

Shelby Stanger: There are a lot of statistics out in the world about recycling and what we do with our waste. For example, every year, eight million metric tons of plastics enter our oceans on top of the estimated 150 million metric tons that are already there. That's like dumping one New York City garbage truck full of plastic into the ocean, every minute of every day, for an entire year. With numbers like that, it's easy to feel discouraged and feel like your own actions won't make a difference. But that's just not true. By being a better recycler, you can not only reduce the amount of plastics and waste being dumped in our oceans, you can also have the potential to help create jobs, reduce the use of fossil fuels, and have a huge economic impact. This episode is a little different than normal. It's focused less on one person's adventure, and more on how all of us can improve our own recycling habits and reduce our waste. I'm Shelby Stanger, and this is Wild Ideas Worth Living.

Shelby Stanger: Back in April, when I was at an event learning about Igloo's Recool biodegradable cooler, I met a woman named Helen Lowman. Helen's the president and CEO of Keep America Beautiful, an organization that's been around since 1953. They inspire and educate people to take action to improve and beautify their own communities. They have a bunch of different programs and initiatives focused on ending littering, improving recycling, beautifying communities, and they even lead events like plogging, which is basically picking up litter while jogging.

Shelby Stanger: Helen has had quite an amazing career herself. Before asking her to break down some of the biggest myths about recycling and giving us tips on how to do it right, I wanted to find out how she got to where she is today. How do you become the head honcho of an organization like this? It helps that Helen had over 20 years of leadership experience and international diplomacy and development, and she worked directly for President Obama. But Helen's career actually started as a volunteer for one of my favorite organizations, the Peace Corps.

Shelby Stanger: Let's start with your background, because you worked for the President, Obama, and you worked for the Peace Corps. So let's start with your background in Peace Corps, because I think that's such an interesting organization that allows you to travel. I have a lot of friends who did it, and their lives have become so impacted by their work in the Peace Corps.

Helen Lowman: Most returned peace Corps volunteers will tell you that it was a huge factor in how they chose to live their life. And that was definitely the case for me. I grew up in this tiny little town in the middle of Texas. So going away to the Peace Corps in Thailand as a volunteer was so eyeopening and life-changing. It was incredible. I just fell in love with the organization and with what they do. So I ended up coming back to Peace Corps as staff, rather than a volunteer. And I was country director in China and Mongolia. Then when President Obama was elected, I was fortunate enough to be asked by his administration to come back to the Peace Corps as regional director for all of our operations in Europe,

Northern Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Then I also was asked to lead some kind of innovative changes in how Peace Corps recruits and places their volunteers.

Shelby Stanger: Maybe just tell us a little bit about what you did with Obama.

Helen Lowman: He's the President, so I didn't interact with him often.

Shelby Stanger: So you guys didn't play basketball?

Helen Lowman: We didn't. No, no.

Shelby Stanger: I was really hoping for a good story there. Okay.

Helen Lowman: Right. Every president has thousands of appointees. And I was one of his appointees. The government, the federal government, has civil servants, and then they have appointees that come in to serve the President when they're elected. There are certain positions in the federal government that a president is allowed to fill with their own people. Yeah, when he was elected, I was fortunate to be asked by the White House to interview for this job. And because I already had a lot of experience with Peace Corps, I didn't have the kind of learning curve that maybe some other people might have had, because I had been a volunteer, and I had been in the field as a civil servant. So I was one of these people that was both, a civil servant in the federal government, as well as a political appointee.

Shelby Stanger: I remember, you told us this story when Obama left office ... This is not a really political podcast, but I think this is really important. When Obama left, he had a meeting with all of his appointees. It might've been on inauguration day of our current president, and he gave you guys some advice and left you with a message. I'd love for you to tell that story.

Helen Lowman: This is the day of Trump's inauguration. When the inauguration was over, they invited all the appointees to go out to this military base to basically say goodbye. Yeah, at the very end, his message to all of his appointees is, "Now it's your time. I've done what I can do, and it's up to you to carry our message and our mission forward."

Shelby Stanger: You could have done anything after after he left office, but you decided to go do Keep America Beautiful.

Helen Lowman: I did. I had a recruiter call me and ask if this was a job I would be interested in, because I had been in kind of the international development world for a really long time. And I said, "Actually, I really would be interested in that," because I started my career in Texas decades ago, working for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, doing environmental education and recycling and awareness about environmental issues. So I said, I would love to talk to them

about that. I also really felt like, climate change ... There's just so much that we need to do in this space. So I felt like, this is an organization that ... Keep America Beautiful is 66-years-old. They're an iconic legacy American nonprofit. I felt like there was so much opportunity to increase their impact and to build across the United States a greater ... a difference, more of a difference. I thought it would be really exciting to lead that.

