



Liz: Hi everyone welcome to Waste30's NothingWasted! Podcast. On every episode we invite the most interesting people in waste recycling and organics to sit down with us and chat candidly about their thoughts their work this unique industry and so much more so thanks for listening and enjoy this episode.

[NTRO MUSIC]

Liz: Hi everyone. This is Liz Bothwell from Waste360 with Sarah Womer, founder of Zero to Go and Sustainability Consultant at Great Forest. Welcome Sarah, thank you for being here.

Sarah: Good morning. Thank you so much for having me.

Liz: I would love to hear a bit about your background and how you ended up here and what sparked your initial passion for sustainability.

Sarah: This is a bit of a long story because I wasn't the entrepreneur who set out with a vision for a business.

I wanted to solve a problem and live in a small town in upstate New York. It's kind of the greater metro New York area that's on the train line and I grew up north of here in Hyde Park and I saw when I finished college I did AmeriCorps in Colorado and then I came back and I saw that friends and family were having trouble with understanding where to get rid of electronics responsibly. I started digging to find answers and I connected people to the hazardous waste cleanup days that happened eight times a year in the county. And I loved having the solution and I loved helping people get their stuff there.

And I did a very circuitous like path to get to where I am now, but I ended up falling in love with understanding where materials go and helping people. And I started doing my own waste drives in Beacon where I live and then that as some listeners may know got challenging because of the CRT issue and just the waste industry changed so much. This is back in 2012, 2011 when it was still there were drives everywhere. We were able to collect over ninety thousand tons of us through four events in Beacon alone and I thought it was fabulous and I think that every city, every town needs to have a solution for e waste and hard to recycle materials. And I was just hooked. Around that time I also became involved with this organization that's no longer that was like a materials reuse warehouse and I started getting them these big truckloads full of styrofoam that were coming from Art foundry where I was working at the time they could use that those phone box for packing, for shipping like people could come and buy it for almost nothing. Or maybe it was free, all the Styrofoam blocks. So that was really the thing that got me so excited because by then I knew a little bit more about styrofoam and how bad it was for the environment. Styrofoam became my thing. I started going and giving talks the Rotary Club about why Styrofoam was bad. And then I got together with some friends and we tried to get started and it began where we live, and our first organization was called StyroFree Beacon and we went to different restaurants and tried to convince them to do the switch. But at that time, paper cups were at least 10 cents per, and a foam cup was a penny per.

So, it was a really hard sell for a lot of businesses. And I you know reached another kind of a good dead end. So, first is the e-waste then it was the foam and then I realized that there was more to be done because I was still talking to people about waste and materials and what to do with this not. And I saw that our town had about 20 to 30 events, public events, every year that brought in all kinds of people from all over. There was the dog parade that was particularly gross because we just have garbage cans on Main Street in Beacon which is a mile long. It's a lovely little tourist destinations small town and it would just get trashed on these festival days. And I was so disgusted that we weren't recycling. So, I started volunteering to separate the recyclables out... and gosh such a long story. But I ended up developing my own garbage cans and after begging friends to let me do their events, I started charging to be at the events and handle recycling. Then I realized I had a business on my hands. That was the moment I

was like yes. Now we're off to the races. So, I started bringing friends in and paying them. And then just getting contracts here and there to do events.

And I did events for about two years before I realized that composting is like the next frontier. Like we have to be composting in our events. So, I found it was really hard to find a hauler that would take compost. We would organize our events like around like every event is completely custom. So, there might be fields where we are for six hours at a beer festival. There might be like a conference room or a wedding. The events really range so depends on how much compost we generate who could handle it. I could talk so much about composting events and how complicated it is, but we found a hauler to handle our biggest events.

To date, it's still the biggest. It was a beer festival in Peekskill that brought in 5000 people for an all-day beer fest and there's only six bags of trash generated from an all-day event. And we had one hundred twenty bags of compost. It was amazing. They use compostable cups.

Now in retrospect, it would've been great if they used reusable glass cups. We would have avoided a massive waste stream, but I got see Peace Sanitation on board with hauling it to King Street, the nearest facility to us about 35 miles away.

And then the seed was planted in their mind that they want to start composting too. So fast forward to five years later they're about to open their facility in Westchester for compost. And there they always say Oh no thanks you. You know because I was telling them this is the future of waste management. You guys are a hauling company and you do garbage recycling, but have you really thought about compost because this is the direction we need to go as a society.

