

# Don't Waste Durham encourages community to seek sustainable alternatives to plastic foam



Crystal Dreisbach is a co-chair of Don't Waste Durham and co-founder of Green To Go, a service that replaces plastic foam takeout containers at restaurants with reusable containers. (Photo courtesy of Don't Waste Durham)

By **Natasha Townsend and Celia McRae**

Between 2010-2011, Crystal Dreisbach wrote 200 letters to businesses throughout the Triangle. Her mission toward a more sustainable Durham was just beginning.

The restaurants Dreisbach wrote to used plastic foam, and she wanted to talk to distributors about sustainable alternatives, she said.

She was working in public health research at the time, and plastic foam takeout containers always bothered her, she said. "I kept thinking there's a better way."

### Voicing her opinion

In 2009, she submitted her idea for reusable takeout containers to a magazine in Portland, Oregon, and won a runner-up award. "Everybody said it was a crazy idea," she said.

The award energized her to reach out to restaurants in Durham.

She knew many people didn't read letters, but a restaurant in downtown Durham wrote back. It was Dreisbach's letter that made the restaurant switch to a different material, she said.

Dreisbach presented her idea to ban plastic foam to the Durham Environmental Affairs Board (EAB). The EAB was excited about the idea and established a sub-committee to work on plastic foam issues, with Dreisbach as a co-chair.

### Seeking a cleaner future

The sub-committee created Don't Waste Durham, which has been meeting since 2012. Its main function is to convene people, from nonprofits to concerned citizens, that care about waste reduction.

"We're at this stage of talking about waste reduction solutions, and people really seem to need us," she said. "For 10 years I feel like I've been shouting at a brick wall, and now it's in the mainstream, and people realize we need to stop all these disposables."

Don't Waste Durham offers a reusable takeout container and straw service for businesses, and implements composting programs in schools and partners with organizations throughout the Triangle to raise awareness about living sustainably.

The nonprofit promoted waste reduction at local businesses, including the Bull City Burger and Brewery, which won the most sustainable business award in the Triangle.

"They'll try anything new. They want to be leaders," Dreisbach said. "They stopped providing straws way before it was a thing."

### Getting the community involved

With the help of Duke's Environmental Law and Policy Clinic, Don't Waste Durham hopes to pass a voluntary ban at the Durham city level.

Before presenting to the EAB on Wednesday, April 3, Don't Waste Durham wanted to make sure the entire community

could participate.

"If you tell low-income businesses that plastic foam is bad, but there's no affordable alternative for them, then what good does it do?" Dreisbach said.

If City Council adopts the resolution, Dreisbach hopes the voluntary ban can be facilitated by community stakeholders coming together to make the ban work for businesses with different income levels.

Duke's Environmental Law and Policy Clinic hopes to get the EAB to adopt the voluntary ban resolution, which means it can go to City Council for a vote. City Council's approval would make a public statement in support. Because the ban is voluntary, people would not be required to eliminate single-use plastics, but would be more likely not to use them, Dreisbach said.

"The solution to pollution lies within each one of us," Duke Environmental Law and Policy Clinic student Rupanjali Karthik said.

Dreisbach said the backing of the City Council would make all the difference in raising awareness about the need to reduce plastic and plastic foam use.

### A cost-effective solution

Part of the legislation Don't Waste Durham hopes to pass would include the city purchasing items in bulk to replace the plastic and plastic foam businesses currently use. Then individual businesses can purchase the replacement items from the city at a cheaper cost. Dreisbach hopes this would make the legislation more equitable and easier to implement.

Dreisbach and Don't Waste Durham approached several local businesses to see how a voluntary ban could work in different types of stores and restaurants. One of these businesses is King's Red and White Supermarket, owned by Brink King and opened by King's father in 1956.

King said he is open to the idea of switching the store's plastic grocery bags to a "bring your own bag" system with reusable cloth bags. He also said it wouldn't surprise him if grocery stores began to switch back to wrapping meat products in paper rather than plastic. The materials might even save the supermarket money, since paper is less expensive than the plastic trays currently used.

"I don't think there would be any bad feedback from it, really, because everybody wants a cleaner, better place to live," King said.