Shelby Stanger: I remember Keep America Beautiful as a little kid. It was like, there was this giant don't litter campaign. Can you just tell us a little bit about the mission of Keep America Beautiful, and what it is? Is it a nonprofit, or is it an NGO?

Helen Lowman: We're a nonprofit. Yep, and our mission is to empower and educate individuals to keep their communities clean, green, and beautiful. I work at the headquarters office. We have 600 and, let's say, 30, growing every day, affiliate communities across the United States, that implement our mission on the ground. Those 630 affiliates are, they're either nonprofits of their own, or they are embedded in their local governments. They do things like, litter cleanups, recycling education in schools. They plant trees. They make sure that their communities have open spaces and green spaces for people to enjoy. So it really is very grassroots. In addition to that, through those affiliates, we have about five million volunteers and participants that are a part of the program. So it's an incredible movement, really. But the heart of it is that it's local. I like to say that it's a local program with global impact.

Shelby Stanger: Recycling isn't as easy as it sounds. You have to know what can be recycled and what cannot be recycled. Does a plastic lid stay on, or get thrown in the trash? How thoroughly do we need to wash that can? For most of us, we put our plastic bottle, or our salsa jar, or our brown paper bag into the recycling bin. We don't really think about what happens after that. Where does it go? How does it get broken down, and who pays for it? There's a lot of wild info out there. I asked Helen to help me break down some of the biggest myths behind recycling.

Helen Lowman: There are a lot of myths. A couple that all I'll focus on, probably the biggest myth about recycling is that, you magically put it in the blue bin, or whatever color your bin is for recycling, and it's all taken care of. And it really takes more than that. There's a lot of people in the United States that believe it's the same everywhere, and it's not. Recycling is not a national program. It's a very local program. So every community may have a different recycling program. For example, there are communities where, you can put glass in your recycling bin, and there's communities that don't accept glass. What's really important is that, each and every individual takes the time to know what can and can't go into their bin in their community, because it's all different, and it's very local.

Shelby Stanger: What happens if you don't know what's going on? Because I live in a condo complex, and there's just recycling bins down in the laundry room that nobody uses. There's a dumpster and recycling bins, and people just throw ... It's

atrocious. People have plastic bags with their recycling in them, and it drives us nuts.

Helen Lowman: That's terrible.

Shelby Stanger: We're like, really? Or, they just don't clean stuff, or they'll put their dirty paper towels in there. You're like, nobody's going to use that.

Helen Lowman: Yeah, yeah, yeah. What's important is that, as a community, your condo association finds out from the people who pick up their recycling. Whoever it is that your condo building is contracted with as their recycling processor, that you reach out to that company and say, "Look, we want to do a better job recycling. What is it that we're allowed to put in our recycling bin?" Then educate every single person in your building on that. Honestly, that is what it takes. Because the issue of, we call it wish-cycling, or aspirational recycling. What happens is, everybody is so hopeful that everything can be recycled, and it can't. There are things that just can't be recycled in every community. So what happens is, let's say a dirty pizza box, or a bag, a plastic bag gets put in that recycling, that recycling is then contaminated, and it contaminates the entire load of recycling. So all the people who've done it right are now ... what they've done is not recyclable. That load is not recyclable, because it's contaminated. So it's really important that, as a community, we learn what is accepted in your condo building, or in your town, or in your office, and then those things are really strictly adhered to.

Shelby Stanger: What are some other myths about recycling? One is that, what goes in, not everything gets recycled.

Helen Lowman: Yeah, and I think this idea that, if I move from New York to Los Angeles, I still can put the same things. The same things are recyclable. They're not. And if that little chasing arrow is on that bottle, that it's recyclable. And that's not the case either. Those little chasing arrows don't necessarily mean that that thing can be recycled in that community. Even things like the lids on plastic bottles. Is it lid on, or is it lid off?

Shelby Stanger: How do you know?

Helen Lowman: Well, you need to ask. You need to ask your local community, or whoever picks up your recycling. Usually, a good bet is, lid on. But just to be sure, it's always a good idea to contact whoever it is that's picking up your recycling and asking them.

Shelby Stanger: It has to be very costly to recycle heavier goods than lighter goods. I've always wondered what happens with glass.

