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MARCH+APRIL 2017

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Blue Note celebrates first anniversary

ZERO WASTE

Lanikai Charter School leads a new revolution

EMPTY BOWL

Hawai'i Potters' Guild fills need for Aloha Harvest

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Females-only 10K run races to its 40th year





Trash to Treasures

Hawai'i's Zero Waste Revolution is changing public school waste habits one (less) trash can at a time.

By Kristen Nemoto

(Above)
These crawly composters are the key component to Lanikai Elementary's Zero Waste Revolution. (Opposite page)
Parker Sawyer, Lanikai's STEM teacher, washes some recently harvested pumpkins.

To most people, a handful of worm excrement wouldn't be considered worth anything. But to the kids and staff members of Lanikai Elementary Public Charter School, worms – and the waste they produce – equal a currency that's worth more than we could imagine.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" asks Mindy Jaffe, Lanikai's Resource Recovery Specialist and lead advocate of the Zero Waste Revolution, as she scoops up a hefty pile of rich and earth-fragrant soil. "This was made from cardboard, paper, apple cores, banana peels [and] rice. It's all right here on campus."

Nearly three years ago, Lanikai would fill over two-dumpster loads worth of garbage bags a day. The thought of transforming its waste into anything substantial — let alone into recyclable or reusable materials — was far from any vision that seemed possible.

Parker Sawyer, Lanikai's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Math) department head, was inspired to start a compost system after the Kōkua Hawai'i Foundation's 'Āina in Schools — founded by musician Jack Johnson and his wife Kim — granted funds for Lanikai to have eight garden beds installed on campus. When Sawyer signed up to be the garden coordinator, he realized that an on-going compost system would be the most resourceful way of refilling the beds. He just didn't know how to go about making it.

"I remembered sitting here thinking," says Sawyer, as he points to the eight now-thriving garden beds. "Now I got to fill these beds and I didn't know too much about gardening at that time."

Parker heard about Jaffe's success at Pearl City High School where a whopping 40 tons of food waste a year was being composted. And after he researched online and took Jaffe's hot composting class, he was hooked.

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(Above) Hot composting stations surround the initial eight garden beds provided by the Kōkua Foundation. (Opposite page, clockwise from left) Mindy Jaffe teaches students about compost; compost lunch line; pumpkins from the garden.

“As a teacher I felt like this was the perfect setting to teach our kids responsibility,” Sawyer says. “We have them eight hours a day, so why not teach those behaviors here, and then hope that it transcends to their home life and eventually within the community.”

Although Jaffe was working full-time at Pearl City High School, she agreed to devote a half an hour a week to take care of a donated worm bin, known as Big Blue, at Lanikai Elementary. Slowly but surely, the worm bin turned the school’s food waste into vermicast — a natural, nutrient-rich fertilizer. The Zero Waste Revolution program soon expanded into lunch separation stations, hot composting piles, *bokashi* (an ancient Japanese method of processing food waste), a compost tea brewer and a non-trash can known as Sort-It-Out Sam.

“Oh the kids just love him,” says Jaffe, as she pokes his swing-open ‘mouth,’ which resembles a cartoonish smile as the

bin also sports two eyes and a nose. Its ‘arms,’ made out of buckets, collect paper and recyclable cans and bottles while his ‘mouth’ takes in such worm-friendly food as fruit peels and half-eaten granola bars.

“The key to zero waste is to designate where everything goes,” Jaffe explains. “Today, we got rid of 22 trashcans and replaced every class with its own Sort-It-Out Sam. We have exactly four rubbish cans on this entire campus. It’s really amazing.”

What’s also truly transformative, says Lanikai’s school director, Ed Noh, are the students and their impact on the adults. When Noh received notice from Sawyer about his pursuit of a zero-waste school, he was immediately on board since it was a program that “just made sense” to the overall environment that it would create for the students and the community.

“There’s this learning opportunity at every facet of this program,” Noh says. “From setting up the separation stations to the data collection. It’s really powerful to



COURTESY ESPIE CHAPMAN

see what this whole cycle is all about. Yes, we're solving one problem with waste reduction, but the other side of it is creating this living laboratory for learning."

And although education is the main goal and theme for the entire program, it helps to see some recognition, especially when Lanikai's data collection was unlike any other school in the nation. Thanks to the school's efforts, Lanikai Elementary was ranked #1 in the nation for EPA's K-12 Food Recovery Challenge for the 2014-2015 school year. Along with this acknowledgment, Noh is equally excited for the school's push to create an on-going dialogue and sense of awareness within the community.

"Our kids are really proud that they're part of the solution," he notes. "That's what's so inspiring about this program."

This year, Kaelepulu and Kainalu Elementary will slowly start their Zero Waste Revolution efforts, turning their food waste into compost with the help of

interns from the non-profit organization, Kupu, and Jaffe as the supervisor.

Although it does take some manual labor experience to do the custodial work that's required for the success of the program, Jaffe is adamant that the idea of a Zero Waste Revolution for all our schools is plausible. Once the routines are established and positive behaviors are reinforced, Jaffe says "nature will take care of the rest." Despite obvious funding that needs to be secured for an actual custodial position (like Jaffe's) in every school and possibly a teacher to take on the role as the educator (like Sawyer's), Jaffe sees no reason why every school in the country shouldn't be a part of the Zero Waste Revolution.

"I think we can teach [our kids] that there's a choice and that the environment is not just the rainforest or ocean," Jaffe affirms. "The environment is right here. We have all the resources available, it's just up to us to make the right decisions." *