hour. I thought “Sometime if I have time I’ll see if I can get on with my story. If I ever do that, I’m going to tell about some things I Learned by working with and in an Impoverished community.”

The first one would be the story I told you earlier, about my little venture in Woodlawn to see if we could turn cleaning vacant lots into a business. My life veered off its course into a big new horizon when the gentleman said, **“Where do we work tomorrow?”**

From that incident I learned the responsibility of having ideas. If the idea’s intent is to impact society, then stick with the developing impact. Don’t drop off into the theoretical.

The second thing I learned from Woodlawn came to me when I was digging in one of these vacant lots. Some boys came by. It was about dusk. I heard two boys walking down the street. Then I heard them kick a bottle. It smashed as it hit against a curb. I thought, hm! I’d better keep low or I may be having trouble here.

But as they got closer, one boy saw a pile of bricks I had built up, and some boards that I had piled nearby. One boy said to the other, “What are these bricks and boards doing here?” And the other guy commented, “I think they’re building a garden.” Then the first boy said, “That’s what they ought to do with all these dumb old lots.”

Listening to these kids, I’m thinking “...yeah! We should turn this little experiment into an ambitious plan to have a community where there are no barren and despoiled vacant lots to injure the people who live among them. We can just clean them all up and make them productive.”

I’m still working on that vision that these boys confirmed. They were telling me, “Hey, it’s easy enough to see that making gardens is what we ought to do with all these dumb old lots.”

And so, end of story. It’s now 50 years later. It’s been a very pleasant life. I learned how to enjoy my life and work while experiencing it in an impoverished community. No sense of loss, no regrets.

Ken Dunn, recycling entrepreneur

Quotes from Recycling Pioneers: Tania Lipshutz/Levy

As Tania Lipshutz, this remarkable woman wrote “Garbage to Energy: The False Panacea,” an influential booklet that was widely read by recycling advocates worried about unfair competition for the resources. Later, her testimony stopped the first mass-burn Incinerator proposed for the State of California, setting the stage for many burn plant battles to come. Gary Liss was the interviewer.

I Was Ahead of the Curve on Recycling

I was born in the USA in 1946. As a young girl, I lived in center-city Philadelphia, which was old ethnic fish markets plus a variety of other stores, and small unimproved houses. There was a junk man who would come around and get our bottles and metals and cardboard. There was a milk man who would pick up empty bottles of milk and leave full bottles of milk. A few years later we kept our discarded food separate for the pig farmer. I guess I was before the curve.

But it was just natural; it was the thing to do in my family. My parents were of the frugal generation. Reuse and repair things. Don't buy too much. The purpose of money was to give it away to people who needed it, not to buy more stuff for yourself.

GL: So it wasn't a social movement, it was just what your family did when they needed to get rid of things.

TL: Right. But I was primed for something bigger. As I grew up and entered college, my mom would keep the bottles and papers for me to handle. When I came home from school there they would be, neatly organized and ready for me to find someplace in the city to take them.

Tania Levy

Scaling Up

There was a time around 1968, where Ecology Action and others in Berkeley had gotten drop-off recycling going. That was when I first got involved in what soon blew up into the worldwide recycling movement, by taking things to that Berkeley drop-off site. I just started thinking of recycling as “Of course! This is something we should do as a society.”

In the early 1970's I went up north to a ranch community to live. It was a 5,000-acre community of people. I had 80 acres to live on, and we all had some farm chores to do in common. There were recycling barrels on the farm for all to use.

In 1973 there was a recycling processing company not far away in Ukiah. So, we would haul recyclables down to those working recyclers in my pickup truck, or somebody else's pickup truck. Compared to the home I grew up in, we at the farm were doing recycling on a bigger scale, and that was interesting.

I Went Looking for an Apprenticeship

I went back to school too, to get another degree and learn my chosen trade. I took a couple of years' worth of professional courses in environmental studies. We had a Steady State Economics class. We learned how to do Whole Systems Analysis for Environmental Impact Reports. We learned about different levels of analysis: the physical, the biological, the social, the monetary.

Then I read an article about a garbage-to-energy plant being proposed for a five-county area north of San Francisco. Our county, Sonoma, was the center of that cluster, so I thought it was likely that it would be built and operated near where I was living.

This incinerator was the first proposal from the California Waste Board that had been funded, so a lot was riding on it. But when I read through its pages, it looked wrong to me. It looked like they were leaving things out of the analysis.

So that's how I found my apprenticeship. I went down to the recycling center to find out what they knew about this plan to burn garbage nearby. And I found that they already had a file cabinet full of information. I read and learned as much as I could as fast as I could. But there was a lot to cover, and before I got very far, I was already showing up at meetings.

I drove to Mendocino County to make a comment to electeds who were already favoring the burn plant project. I got a hitchhiker to read more of the recycling center's material to me as we drove to the meeting. Then I gave a speech, to tell them about the technology they were approving.

Garbage Reincarnation

You may ask how long did it take me to get into the field once I found it? About 24 hours. Advocacy turned into my paid work. It wasn't all mental. The recycling center job that I was offered was about half physical work and half lobbying — writing position papers and making presentations.

I worked for a small but fast-growing nonprofit company called Garbage Reincarnation. It was run by Mike Anderson. Some of the staff at first suspected that I was a spy for the garbage companies. Here they were, already doing battle over wasting versus conservation, and now comes this woman with all this enthusiasm. She goes through their files. She acts like she really cares. Where did *this* come from? (Laughs)

But I won them over. I baled enough cardboard. (laughing)