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Our Home — Approaching zero waste

By Jim and Celeste Parsons Jun 30, 2019



These workers collected waste for the Zero Waste Initiative, which endeavors to send festival waste to recycling centers or compost instead of a landfill.

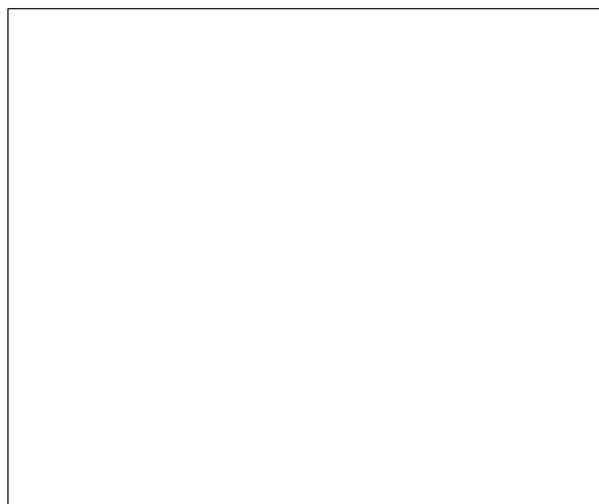
Messenger file photo by Heather Willard

A couple of weeks ago, we volunteered at the Nelsonville Music Festival along with 58 others helping with the trash control provided by Zero Waste Event Productions, LLC. A four-day, well-attended outdoor event like the Nelsonville Music Festival can result in a small mountain of trash.

Zero Waste, owned jointly by Rural Action and its workers, offers its services to events in Ohio and surrounding states to divert recyclable and compostable materials from the waste stream of large public events. Thanks to Zero Waste, more than 90 percent by weight of NMF trash is

recycled or composted, and by the close of the day after the festival, no trash is left on the site. This amazing result is achieved by controlling both the trash input and trash output.

Input is controlled by requiring all the food vendors to use either recyclable or compostable serving materials. Food is sold in paper plates or baskets, or in foil wraps; cutlery is almost all compostable. If you haven't seen compostable forks and spoons, they look like plastic and are quite sturdy. Each piece is stamped "compostable" so that they are easily distinguished from other plastics. Around the venue there are about 15 trash disposal sites with three clearly labeled and color-coded bags: recycle, compost and landfill. Attendants continually make the round of sites, swapping out full bags for empty ones.



At this year's music festival, our first assignment was to work in the sorting tent — the first step in controlling output. Even with folks trying to put things in the proper disposal bags, there is a lot of crossover. So, under a good-sized canopy, Zero Waste operates a custom-built, electrically-powered, collapsible conveyor belt. On one side of the belt are five trash bag holders — one for cans, two for other recyclables, one for food compostables and one for compostables that need to be put through a shredder (this includes plates, cutlery, napkins, and other paper products) — before going into the industrial composter. At the end of the conveyor belt is a bag for stuff going to the landfill.

On the side of the belt opposite the sorting bags stand the sorters. Our crew numbered five or six — three sorting, one sifting through the sorted bags to make sure no recyclable forks have been sorted into compostable trash or vice versa (and swapping out bags as they fill), and one at the end of the line directing the flow of landfill items.

Our uniforms were aprons sewn from abandoned tents or camp chairs and double sets of nitrile gloves. We received a quick introductory briefing of which items go in which categories — these types of forks and spoons are compostable; these are recyclable; these have to go to landfill ... these glasses are compostable; these are not ... watch out for disposable diapers ... foil wraps can go in the recyclable bag unless they are too gummed up with catsup, melted cheese, or similar hard-to-remove food.

Then the line starts moving. We soon learned that even tightly crumpled foil may contain wadded up napkins and food scraps, which we removed and sorted into the proper bags. Sometimes dozens of luscious-looking strawberries came down the line, mixed in with unconsumed salad, nearly-whole hotdogs in buns, and corn-husk tamale wrappers. Ninety minutes passed very quickly, as we melded into a team, each person sorting out items easily tossed into the bag in front of them. In spite of the no-smoking policy at the festival, cigarette butts were in the mix, and had to be carefully picked out and shunted into the landfill bag.

We took a short break to stretch, get drinks or snacks, and visit the port-a-potty. When the line started up again, we fell back into the routine, watching out for broken glass. We found bits of wire, a couple of torn-off shirt sleeves and some other anonymous pieces of fabric, and one small glass bead shaped like a bee (claimed by one of the group as a souvenir). As more bags filled with sorted trash, other volunteers used a balance scale to weigh the bags and tally the amounts of recyclables, compostables, and landfill stuff. Near the end of our 4-hour shift, we stopped the line to clean up the area, rinse out glass jars that were set aside, and leave the area clean “so that the next shift won’t be scared off.”

Our final volunteer shift was on Monday after the festival had ended. After helping to clean up the sorting tent area in the festival compound, we moved over to the camping area where a parallel collecting and sorting operation had been conducted. Campers had deposited most of their waste in the provided Recycle/Compost/Landfill bags, and we loaded them onto trucks for removal and additional sorting off-site. As a final clean-up, we walked through the whole field, making tight search patterns and using long-arm grippers to save our backs while picking up anything the campers had left behind on the ground: rope, pieces of camping chairs and tents, garments, cigarette butts, bottle caps, etc.

We feel pretty good about how we spent the weekend. We had a fun time, met some great people, heard some good music, and kept a huge mass of recyclable and compostable stuff out of the landfill. We’ll do it again next year.

You might see Jim and Celeste Parsons riding their tandem bicycle with the American flag on the back.

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