So, in the midst of all that I just wanted to do it all, I'm very like hands on get it done kind of person. And I launched a Kickstarter and I got twenty thousand dollars together in about two and a half weeks to launch a compost pickup program in Beacon. And at the time I was dating somebody who owned a bike shop and I helped him run the bike shop as well. And he really convinced me that we should be doing this with cargo bikes in town because Beacon is only five miles square.

You know, I said I brought the bikes to different events and we would you know use the bike to haul full bags of compost, trash and recycling from our zero waste stations where educators were telling the public about not your cup goes here. And so on to the staging area, dumpster area and the bike just captivates everybody's imagination and attention. It's a fabulous expo of what is possible but doesn't need to be a truck that handles waste, it can be a bike, it can be several bikes and I looked to pedal people in Northampton Mass as my major inspiration.

Have you heard of them? They've been hauling waste for 30 years on bikes.

Liz: Wow. No, I have.

Sarah: They do garbage recycling compost and they help you move out of your apartment. They're just the coolest ever.

Liz: That is very cool.

Sarah: We started picking up compost in town even from businesses and I just quickly realized that the bike even with a trailer attached and we have an electric as this motor on me. Let me say that to help us haul massive weights the bike can do a thousand pounds of material and that is quite a lot but if you are coming from a restaurant it's just like not even enough. We'd have to make multiple trips to restaurants to pick up, you know, two or three totes and then bring them back to three clean ones.

We lost money on that endeavor because we were doing business and residents so currently the business is doing a mix of the bike and like a gasoline powered vehicle with a trailer attached. But yeah it was it was it was wonderful to try that.

Liz: That's amazing. And so, I have to ask. Last I read that you diverted nearly 60 tons of organic waste through your zero to go program keeping them from the landfills or incineration. That is just unbelievable.

Sarah: Oh, thank you so much. It's a lot of hard work and that includes our events and restaurants and our residential program and accomplished drop off at the farmer's market. It's an amazing passion project. I will not say that it is like a super thriving business that's growing. It was hard. I do not have a business degree. I did not set this up very beautifully and doing it with my own car and the trike. I could write a book about

what not to do in business. But I also am so proud of what we've accomplished, and that kickstarter was mostly all people in Beacon donating to make a compost pickup program a reality here in this town. I just am thrilled that it is going to continue.

So currently I'm in the process of separating from the company and my partner is going to take over and the compost pick up run is going to go to our partner company who actually has facility and that was one of the hardest parts too. We're doing our event, we launched the Kickstarter, we start accomplice program and the plan was always to have our own facility in town and I believe that every community needs to have an answer for organics. And it's just really difficult to do. It was nearly impossible for me to wrap my head around launching something like that while I was running the business. So, we don't have a facility in town. The nearest one is still 30+ miles away, so our partner company has their own facility. They're also a small woman owned company and we just love them. We've been partnering with them for years. I feel really good knowing that they can create beautiful compost from the food scraps and then they turn it and sell it. And that's the way it was meant to be. And that's what I always wanted for my company and also for every town that's doing couples program. It's not OK that material is going to go so far away. We need more infrastructure and we needed it yesterday. So, I'd really love to turn my attention to developing bigger solutions and helping push policy.

Liz: Good for you. I mean not to take away from what you've already accomplished but I see what your bigger goal is and it's impressive.

Sarah: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Liz: Now what advice would you give to other entrepreneurs who want to start their own program like this. Sounds like you've learned a lot of lessons along the way.

Sarah: I really have. I would say even though it's really difficult to get the help you need to develop a strong business plan, take the time to do it before you get too excited and launch. There's a lot of others small community based compost companies out there throughout the U.S. and it's definitely worth talking to them and seeing if you can you know share numbers not the whole business plan but really get a clear understanding of

what it means because you're about to work super, super hard for very little for a long time.

If you can have your vision on a bigger goal for yourself and, you know, that when you hit x number of customers, you're going to be a break even and then when you get to know another 30 more now you're in the profit zone. And just really gearing yourself up towards that and making sure that you have everything you could possibly need in place as best as you can. So, a marketing team just one person on social media, you know five hours, a week you can't skimp on certain things to get to your core. And that's what I learned. And we did do some of it but because we were running, we're basically having three different businesses happening all at once the events, the compost program and we were also maintaining a park it was a way of life from one person and then I brought my partner on board. It was a heck of a lot for two of us and we both work full time jobs in addition to running the company. Unfortunately, I've kind of reached a point where I'm a little tired and burned out for 8 years and making money and supporting yourself is actually one of the most important things and anybody who's been a business school tell you that. But I have a literature degree, so I'm just a total dreamer over here I'm a dreamer and a doer. And so, taking a little bit more time to talk to the folks in the business knowledge.

