

Keeping it Green: Learn How to Recycle the Right way

By Kristen Eleveid

When you see the number inside the recycling symbol on your milk jug, do you know what it means? If you don't, that's okay – most of us don't. But one Gwinnett organization is working to help us all become confident recyclers and showing us that the payoffs of recycling right are well worth the effort. Those payoffs? Conserving natural resources, preventing harmful emissions, and powering Georgia's economy.

Back in 2015, Laura Hernandez was volunteering at Gwinnett County's annual America Recycles Day event. Unloading broken and outdated electronics for recycling, Laura was encouraged by the high turnout of people who were willing to take

the extra steps needed to responsibly dispose of these items. She had an epiphany: to be part of this type of eco-friendly education and change.

Laura put in her two weeks' notice at her job the next week.

"I really wanted to get in front of people and show them how they can do right for the earth," Laura said.

She knew there were other like-minded people in the area, having seen that at the recycling event. Laura and these other passionate citizens began meeting as a group, looking for new ways to protect the local environment and encourage others to do the same. By early 2016, the group had created a website and named themselves Gwinnett Recycles.

"This is a group about neighbors helping neighbors," said Laura. "All of us have decisions to make every day about what to do with things we're finished using. Our group wants to help people make smart choices."

A main source of inspiration for Laura is that so much of what is properly recycled

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is used by industries in Atlanta and the surrounding areas to make new, more eco-friendly products. As both the website and Laura herself notes, the recycling industry creates 23,000 jobs in Georgia alone, thanks to the many available local outlets for recycled fiber, plastic, metal, and glass.

While the team at Gwinnett Recycles is passionate about recycling, sometimes the conversation has to be about what *not* to recycle. According to Laura, many people are "wishful recyclers," putting items in their curbside bin that cannot be recycled that way or cannot be recycled at all. For instance, your plastic grocery bags can't be recycled in your curbside bin because the companies that process our paper, cardboard, plastic bottles and jugs, and metal cans simply don't have the means of sorting out bags. These lightweight bags get tangled in equipment. Instead, look for a local bag return at your grocery store, and bring your empty plastic bags and film there. As long as the filmy plastic stretches and is marked with the number two or four inside the triangular recycling logo, it's good to go in the store bins. Examples of these items would be shopping and produce bags, dry cleaning bags, bread bags, Ziploc bags, and even Amazon bubble mailers.

There are many locations in our community that accept recyclable and donatable goods. H&M clothing stores take all types of textiles to be used in new ways. Snellville is home to a local drop-off for recycling your empty glass bottles and jars, as well as a host of other household items. A directory on the Gwinnett Recycles website includes instructions for recycling hundreds of items that aren't curbside-friendly.



"We need to recycle the right way to help the system work," said Laura. "The list of items recyclable curbside is pretty short, which is surprising to many people."

More than anything, Laura and her group want people to understand that having a full recycling bin each week may feel great, but, ideally, we would recycle less because we would be more mindful of the products we use in the first place. Laura encourages everyone to look for ways they can reduce their own use of plastic and other single-use or short-term use products, along with finding creative ways to bring new life to old items. These efforts are also part of the educational resources provided by Gwinnett Recycles.

If you are interested in helping Laura and her team beautify the county, join them for one of their socially distanced litter clean ups. If you feel you may have other talents this organization can use, contact them about your ideas. Volunteers are always needed and are welcome to participate in any of the many projects Gwinnett Recycles is coordinating.

More information at Laura@gwinnettrecycles.com



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