

Our Town: Ann Arbor's Block Coordinators

by Vicki Mehl

Ann Arbor has a group of volunteers that is changing the way the people in this city live. The block coordinators for the Ecology Center's Recycle Ann Arbor program have been going house to house encouraging residents to use the expanded curbside recycling service, and their efforts are paying off. Since January the number of monthly pickups has more than doubled. Why would these people try to change the habits of a whole community? Talking to four of the busiest volunteers offered some clues.

Changing Attitudes

To Anne Elder, a block coordinator on Western Drive, the biggest challenge is getting people to change their attitude. "Recycling to me is one of the basic necessities like the food you eat or shelter, so I don't think of it as an extra project. But so many people never even thought about it or they think it's such a hassle. If they would make just a little adjustment in their daily patterns, change just a little bit, they'd find out it wasn't so hard."

Anne is a mother and a full-time coordinator at the Wild-flour Community Bakery. She joined the block coordinator program because it appealed to her strong sense of community. Civic involvement began for her as a junior high student in New Jersey twelve years ago when she participated in a church-sponsored recycling program. Now she takes her four-year-old daughter, Mahogany, along when she passes out recycling pamphlets and reminder tags. She finds people are more trusting in the presence of a child and it ensures that Mahogany will learn at an early age the importance of recycling.

The Garbage Nightmare

The volume of garbage that our "disposable" society creates is a nightmare to Kathy Donofrio, of Creal Court. She used to daydream about how to get other people to recycle like she does, so it wasn't hard for Ecology Center staff member Marcia Barton to persuade her to become a block coordinator. A full-time mother of three young daughters and part-time nurse, Kathy took on the responsibility of informing two hundred households in her neighborhood about the curbside recycling program. She made the initial visits herself, recruiting volunteers along the way. Because so many people were unfamiliar with the procedures of recycling, Kathy made miniature samples of recyclable items and carried them in a small basket. Generally, the visual aids were very helpful, but a few people were greatly relieved to find out that cutting newspapers and cans into three-inch squares was not required. Later, the neighborhood children became eager helpers too, racing to see who could pass out the most monthly reminder tags in the shortest time. Kathy, pushing baby Julie in a stroller, had only to supply tags and directions.

Watching the children participate and seeing the bundles on the sidewalk on pickup day is all very exciting for Kathy. "It's my dream come true. I actually got my neighbors to recycle. Now I daydream about getting the hospital to recycle."

Environmental Responsibility

Pat Stejskal is a cheerful radical when it comes to recycling and energy conservation. Outdoor vacations with her husband and two children made her aware of the increasing amount of litter left by careless, uninformed people. A former airline stewardess, she will now smile engagingly as she threatens violence to litterbugs. With gracious bluntness, she will insist that if you are capable of opening a can, you are also capable of recycling it.

Pat believes in setting a visible example, so being a block coordinator on Maryfield Drive gave her the chance to take her convictions door to door. She laughingly asserts that she has "shamed people into recycling," but more often will take an educational approach to convert non-believers. She would like to see more extensive recycling education in schools, civic groups and mass media to make environmental responsibility a national habit. And if people still can't be persuaded? "Hit 'em in the pocket! Then they'll think twice!" she laughs. But her intent is serious. Perhaps she would suggest that garbage disposal be paid for by the pound.

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Reminder door tags distributed by block coordinators.