But it's great. I think that now is the time for innovative solutions. And it has been for the last five years or more. We need small companies to come out and fill in the gap and create the infrastructure. We can't wait for our county, our state to develop action plans around creating infrastructure. We can't wait for them to help the public understand how to recycle if you know you can do it, just start doing it. If that's what you're passionate about. Don't wait around because we've been waiting in the Northeast for a long time for certain things to progress and it's just not so I feel about it.

Liz: Ok. That's great advice. You had great success with consumer education around waste during cycling. What do you think what made it so successful what did you do that was so different when it comes to education?

Sarah: I always believed in the hands-on approach where people could physically see and touch the products and understand where they're supposed to go.

So, the famous Clearwater Festival to celebrate and protect the Hudson River is where I learned and got my inspiration to do zero waste events. And I saw volunteers standing behind zero waste stations, helping people who just had a lovely lunch at the food pavilion, understand where their hot dog bowl would go and where their napkin goes and where their fork goes. And people are so confused, intimidated, overwhelmed by choices around trash and I've seen it thousands of times in my years of standing behind zero-way stations. And for me, I disarmed that by standing there and being really friendly and my staff has always been really kind and friendly and open and say "hey it's OK. Let me help you. I'll tell you why this is a combustible cup" and then just you know these are everyday items that people hold and touch all the time but actually take a second to understand where it goes. It's transformative. And they don't have a choice when we do an event all the other garbage cans are gone. They have to come talk to zero waste educator. And I found that to be so powerful.

And I also gave tours that recycling plant here in Beacon which is now a Republic Recycling. And people would come in with physical examples of what do I do with black plastic potting pot that I got from the nursery and just having examples showing people it really takes the intimidation away and it helps connect people to their waste and they're making better waste choices because they've actually conducted with the material in our culture, it's really disposable... Out of sight out of mind as quick as possible. Don't want to think about it. So, anything I could do to slow people down and like have that conversation I found to be so important and really helpful. People still come up to me and my team all the time and say you know now I know and because of you I started composting at home. And not everybody is great like that but a lot of people are really blown away and learned something like that.

Liz: Oh, I bet. That's fantastic and then it has the lasting effect right. It's not just that one event they're thinking about this at home and at another event and it's the trickle-down effect.

Sarah: Yeah. I really hope so and I do think that's true.

Liz: So, you might still love the recent media attention around food waste and the EPA 2030. Food lost and waste reduction goal. Do you think it's having a positive effect on behavior and policy?

Sarah: I think it's really exciting. It is so welcome to see this legislation be announced last week. I think that the attention is great, and we have a long way to go. I think that it's really challenging to develop compost infrastructure. I wish it was easier. I've chatted with my county recycling coordinator and I can just see that you know money is one of the biggest issues. And of course, there's NIMBYism. Our country is so divided right now, and I think it has been for some time, of course, it is an electric time to talk about waste issues.

There's so many incredibly important things going on but I am heartened to see that the plastic bag ban is happening in New York. There's a lot to be said and done but I think that we have to be paying attention and advocate for things that actually really do make sense.

I'm trying to remember that the folks I mentioned before in Peekskill who are opening their own compost facility, they're feeling kind of like the legislation that was announced at the state level is not really adequate and they want to push to make it a little bit stronger. The loophole is that, correct me if I'm wrong, I think it says that you fear within a 25 mile radius of compost facility, you can compost but if you're outside of that 25 mile radius and there's no facility you're exempt.

So, there's compost spot is in Westchester. Right now, we're driving so far for to bring our garbage to the landfill. We're driving so far to bring compost accomplice facilities that just don't exist.

So, to limit our radius and say that you know it's got to be within 25 miles is short sighted because we just don't have the facilities yet. We really need to focus on making that make sense before we be so stringent about it.

Liz: Your work seems to extend to marine debris as well. It really is astonishing to hear that by 2050 there could be more plastic than fish by weight. Is your work with the plastic free waters way or waterways partnership aiming to combat this?

Sarah: Yes, that group is just really inspiring and the people who are involved are incredibly smart and they work for organizations that are devoted to protecting them. The power is that the group has working groups within.

So, we've got a group that focuses on plastic bags, straws, balloons, Styrofoam. There's like eight working groups and they are coming together to try to push initiatives forward and it's just focus on New York and New Jersey. And these are major metro areas and there are if you think about how many plastics experts and water conservation organizations are there it is it's amazing. We bring in speakers.

