

# From Plastic to PPE: How this Social Enterprise Pivoted During a Pandemic

By **Shaina Dubinskiy** - August 7, 2020



*All photos provided by Zero Waste Event Productions*

Tyler Bonner never thought he'd be making face shields when he first founded Zero Waste Event Productions in 2011.

After working with Rural Action, where Bonner spent two years cleaning illegal dump sites and working with local events to reduce waste sent to the landfill, he eventually took over operations. It was then that the social entrepreneur decided to pitch his own idea for a viable business, under the Rural Action Zero Waste Program, with the objective of hitting just that- a zero waste goal at large-scale, nationwide events.

Since the company became an LLC in 2018, Bonner and his team have worked over 141 events, creating and setting up trash signage, picking up waste, and sorting the contamination to see what can be recycled and deferred from the landfill. But their hard work doesn't stop there. After events, the Zero Waste team produces an infographic report to share with event organizers and showcase the success of their efforts. Aside from waste cleanup and collecting data, Bonner and his team also work with food vendors to ensure the use of compostable food materials and items.

"A lot of material generated at events is centered around the food court or the food vendors," Bonner explains. "We need to have an agreement with the food vendors to serve only on compostable service wear. If they can all be compostable instead of single-use disposable items, we can make sure that they can be sent to a facility where they can be shredded up and composted instead of the landfills."

Just like any blossoming company, however, Zero Waste met its fair share of growing pains; from needing new equipment to basic company logistics, and more recently, a higher demand than they initially expected. Bonner explains that he spent the past two years doing most of the outreach, finding events and making new partnerships. Last year, his work shifted from filling the calendar to shuffling around the team and bringing on enough team members to meet the quickly increasing demand. Bonner says this can be challenging, as he wants team members that are not only hardworking, but passionate about the cause.

"It would be really easy to collect material and throw it in a dumpster, but that's not who we are; we really have to have the people leading volunteers and really representing our business to do as much as we can and divert as much as we can from the landfill," he says.







After the coronavirus shutdown canceled the rest of the company's event itinerary, Bonner and his business partner had to quickly pivot and decide how, or even if, they wanted to continue operations.

"When things were getting serious, we had a brief conversation. There was a moment where we were like 'we can put this whole thing on pause and get part-time jobs for a year and figure it out and come back in 2021,'" he explains.

Nevertheless, it was important to both that their mission continues, and they were willing to get creative amidst chaos to reduce waste and work toward their goal of helping the environment.

Zero Waste recently partnered with Precious Plastics, a community with open source designs for machines that can be built to shred plastics and mold them into different items. In Bonner's case, this is PPE and face shields. This was an idea of Bonner's that had been brewing long before the pandemic, initially wanting to create frisbees with logos to pass out at their events. Now, with the uncertainty of how outdoor events will look in the foreseeable future, Bonner could make his dream into reality by creating PPE to give back to the community.

Transitioning from a service to a product-based company, however, hasn't been easy.

“In many ways, it’s like we’re starting from square one,” says Bonner. “We really don’t know anything about product marketing and producing, logistics, and making the products.”

Partnering with an Athens-based molding company, the Zero Waste team has created face shields and hands-free door openers. The social enterprise also received a small business loan at the start of the pandemic from the Athens County Foundation. In exchange, the first 600 PPE molds will go out to Athens medical professionals and individuals in the community with special needs who may have trouble using masks.





Eventually, Bonner hopes to permanently expand Zero Waste's product line by establishing mutual advertising relationships with event coordinators and creating souvenirs that event-goers can take home.

"We've been working with other businesses and Rural Action to collect materials so that when we start doing events again, we have an enormous amount of plastics and essentially an endless supply of stock to use to shred down and make into products," he says.

According to Bonner, the new product line could even include bricks and building material.

“As the virus situation calms down and there isn’t as much need for PPE, I think the door is really open to expand in other areas,” Bonner says. “If we continue to grow in that direction, we’ve been talking about upgrading to different machines that can handle more material, run longer, and run faster and increase production to meet the demand.”

Bonner’s ultimate hope is that, with the help of his company, event organizers and those who purchase Zero Waste Events’ products will bring a “90% or greater diversion from the landfill” by reducing waste to the landfill and finding new life for material that would otherwise be thrown away.

*For more information, visit [zerowastefest.com](http://zerowastefest.com).*

## **About SocialVentures**

Founded in 2014, SocialVentures is a non-profit organization that advances remarkably good businesses—businesses that intentionally integrate social impact as a non-negotiable component of their business model. To contact SocialVentures, send an email to [info@socialventurescbus.com](mailto:info@socialventurescbus.com) or visit [socialventurescbus.com](http://socialventurescbus.com).



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