

Spin the Bottle

Sustainable Futures gives old glass new life



Story by Lindsey Hileman
Photos by Lenny Wheeler

Carlyn Blake laughs while she racks her brain, trying to figure out what in the world can be done with an old Crown Royal bottle. But this isn't just light-hearted conversation over an empty bottle of booze; this is a meaningful question because she is serious about her business. Blake is the executive director of Sustainable Futures, a Boise nonprofit that turns your old wine, beer and liquor bottles into drinking glasses, vases, wind chimes and other useful household items.

Treasure Valley residents can throw paper, cardboard, plastic, aluminum and tin into their recycle bins and leave the sorting to the professionals, but historically, recyclers in the valley have had limited options when it comes to glass. Cobwebs collect on old beer bottles and jars accumulating in milk crates in the corner of garages by well-meaning, earth conscious folks who never quite know what to do to keep glass waste out of landfills.

Boise city began an optional curbside glass recycling program in the fall of 2011, but residents outside Boise city limits still have to haul empty glass jars and bottles to recycling centers. Glass is accepted at 17 recycling drop-off locations across the valley where, currently, the glass is put on a truck and shipped out of state to be recycled. According to Mayor Dave Bieter in a statement released while the curbside program was evolving, local markets for recycled materials makes recycling more cost-effective while saving fuel costs, lowering greenhouse gas emissions and saving landfill space.

Sustainable Futures is helping limit the cost of recycling by accepting glass bottles right here in the Treasure Valley. The Boise nonprofit cut their first glass in 2008. Founder Lisa Scales's mission actually began with a desire to help offenders recently released from prison--individuals who felt remorse for their crimes, but faced nearly insurmountable obstacles when it came to finding jobs. In Idaho, 58 percent of women offenders who leave prison will reoffend and end up back behind bars. Scales attributes this high recidivism rate to the fact that most businesses are not willing to hire individuals with a criminal record and minimal job skill. Because it costs \$30,000 for one person to spend one year in prison, it made financial sense

for Scales to find a way to help this demographic and other individuals with significant employment barriers, such as refugees and at-risk youth.

"She really wanted them to do something that was significant in the community, not just make any old widget, but do something that was really of value because this is a community that supports them financially so they need to give back in a significant way," Blake says.

When Sustainable Futures was conceived, Idaho did not have a functioning system for recycling glass and that really irked Scales. Compared to the rest of the globe, the U.S. is one of the most wasteful societies. According to a study released by the British Colombian government, our neighbors to the north recycle 90 percent of their glass. The majority of Europe is on pace with that statistic, as well. And why not recycle glass? It was meant to be a reusable material. Our grandparents placed their empty glass milk bottles out for the milk man to be taken back to the dairy, cleaned and refilled. It has only been in the past few decades that Americans have moved away from these practices. Blake says Americans got out of this habit when it became more expensive to recycle than to not. And she would know. At one point, Blake looked into bottle wash-



ing and couldn't find a way to do it for less than a dollar a bottle. When Scales founded Sustainable Futures she had a meaningful mission but she did not have a fully formulated plan. From 2008 to 2010 Sustainable Futures struggled to define itself and Scales came out of her own pocket just to keep the doors open. In 2010, Blake joined the company with a

clear understanding that even a nonprofit has to produce results.

With Blake's help, Sustainable Futures grew. In 2011 it cut 45,000 bottles and in May, moved from a 2,000 square foot facility to a new 10,000 square foot facility on Franklin Road. The move was a bit of a leap of faith for the organization. It had not yet secured what would turn out to be a very generous grant from Idaho Women's Charitable Foundations, but knew it needed to prove itself to get the attention of the foundation.

"I think because we moved to this facility and they could see we were trying to grow, we got the grant," Blake said.

