

AT YOUR DISPOSAL

One person's trash is another's teaching tool

Dumpster diving couple decides to turn trash into teaching treasures

By Chrissy Kadleck

After some covert dumpster-diving missions around the industrial park where his manufacturing company I Was Framed is located in Gardena, Calif., Steve Stanton knew there was plenty to learn from what others leave behind.

Stanton, along with his wife, Kathy — both recently schooled in the idea of using recycled and found objects as creative learning tools for their son's preschool — decided to create a company that would transform this trash to treasure.

"I was just amazed at the variety of things that are thrown away and how colorful and wonderful they are," said Stanton, who has been in the manufacturing business for 35 years and maintains an architecture license. "We realized there was sort of a world of materials around, and in a city the size of Los Angeles, how many needy schools and children there are, it seemed like a natural to explore starting some sort of center where these things could be distributed to schools."

From there, the couple bought a recycled postal truck with a mere 215,000 miles on it, outfitted it with some bins and shelves, filled it with donated materials, and Trash for Teaching, Inc. was founded in May 2004.



TALKING TRASH: Students enjoy a craft period with scrappy supplies from Trash for Teaching.



The company's first stop? The Los Angeles Unified School District, which has about 450 schools and 800,000 students.

Once the arts teachers were on board, Trash for Teaching got the green light to start visiting elementary schools with its "Treasure Truck" (the diesel truck that has since been converted to run on straight waste vegetable oil) and an arts facilitator to transport materials and support to teachers and students.

"The thing that we are really doing is eliminating the need for schools and teachers to go out and buy materials that someone is going to manufacture," said Stanton, who estimates that if all schools in the greater Los Angeles area would use these materials, up to 500 tons of waste could be diverted from landfill annually. "We're offering to kids a much more creative process to challenge to them in learning that can't real-

ly be achieved with traditional materials that people go buy."

Working with 45 industries, Trash for Teaching offers an unlimited supply of unique materials including yarn, wood pieces, pen parts, plastic film cases, credit card-sized plastic chips, fabric, cardboard and upholstery.

The company regular visits 40 schools, and more than 3,500 students have gone through the truck to choose their trash-to-treasure materials.

"It's growing like crazy. We're training and hiring arts consultants and teachers to go out and do these programs for us," Stanton said. "We're going to double from this year compared to last because we are doing twice as many classes."

He said this program could be replicated all around the country and he's hoping to partner with waste management companies and others to broaden the company's scope.

"It's just the right thing to do; there is such a tremendous need, and there's not a school out there that wouldn't love to have these materials. The biggest challenge for us is always the financial side of it," said Stanton, who continues to donate his time as executive director, as does his wife Kathy, the director of the program. "We're very efficient in terms of dollars spent on kids. Almost every dollar goes to making these programs work. But the goal is to find partners and funds so that we don't have to charge schools at all." ■

Contact Waste News correspondent Chrissy Kadleck at ckadleck@sbcglobal.net

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