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Polaris Trash Talkers

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN • FOR THE COLORADOAN • FEBRUARY 16, 2010

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We are all familiar with the adage from Gandhi, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." But students at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School are taking this message to heart.

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During a recent class trip to the Heifer International Global Village in Arkansas, students participated in a poverty and hunger simulation. They learned to live without excess, and their eyes were opened to the immense amount of waste in our country.

"Heifer was a truly healing and incredibly fascinating experience that left me with a need to do more," said Junior Maia Ashbach-Sladek.

She enlisted the help of other students, and they approached the principal about starting a schoolwide composting and recycling program. With his approval, the students partnered with ZeroHero Events and Gallegos Sanitation. Within two months from returning from the Global Village simulation, Polaris became a site for a zero-waste pilot project.

Just like they do for other local events, such as NewWestFest, ZeroHero Events provided Polaris with zero-waste stations. Gallegos provided the school with the appropriate large containers to put outside. Now students separate their trash into three bins: landfill, recycle and compost.

"Some students are more knowledgeable about recycling and composting than most adults out there," said John Long with ZeroHero Events. "They are committed to making this world a better place."

Polaris art teacher Ryan Grindel wanted to keep the students' momentum going. So with the help of a parent volunteer, an after-school



Polaris Students showing off the compost bin they made. (Courtesy of Ryan Grindel)

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environmental club called the Trash Talkers was formed. Grindel's motivation to start the club comes from his own desire to be a more conscious consumer. From food to clothes to any human-made goods, he believes it is important to know the origins and impacts of his own consumption choices. "Since we are a small school," Grindel said, "I think it is completely possible to pursue a school that produces zero waste." The Trash Talkers are working hard to keep zero-waste at the forefront of the whole student body by adding a three-stream waste station to each classroom. But beyond the classrooms and the school, the group wants to reach out to the community. Through partnerships with ReSource and The Rocky Mountain Sustainable Living Association, or RMSLA, the Trash Talkers are able to do just that.

Resource, a nonprofit organization that provides the Fort Collins with a place to buy or donate reusable building materials, is working with the Polaris group to make compost bins. These bins will be either given out or sold to members of the community. The Trash Talkers have also partnered with the RMSLA on the Future Friday 2010 Environmental Film Festival happening from noon to 8:30 p.m. Saturday at Rocky Mountain High School.

Kristina Cash with RMSLA enjoys working with the students to plan the event. "I feel this is the sort of learning that Polaris students really thrive at," she said. "It's participatory, practical and creative. I feel we can accomplish a lot by working together."



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Fellow Trash Talker Katie Hadcock sums it up by saying, "It puts a smile in my heart to know that these teenagers are breaking the typical stereotype of high school students to contribute to the betterment of our school and our community."

Kerrie Flanagan is the director of Northern Colorado Writers and a freelance writer.

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