We have large partnership meetings a year and we have speakers come and they talk about their work around reducing plastic from getting into our waterways. And it's really exciting to hear about the innovative technologies that are coming out. There's a lot of work to be done. And you know there's arguments for every which way. I'm sure everybody has heard of Boyon Slat and his ocean cleanup program and some people are really critical.

And you know he says, "look I'm going to try to do what I can to get plastics out of our waterways, but we need people to be working on reduction as well". He says this because people are like well you can't get all the plastics out of the water you like. I know you I said I can do what I can on this, and we really need we need everyone to be working on this puzzle from every different corner and reduction is key. And I think that now there is this plastic bag legislation is being talked about and is happening reduction is finally getting to be like more top of mind for people.

Liz: So, now you work with clients on the implementation of sustainable waste management programs. Could you give us a concrete example of how of how you've helped a client do that? I mean, you don't mention names or anything but just to give us an idea of how you've taken sort of your sustainable waste management principles and help the client see their vision through.

Sarah: Sure, this work is so exciting for me. Whenever there's a lot of material being produced, it often means there's a lot of waste associated with it. And because I honestly just totally obsessed with like waste and this is my whole career in my world, I'm really intrigued when there's hard to recycle items. And I've got my sights set on

breweries right now. And I have a client and they all have the same material, they all have spent grain, they all have to buy green which comes in bags. They all have hops, they all have malt. They all have the same materials; they've got pallets and it's a list of probably like 20 things that are in huge volumes. So, I've been working with a brewery to help them develop a slightly different system. What they're currently doing most breweries are doing garbage recycling and they're composting the spent grain. But I introduced a pallet wrapper recycling program to their team and now they're diverting a huge amount of plastic film wrap and bring it to the local grocery store for recycling.

Same with another client have which is in beverage production. I worked with them for about a year and a half and they have a small garbage dumpster. It's a good one. It's a two-yard garbage dumpster and then they've got a six-yard recycling dumpster and then they have all their pallet wrap going out to recycling at the local store and the kind of money that they are saving by doing this work, it pays for itself. You know just the small amount of staff time it takes to bring this material to the store, and you know the time it takes to back it up. I mean it's just it's amazing and if you think about facilities that are you know over 10000 square feet and have power up it's huge.

But of course reduction is key. So the brewery I was just talking about, they switch to reusable pallet wrap which is basically a canvas and Velcro little system and they personalized it with their logo and it looks great and it's perfect for them to bring their cans of beer in and out of their walk in just as they produce it instead of using pallet wrap. It's fast and it's easy and it's you know \$120 and it just pays for itself within a few you know a few weeks depending on the size of the brewery.

So, this stuff is awesome for me, I love a challenge and I just I think that there's just so much great work to be done around production facilities.

So, that's where my set my sights are set now is to assist breweries and large scale production facilities and get them composting and divert this stuff, that's pretty easy to divert.

Liz: It just takes a little bit of a tweet to their current system that's great and it's an instant impact and then they see that it's a cost savings so it's a win, win really.

Sarah: It is especially if you can help them understand how much money is being saved. Yeah totally a win, win.

Liz: That's amazing. Good for you. And then what are some of the lessons learned in working with municipalities to implement programs like the one you've done? I'm sure you've honed a lot of your collaboration skills and your negotiation skills so I would love to hear a little bit about that.

Sarah: That is such an interesting question and it's interesting to hear your perspective on it because actually what I did was, I circumvented working with my municipality by starting my own for profit company and collecting compost and I don't have to deal with anything at the city level.

Well now in retrospect, what I should have done is, I should have gone to city council all the time like every month and talked about what we're doing with the compost why we need a facility here and really advocated to make it part of the new municipal program.

Now we did approach the city and several council members with the idea that if residents are composting, they should have a reduction in their taxes but because they're diverting at least 30% of their solid waste from the landfill to compost and they are paying out of pocket to do it. And it's not that affordable for everybody else, it's just really a profit models is really hard. So, it's \$35 a month to compost with us in the monthly compost pickup program. But you know people are just paying that because they know it's the future and the right thing to do. And I really deeply, deeply appreciate all of those people who are customers and care to that level. My vision was for them to get a tax break.

In a certain amount of time for this program to be a municipal program and rolled out to everybody as part of the tax base, that is something that I wish were a bit easier. City is not that progressive when it comes to environmental issues. And I did not push that hard on it because I just couldn't.

