



Trashmagination Podcast #72 – Community Service through Creative Reuse

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Have you seen recent posts on social media with the hashtag “#trashtag?” [<https://mymodernmet.com/trashtag-challenge/>] This is when people find an area that has a lot of litter and they pick it up. While it's great that people are picking up litter, all the items they pick up will end up in landfill and are unlikely to be creatively reused. Today I want to talk about ways that you can help your community by actually reusing trash, and hopefully it will never end up as litter.

Crocheting and Weaving Plastic Bags into Mats

I'll start with the community service project that people email me about almost every month. This involves crocheting plastic bags into mats for people who are currently homeless. Sometimes these mats are called Mercy Mats. To make these mats, people cut plastic bags into loops and then loop them together to make a type of yarn called “plarn.” It takes about 500-700 plastic bags to make a mat and between 12-30 hours depending on how fast you crochet.

In Canada, there is a variation on this idea of making sleeping mats from plastic bags led by an organization called Milkbags Unlimited [<https://milkbagsunlimited.ca/>]. In Canada, a lot of milk is sold in plastic bags rather than in cartons, plastic or glass jugs. I grew up in Canada, and I remember visiting a dairy in second grade. There was this long plastic tube of milk that wrapped all the way around the dairy, and a machine would cut the tube into individual milk bags. Seeing how that machine made a long tube into individual bags is one of my earliest memories. The volunteers with Milkbags Unlimited don't crochet their mats. They weave them on a big rectangular loom made from wood. They ship these mats overseas, along with other supplies [<http://sharethesmile.ca/Creations/Williams-Parkway-Sr-weaves-waterproof-mattresses-for-developing>]. Thanks to my friend Mike for sending me this story.

Sewing Community Projects that Can Involve Creative Reuse

The next community service project idea is called fidget quilts or fidget blankets. These are small quilts – maybe 2 feet by 2 feet that sit on your lap and they feature a lot of movable parts like zippers, tags and loops. You can incorporate fabrics with different textures. I want to make one because it looks like a fun challenge. People give me lots of fabric scraps with fun textures that I might not use in a quilt, so I was looking for a project to use them up. I met with the volunteer coordinator at a local senior's center called VITAS Healthcare of Northern Virginia named Lindy [<https://www.volunteermatch.org/search/opp2806026.jsp>]. She said that these quilts are very calming for people with dementia because it keeps their hands busy. She said other crafters also make memory bears for residents from the clothing of a spouse who has passed or maybe their own clothing. I talked about memory bears back in episode 64 about memory keepsakes [<https://trashmagination.com/memory-keepsakes/>].

If you think fidget quilts or blankets sounds like a fun project, I recommend a video tutorial by Rob Appell from Man Sewing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhojSOjTAn4>. He shows step-by-step how he made a fidget quilt for his grandfather. The number one consideration is safety – making sure that all the parts are secure and not easy to remove, as well as easy to wash. Rob included textures like pockets, zippers, burlap and trims.

There are many community service projects that involve sewing fabric scraps. When I was involved with a quilt guild, we used to sew blankets for Project Linus. These go to firefighters and police officers who give them to children at the scene

of a fire or other challenging situations. Many quilters sew quilts for shelters, those serving overseas, people receiving medical treatment, parents of newborns who pass away in the hospital and many other wonderful recipients.

Some people sew cute items and sell them to raise money for charity. One example is Lily's Love Birds [<https://www.lilyslovebirds.com/>]. Lily was inspired by the book "I am Malala" to help girls around the world to go to school. She and her sister sew adorable fabric birds from recycled fabric scraps. They sell for 1 bird for \$9 and 3 for \$25.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=YvFJTJr_GfQ

There are other events where people sew little objects with messages of inspiration and hide them around town. One example is called Hand-Made Hearts in Pittsburgh. The goal was to make lots of hearts, then tag them a positive message. These were then placed around Pittsburgh to share compassion after the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in October 2018 [<https://contemporarycraft.org/event/pgh-hand-made-hearts/>]. Crafters have come together to make quilts and other items for the families affected after many horrible events like 9-11 and the Orlando shooting.

Making Crafts from Recycled Materials at Community Events

The next way we can do community service through creative reuse is to teach people how to make crafts from recycled materials at a community event. Sometimes people make these crafts for free at the event and other times, people pay a small fee for a ticket to make the craft, and that's part of the fundraising goals of the event. I have done this for free a few times like when people decorated butterflies that I had cut out of plastic milk jugs or they made caperpillars, which is a caterpillar made from plastic caps. I have helped people to make little robots from plastic caps as well.

A few years ago, my taiko group offered taiko-themed crafts as part of our summer festival, including:

1. A taiko player made from recycled individual yogurt containers - <https://trashmagination.com/taiko-crafts-from-recycled-plastic-caps-and-wine-corks/>
2. Fans or uchiwa made from recycled cereal boxes and wooden craft sticks
3. Small baskets made from colorful plastic caps from laundry containers - <https://trashmagination.com/toddler-craft-basket-from-recycled-laundry-cap/>
4. Drum ornaments made from wine corks and plastic milk jug lids - <https://trashmagination.com/taiko-crafts-from-recycled-plastic-caps-and-wine-corks/>

There are lots of events where the participants are invited to make crafts. But new craft supplies cost a lot. So one way to reduce the budget is to make crafts from recycled materials. Every dollar your community organization doesn't spend is one less dollar you have to raise.

Trash Fashion Shows

Some organization raise funds through trash fashion shows. For example, the City of Orlando has a trash fashion show called Trash 2 Trends which raised \$22,000 or a school in Bend, Oregon raised \$20,000 at their event, Rubbish Renewed. You can learn more about this creative reuse community service idea by listening to episode 13.

Terracycle Collection Programs & Creative Reuse Centers

Another way that schools and charities raise money through creative reuse is to collect items for Terracycle or other similar organizations. Terracycle has a program called Brigades where you sign up to collect items like contact lens packaging, Brita cartridges and many other types of packaging [<https://www.terracycle.com/en-US/brigades>]. They pay you to ship the items and they pay a certain amount per item. The brigades program works best for a large population such as a school because they ask you to collect very specific branded items. Terracycle then finds ways to creatively reuse all these materials.

While Terracycle brigades pay your organization to collect items, there are many other organizations who will take your trash items for free and find a creative way to reuse them. The time that you spend volunteering to clean and sort your items can help build stronger community organizations. For example, many creative reuse centers take items like small jars, plastic caps, wine corks, wooden craft sticks, prescription bottles, CDs or DVDs, motherboards, keys and lots of other items that can't go in your recycling bin. I also find many pre-school and elementary teachers are looking for specific items for crafts in their classrooms. Always check with community organizations and teachers before starting to collect a trash or recycling item in bulk.

Thank you!

Thank you for listening! I would love to hear how you do community service while also doing creative reuse at trashmagination@gmail.com. Until next time – may you see opportunities for community service in your recycling bin!