The new facility is separated into two sections. In the front, walls are painted the happy shade of green now synonymous with saving the planet. There are offices and a retail area where products are prominently displayed and among them are stories from local publications and other forms of recognition. Just inside the front door hangs a testimo-

nial from an IDOC inmate who worked there. “Now I shine, not just on the outside but on the inside. I’m like the glasses we make. I have new use.” There is a classroom where non-English speakers take English language classes and learn other important skills that will help them find employment. Many Sustainable Futures employees are there as part of work release or are paid through another entity, so Sustainable Futures’ role is to teach program participants vocational skills, such as inventory management, production operation, shipping and packaging, attendance and punctuality, safety requirements and office duties. Participants scoring high marks in these categories leave the program with a letter of recommendation.

The back half of the facility is where the magic happens. This warehouse area is separated into smaller sections for sorting, storing, production and packaging. At the back of the facility, Dawn, the assistant production manager sorts glass bottles from a shopping cart. The wall behind her looks like a bar after a busy night; the empties on the wall serve as a reference for what bottles are usable. They are sorted by color, shape and size and those deemed unusable or have broken in transit are sent to Environmental Abrasives to be turned into sand blasting material. This means that Sustainable Futures can boast that 100 percent of the glass that comes in and out of the facility is recycled locally. It doesn’t go to the land fill. It doesn’t go to the glass pit that already has 8,000 tons of glass in it. Just as Idaho is looking for better ways to recycle glass locally, Sustainable Futures tries to do as much with the glass in-house as possible by making wind chimes from the tops of bottles they’ve cut into glasses and finding other uses for what would otherwise become waste glass.

“It’s a fun place. It’s a creative place. Everybody comes up with ideas: customers, employees, program participants, even people here doing community service,” Blake says. Sometimes bottles are left at the door of the facility by locals, but most of the bottle stock comes from restaurants, bars and hotels that support the program. Bittercreek, Fork, Red Feather, Solid and other local businesses save money on landfill fees by working with Sustainable Futures and many buy the repurposed glass to use in their restaurants. According to Blake, Bittercreek bought the glasses even when the quality was bad and the price was too high.

Nowadays, the glass is cut then goes through an eight-step process of grinding, polishing and shaping of the inside and outside of the rim. Any customer who is unhappy with the quality of a glass that was purchased before the process was perfected, Blake offers to refinish them.

“People ask me all the time if our rims are fire polished because they are so beautiful. They’re not. It’s a cold work production line; we don’t use any heat,” Blake says. “I have people who buy things from for-profit companies who do what we do and they’ll tell me ‘I can’t believe these are so good.’”

In the production area at Sustainable Futures, employees grind, wash, polish and quality check the glass. After the product is finished, it gets packaged for shipping in a recycled packing material called green wrap. Keeping with its mission to be environmentally responsible, Sustainable Futures no longer uses bubble wrap which is known to be terrible for the environment. Since switching to the eco-friendly green wrap, the breakage in shipping dropped from 15 percent to 1 percent.

While Sustainable Futures sells commercially to local bars and restaurants, it also sells products online and in stores like Indie Made in downtown Boise, Record Exchange, Dunia in Hyde Park, the Co-Op and Metropolitan Markets in Seattle.

YouTube is filled with tutorials on how to make drinking glasses by cutting bottles at home, but methods that involve flaming string and ice water or a blow torch produce a rim that would be frightening to touch to your lips. It would be wise to leave glass cutting to the professionals at Sustainable Futures.

For those with a creative side who might be interested in doing their part to keep glass out of landfills, there are many ways to up-cycle glass at home. Design blogs and websites like Pinterest have inspiring ideas for those empty wine bottles and you don’t have to be Martha Stewart to pull them off. Even the novice crafter can manage to stuff a green bottle with white Christmas lights to make a bottle lamp or use craft glue to wrap bottles of all shapes and sizes with ribbon, yarn or raffia. And there is always the college apartment go-to: the wine bottle candle holder. Old glass jars—either left clear or acrylic painted—can be used as vases and smaller jars make great votive candle holders.

Whatever level of creativity, there are hundreds of practical ways to keep glass out of landfills. Sustainable Futures has found a way to do its part, all while helping populations that face adversity in the job market.

If you want to help Sustainable Futures, “drink more vodka, Budweiser Platinum and Rogue beer,” Blake laughs. “I never have enough of those.”



For more information on Sustainable Futures and to purchase products, visit www.Sustainable-Futures.us