Helen Lowman: Glass is heavy, and that is part of the reason why it can be hard to recycle. Recycling is a commodity. So it's sold on the market. There's times when the

markets are really good, and there's times when the markets are not. And markets go up, and markets go down. So sometimes, in the history of recycling, there's been ... You can make money on recycling, depending on supply and demand. Then there's other times when, there's no market for it. Also, each individual type of recycling is a different commodity. So glass goes up and down, and the cost of transferring it from your house to the recycling facility to the plant, all those factors have to come into play. So it can be more expensive than other products.

Shelby Stanger: While we're on glass, we used to just go get a Coke bottle at a restaurant, drink the Coke, put it back in the bin, and Coke would fill that bottle back up. You were saying that, people today, when you recycle glass and it gets mixed in, people don't like to have glass that's dirty.

Helen Lowman: Well, yeah. It's interesting because, that's not just the case with glass. There's a real marketing issue with a recycled content container that has food in it. There's a mental challenge with people of, well, if it's not perfectly clear, and it's not perfectly clean, and you know, then then is it really okay. And the fact is, it is. It's highly regulated. And in order to close the loop on recycling in the world, we have to, as consumers, demand products that contain recycled content, so that the loop is closed.

Helen Lowman: Because if we don't do that as consumers, then there won't be any market for those recycled goods. For example, if you buy a bottle that's made from virgin plastic, or virgin glass, or any material, and we don't then demand that the next bottle we buy have recycled content in it, it won't work. As consumers, I think, mentally, we just need to realize that, these things are highly regulated. And even if they have food in them, they're clean, and we need to look for them.

Shelby Stanger: As consumers, we have to demand better of the brands we buy from. We hear a lot these days about voting with our dollars. And it's true, we should be spending our money with companies who are doing work to make an impact on the environment positively. When we come back, hear how the recycling process has changed recently, and how you can improve your own recycling practice.

Shelby Stanger: I love renting things. I love renting movies, I love renting books. I love that I can get a lot more than I would if I bought them, and they don't take up room in my house. Well, guess what? Now you can rent your outdoor gear at REI. That's right. Now when you want to get outside, you can just rent the gear you need, and you don't have to figure out where to build that gear shed. So next time you're super outdoorsy friend or you want to get outside, don't panic if you don't have the gear you need. Just go to REI, tell them the situation, and they'll get you set up. You can learn more at rei.com/rentals, and find out which stores it's available at. Renting stuff is awesome. REI now has you covered for all of your outdoor rental needs. Just go to rei.com/rentals.

Shelby Stanger: When I think about recycling, I always think about those glass Coke bottles I mentioned in my conversation with Helen. You drink from them at a restaurant, give them back the restaurant, they'd get cleaned, and then refilled. Why doesn't everything else just work that simply? Well, recycling isn't that easy. It's a process, and there's a major industry behind it, and it's one that's always changing.

Shelby Stanger: How has recycling changed in the last year? Maybe you can explain this, but I've read that China used to take a lot of our recycled goods, and now they don't. Maybe you can explain that to us, and then explain how that's changed a little bit.

Helen Lowman: Yeah, absolutely. China used to purchase a huge amount of, not all of it, but a huge amount of our recycling. Basically they said, "You know what? We have our own environmental problems to take care of, and we feel like the percent of contamination that's being sold to us from the United States in the recycling is too high. And in order for us not to basically have to sort through it again, we need to reduce the amount of contamination. So if the United States can reduce the amount of contamination in their recycling, then we're willing to purchase it." It isn't as if they just said, "Sorry, no. We don't want anymore of your recycling." They said, "We want it. We just want it to be clean, and then we'll buy it." So that's been a real challenge for the United States, because most towns have what's called single-stream recycling. Single-stream recycling is when you put everything in one bin. It's not separated at the curb. I don't know if you remember this, but it used to be, we had to sort everything. We had a bin for paper, we had a bin for, aluminum. And in order to get Americans to recycle, the idea was, well, if we can have them put it all in one bin, and then we'll sort it at the recycling facility, then we'll get more people to recycle in the United States. And it did work. But the cost was that ... It just had a lot of contamination in it. China was willing to buy that from us for a while. But I have to give the Chinese some credit here in realizing that they have their own environmental issues and challenges. And they said, "You know what? We've got to take care of the problems we have. So until you can solve your contamination problem, we can't buy your recycling."

Shelby Stanger: Why can't we have stricter laws about throwing the wrong things in the wrong bins? I remember when I lived in this town called Raglan, New Zealand, they're a zero waste town. And the trash guy knocked on our door, because there was like a drop of tomato sauce at the bottom of a can, and was like, "You have to wash this out." He pretty much reprimanded Johnny and I, and I was like, this is awesome. He educated me on it, and I was very thankful, and they explained how recycling works in their community. And they've solved the problem. But that's because, there was a check and a balance. There's not, at least not in my town, nobody cares. Nobody knows if you throw the wrong thing in. And it's just that single bin. Can we go back to those three bins?