So yeah. That's interesting. So now currently we're going to be transitioning the program to another private company that has trucks employees and a facility and that's perfect. But I did try to get a facility in town. I put in a bid three different times on a piece

of land with several other organizations that wanted the land for agricultural purposes. And it's just it's taking forever. It's taken probably like six years and I still don't know if this RFP has been accepted.

So, if it does get accepted, we could have a facility in town which amazing, but I've seen other municipalities take on composting and make it part of their you know in their cities initiative and I think that's amazing.

Liz: Well keep us posted if that ends up coming through. You never know... So, what else should we be paying attention to in the world of waste recycling and organics. What do you think is the next frontier?

Sarah: Well as recycling as, you know, the market is I don't feel particularly equipped to talk about the market and what's exactly happening. But I know that we're in a challenging spot. I know there's turmoil. I know the market doesn't exist for certain materials like it once did. And companies are scrambling to try to find outlets. And I think that education around what's recyclable and the cleanliness of the materials is super important. And I can't really understand why cities and haulers aren't making more of an effort to make people aware of what is get recycled and how to do it right.

A town nearby is switching back to dual stream which has been proven is a lot cleaner than single stream which is what we have here. Single stream just can be great, but it definitely brings in a lot of wish cycling. And I think haulers and the public should be paying attention. I love the idea of the "Whoops" stickers, haulers taking a look at making sure that the material is right and if it's not leaving a tag because people just don't know what's recyclable and that's the thing that I've learned in my ten years of work around recycling is there is a lot of confusion. Everywhere you go people are just not clear. They don't feel like they were told clearly. Flyers aren't not that good. This isn't what we do at school. It's not what we do at work and we're not doing it at home because it's not part of our culture. And I see it, I see it over and over and I think that makes everything so much harder. And the "whoops" stickers... I mean I know it costs time and money to actually get something like that happening, but I look at cities like Seattle when my favorite groups is Cascadia Consulting and they're doing a project right now with getting "whoops" stickers out. And I think that I think it's amazing. I would hope

to see that because it's such a direct way for consumers to understand their trash and recycling choices and what's right and what's wrong.

Right now, people are just so disconnected and there's not enough time or money in the world for haulers to stop everything you're doing and do that education but there we have to keep trying and so many little ways wherever we can.

Liz: Right. I agree. So, what's next for you? I know you have lofty goals about helping big businesses practice more sustainable waste management principles but what are you hoping for yourself?

Sarah: I have a lot to say about that. My hope is that I can work with people who really know a lot about data and why recycling works and why it doesn't work. I really want to be part of a team of experts who are experience and they can help bring recycling and composting to the next level. And I don't really want to do it on my own I am doing consulting I'm on my own and I do work with great forest in the city and they're great but I still really my dream is to walk through giant warehouses full of production happening and look in every garbage recycle can and understand their waste and then develop programs to make it less. I would love to fly all over the world and all over the country to start with a group of people who are working on projects to help big scale businesses lessen.

Liz: Oh, good for you. And your passion is contagious, so I know you're going to continue to do great things.

Sarah: Yeah. Thank you. No matter what I do I'm it's going to be involved in waste management. I think, I mean that is definitely where my passion is and I think that there's a lot more to be done and there's just there's so many smart people like you know, the Recycling Partnership, Rubicon Global, I mean there's so many good things happening right now and it's an exciting time to be in the industry.

Liz: So, what keeps you busy outside of your work other than baking the best chocolate chip cookies on the planet.

Sarah: That is my thing. I love baking. I try to make big something at least, oh gosh, like once a week. I have a lot riding my bike, that is totally a thing that I enjoy getting out and just doing breathing the fresh air and riding and challenging myself and travelling and looking forward to doing a bit of traveling this spring.

And I get to go to Germany after I go to the WasteExpo and study the circular economy and with a group of 14 other people who are really interested in waste and up cycling and closed loop systems, so I'm thrilled to be doing that.

Liz: Oh that sounds amazing. Good. Well how can listeners hear more from you Sarah. Do you want to share your Twitter handle or website or anything?

Sarah: Oh my gosh. Actually, there isn't a great way. Facebook! Find me on Facebook at Sarah Woomer and there's a couple of us out there but you'll probably be able to tell me because I'm posting about garbage and compost. That's really the best way to find me. And in the coming months, I'll probably announce a new website.

Liz: Ok sounds great. Well we can't wait to see what comes next for you and we appreciate all you've done for the planet so far. So, this has been so fun. Thanks for talking with us. And we will see you at WasteExpo.

Sarah: Thank you very much. It was a pleasure to talk with you.

Liz: OK, thanks Sarah!