

Zero Waste Event Productions Poised to Capitalize on Capacity-Building Efforts

By **Susan Post** - April 6, 2018



In 2011, Zero Waste Event Productions (ZWEP) first emerged as a project housed within the nonprofit Rural Action. Based in Athens, Ohio, the project initially focused solely on the Nelsonville Music Festival, and has since expanded into a fully operational social enterprise.

Rural Action is a membership-based nonprofit working in the southeast and central eastern counties of Appalachian Ohio since 1991. Rural Action's mission is to promote social, economic, and environmental justice by training, organizing and supporting communities.

Over the years, ZWEP has added a composting service, and through a collaborative initiative with Ohio University students, has designed and produced a conveyor belt system, allowing ZWEP to more efficiently divert as much material from landfills as possible at events. ZWEP is currently in the process of becoming its own standalone LLC, with Rural Action maintaining some ownership, as well as benefitting from a portion of the revenues that ZWEP generates.

Fulfilling the Mission by Diverting Waste

For each event, ZWEP's goal is to achieve 90 percent (or higher) diversion of all waste material. Not only do they recycle materials, they also compost and reuse materials, and keep the event grounds clean and comfortable for festival goers. Also after each event, ZWEP staff deliver an infographic to the organizing group to show how many pounds of waste were diverted from landfills. For the Nelsonville Music Festival alone, ZWEP has diverted more than 30,000 pounds of waste from landfills since 2011, and throughout all of the events, a total of nearly 142,000 pounds of waste has been diverted from landfills.



Tyler Bonner, business coordinator for ZWEP, started at Rural Action in 2013 and 2014 as an AmeriCorps volunteer. As his time with Rural Action was coming to an end as an AmeriCorps volunteer, he recognized that much of the knowledge and experience related to the work that ZWEP had been doing would leave with him, so he pitched for a full-time position to continue and expand the project. Also during that time, his manager, Kyle O'Keefe, was transitioning to SWACO, as its new director of innovation & programs.

In 2015, ZWEP expanded to officially become a social enterprise, offering event waste services throughout the state of Ohio. In 2017 alone, the organization provided services to 25 events, many of which were outdoor, multi-day music festivals. They even manage events that have camping elements to them, in addition to single-day street festivals.

Ramping Up for the 2018 Event Season

For ZWEP, the event season kicks off at the end of April. In 2018, the organization hopes to expand their operations so that it can have two to three teams managing different events each weekend around the state and beyond. Leading up to this expansion, the focus of ZWEP's grants has been to increase their capacity and equipment. The organization has purchased two box trucks in 2017, and is also looking to purchase a pick-up truck soon.

"One of the biggest challenges we currently face comes down to terminology and peoples' understanding of what terms like 'waste management' mean," said Bonner. "Many organizations that produce events manage the event waste themselves, or hire traditional companies to manage waste, not fully recognizing that this means that the waste produced during their events will wind up in landfills."

ZWEP maintains a core group of staff members to lead teams comprised of contractors and volunteers that groups organizing the events help supply. For example, the Nelsonville Music Festival website has a place where people can sign up to volunteer. Other event groups offer incentives such as free tickets or a drink token in exchange for a few hours of volunteer service. While there are a few national operations that have a focus on diverting waste from landfills, they are also only focused on extremely large, multi-day events.

“Celebration at festivals and events is a key part of the human experience,” said Bonner. “But we need to learn to celebrate sustainably. Through the work that Zero Waste Event Productions does at events, organizers can be sure to provide a great experience for their attendees, while knowing that they are also reducing waste to landfill, and minimizing their impact on the land.”

How you can Help Zero Waste Event Productions Further its Mission:

- Consider hiring ZWEP for your next event, music festival or street fair. ZWEP is currently offering first-time customers a 10 percent discount on any event in 2018. To get take advantage of this offer, sign up through SocialVentures’ online [social enterprise Marketplace](#).
- Visit ZWEP’s [website](#), and consider volunteering at an upcoming event.
- Learn more about Zero Waste Event Productions’ work with the [Nelsonville Music Festival](#).

For more information, visit zerowastefest.com.

About SocialVentures

Founded in 2014, [SocialVentures](#) advances remarkably good businesses—businesses that intentionally integrate social impact as a non-negotiable component of their business model. [SocialVentures’ online Marketplace](#) features profiles of more than 100 local social enterprises. You can use the ‘Cause’ drop-down filter to learn more about how you can support local social enterprises, whose impact area is dedicated to environment and sustainability.

For more information about SocialVentures or our Marketplace, please feel free to send an email to info@socialventurescbus.com.

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