Helen Lowman: We could, but it would be really, really hard. That kind of-

Shelby Stanger: Why? Is it space?

Helen Lowman: It's not, it's just a change in behavior, you know? The recycling rates were really, really low when people had to separate. We could go back to it, but it would probably reduce the amount of recycling at a time when we really actually need it to increase. There's a lot of corporations that produce goods that are making these incredible goals on closing the loop and using recycled content in their products. And they need us to recycle, in order to meet their goals, in order to close the loop. So by going back to curbside sorting, it would be ... I think it would probably be harmful in the long run to go back to that. The best thing is just to continue to try and educate the public on what can and can't go in that bin. There's a great saying in the recycling world, which is, when in doubt, leave it out. The idea being that, if you are not sure, 100% sure, that the thing you have in your hand is recyclable in your community, then put it in the trash.

Shelby Stanger: What about, there's a big community of people who recycle, and they're called informal trash pickers. Oftentimes, they're homeless people in our communities, who take out recyclables out of the trashcan. It happens in our community. We're a beach community. People will come, and they'll pick out all the bottles, aluminum cans, after like the 4th of July or a big holiday, and then they'll take them and they'll try and sell them. And in Buenos Aires, in a couple of cities, I'm sure, around the country, they said that there's informal trash pickers that the city is now paying them a wage for collecting recyclables. Do we have anything like that in the United States?

Helen Lowman: Actually, we do.

Shelby Stanger: Okay, cool.

Helen Lowman: There's 10 States in the United States that are bottle bill states. Those bottles and cans actually have a value. And there's many times when I've been in New York city, and I've seen folks along the streets opening up ... The bottles are in clear plastic on the curb, and I've seen them going through to pick out the bottles and cans that have a value, and then taking them in get the refunds. There's only 10 states in the United States that have those bottle bills. So it's generally, you see that kind of thing in states where there's a refund.

Shelby Stanger: Yeah. In Buenos Aires, it said these people are unionized and they're seeking formal acknowledgement. So that's like a little bit of a step up. But that seems like that could be a really interesting ... I guess it's expensive to recycle, is the bottom line.

Helen Lowman: At the end of the day, there's huge value in these items. That's the thing that I think, because it sits right next to your trash, there's this thought that, it has no value. But plastic is actually made from oil. What we pay to put in our car ... If you think of it in terms of, what does a gallon of oil cost, then you kind of begin

to think, "Oh, well, actually, there's some value to this." The same with paper. Paper's made from trees. Trees have to be planted, they have to be ... There's a value to all of these things. Glass is made from sand. So when you think about where it comes from, then you begin to realize, oh. Okay, there's real money tied to this stuff. That's, I think, what we forget when we're trying to figure out whether or not we should recycle.

Shelby Stanger: What can we actually do? What can you do? I often feel helpless when it comes to making a dent in the amount of plastics and trash in the ocean, or even when I see something in the recycling bin that I know shouldn't be there. Helen offers concrete tips for us to improve our recycling practices.

Shelby Stanger: Is there advice you can give to us on, if we're out, we don't have a reusable water bottle, or reusable utensils, reusable container, reusable bag, what should we do?

Helen Lowman: It's a great question. There is a hierarchy in this, and it's the three Rs: reduce, reuse, recycle. The most important, the R that has the biggest impact is reduce. The second is, reuse. So anything you can use more than once, that has the next impact level. Then the final one is recycling. You don't necessarily have to choose between those three materials, between aluminum, plastic, or glass. You just need to know if it's recyclable in your community. Like I said, in some communities, glass is not recyclable. If you choose glass, and you put it in a recycling bin in a community that doesn't accept glass, then you're not helping. And you should definitely choose aluminum or plastic. Ideally, don't forget your bottle.

Shelby Stanger: But those bottles, if you lose them, and they go on the landfill, those things seem almost worse, because I feel like they're never going to biodegrade, ever.

Helen Lowman: Well, if you've reused it multiple times, the idea of buying a reusable bottle is that you continue to reuse it.

Shelby Stanger: For the rest of your life, yeah. I need to stop leaving mine.

Helen Lowman: I'm always forgetting mine. The other day, I read an interview. There's this woman, I don't know where she lives, I think she lives in New York City, who basically did ... She made her own life zero waste. And she had like a jar, a glass jar. And for a year, all the trash she created fit into this jar. I heard her interviewed the other day and she said, "If we can remember our keys and our wallet when we walk out the door, we can remember our water bottle and our coffee cup." And I thought to myself, you know what? She's right. There's no excuse.

Shelby Stanger: No, there's not. I think these zero waste individuals are so awesome. There was a woman I met in New Zealand who went a year with zero waste. It was

incredible. We interviewed this guy, Rob Greenfield, who goes zero waste for months at a time. He's living off the land right now.

Helen Lowman: Yeah. I don't know him personally, but I've read his stuff. He's great.

Shelby Stanger: I think, when you're at the store and you're ordering a coffee, I just try to get a mug for here. And if I want a straw, I'm like, no, I don't need a straw. Buying a reusable straw just seems dumb. Just don't use a straw. Drink like an adult. Sorry. I know there's a lot of companies that sell straws, and I love straws. But maybe you just don't need them. I think this reduce and reuse has gotten a little lost. How can we bring that back to the forefront?

Helen Lowman: Yeah, I agree with you. I think that, remembering that there's actually three Rs, there's not just one. And that those, the reduce, reuse, are really the places that have the most impact. That's where we can make a huge difference. There's going to be recycling. We need recycling. And it works, and we need it in order to close the loop. But we also need to reduce how much stuff we have. We all have so much stuff. So it seems like, if we can just be conscious of that, and be aware, and have our water bottle, or our refillable coffee cup, and be really, really aware and conscious of using those things.

Shelby Stanger: So the main tips and takeaways about recycling is, learn about it, clean it. Anything else?

Helen Lowman: The other thing I would just add is that, I think that we also tend to focus our recycling in the kitchen. But there is recycling in the bathroom. When you go to work in your office, make sure there's recycling, you're recycling there. The amount of paper in an office, all of that can be recycled. In public spaces, that's really what we focus on, is making sure that people on the go have access to recycling bins in public spaces, so that they have the option. They're not having to throw their fast food drink cup in a trash bin. But they have the option of, if it is recyclable, they can put it in a recycling bin. Or if they have a bottle of water that they picked up at the local 7-Eleven, that they can have a place to recycle it. That's a huge focus for us. Parks and street corners and things like that.

Shelby Stanger: When you say, we can just find out in our community about recycling, where can we find more about recycling as a whole?

Helen Lowman: A lot of places, actually. We have, on our website, which is kab.org, we have a lot of information about recycling. Berecycled.org is another one of our websites that focuses solely on recycling. If you want more information about your own local community and what is recycled there, go to your municipal government website, and there's probably information on your local government's website on what specifically can be recycled in your community.

Shelby Stanger: What if we want to get beyond our own home, life, bathroom? How can we get even more involved with places like Keep America Beautiful, or other organizations?

Helen Lowman: Like I said, we have five million volunteers and participants across the country, that have local events in their own communities. So it's not like people have to go far. Our affiliates, you can go to kab.org, and we have a place where you can look up your own affiliate, or your nearest group. They do litter cleanups, beach cleanups. They plant trees, they do all sorts of stuff, and they need volunteers. So any time a person wants to become involved, there is a way to be involved in this movement.

Shelby Stanger: I asked Helen for her biggest gems of wisdom for how to make an impact. She said, educate yourself, and don't litter. She said litter is still a huge problem in this country. She told me 80% of what's in the ocean started on land. And it's much further inland than the beach or the beach parking lot. Talking with Helen gave me some great ideas on how I can step up my own recycling game, like talking to people in my condo complex, and just checking out what the recycling requirements actually are in my own area. What about you? How will you take your recycling prowess to the next level? I'd really love to hear what you're doing to make an impact. Tag me on Instagram or Facebook @wildideasworthliving, and I'll share them out. I can always use more ideas to up my own recycling game.

Shelby Stanger: If you want to get involved, you can visit Keep America Beautiful, that's kab.org, or you can go plogging, picking up litter while jogging, an activity that comes from Sweden, where it's actually called plocka upp. I don't even know if I'm saying that right. Well, anyways, Keep America Beautiful is doing a plogging event in Houston, Texas on November 16th. You can go to their website for more event details, kab.org. Thank you so much to Helen Lowman for sharing all this information with us, and for doing the work you do. It's people like you who are making a real impact on our planet.

Shelby Stanger: This podcast is produced by REI, with help from Annie Fassler and Chelsea Davis. As always, I appreciate when you subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you listen. Send us those recycling ideas on Instagram @wildideasworthliving, and write a review on this show. And while you're at it, tell a friend, or 100 friends, because that's what keeps this show going. And remember, wherever you are, some of the best adventures often happen when you follow your wildest ideas.