

# Dumpster diving in Athens highlights food waste problem facing the country

By Lee Shearer

Posted Aug 13, 2016 at 4:26 PM

More than 100 people showed up at the University of Georgia's Memorial Hall this past week, three days before classes began, to hear Rob Greenfield, a traveling advocate against food waste.

A much smaller group accompanied Greenfield the following night for a hands-on demonstration of what he was talking about - a surprisingly productive round of dumpster-diving behind some of Athens' supermarkets and restaurants. In a little more than two hours, Greenfield and a handful of others brought out enough meat, fruit, vegetables and other groceries to fill up a refrigerator and part of a pantry - all of it perfectly edible.

Greenfield, 29, has been dumpster diving for years, partly because the way he's living his life now, as a kind of adventurer valuing time more than money, freedom more than a paycheck.

But he's also in the forefront of an emerging awareness about just how much food is wasted, and the cost not just in money but in environmental impact.

"Food waste is one of the most pressing environmental issues of our time," said Greenfield, who's now on a national "Food Waste Fiasco" tour, staging events to highlight the issue - all with the flair of the public relations professional he used to be.

Here in Athens, he's making a time-lapse video of the refrigerator and pantry filling up with what he and a small band of local helpers manage to pull out of dumpsters. In other places, he's carefully arranged the food in artful patterns reminiscent of mandalas before giving it away.

"I find dumpster after dumpster is filled to the brim with perfectly good food," he said. "Seventy percent of my diet this summer came from dumpsters."

Reclaiming discarded food, along with steps such as abandoning cell phone and automobiles, helped him live his life in a certain way.

"My focus in life is to spend as much time as possible on things that matter and as little time as possible on time-wasters," Greenfield said.

Food waste is at the heart of what matters, he said.

"The main issues are food insecurity, food waste and food accessibility," he said.

Food waste has a surprisingly big environmental impact, Greenfield told his UGA crowd, which included Athens townspeople as well as UGA students.

According to Consumer Reports, which features food waste in an article in its September issue, some 28 percent of the world's farmland is devoted to producing food that gets thrown away; 4 percent of the oil we use is burned to move food that's thrown away.

In California, about 20 percent of electricity use is for pumping water, and about half that is used to produce wasted food.

Some of it is food we let go bad in our home refrigerators and shelves, and a great deal of it is thrown away by grocery stores and other retailers because a product's expiration date is nearing or it's blemished.

Much more is disposed of at the farm because it's too big or too small or blemished - we want only perfect-looking produce, he said.

At the same time, one in six Americans - one in five in the Athens area - is "food insecure," meaning they can't be sure where their next meal is coming from, said Christy Tweedy, an AmeriCorps Vista volunteer working with the Athens Community Council on Aging.

Tweedy coordinated Monday's program, and was one of eight people who spoke before Greenfield to tell briefly what their company or agency does to alleviate food insecurity or food reduce waste in the Athens area.

Some of those agencies help divert some of that food waste, including UGA's Campus Kitchen, which receives donations from grocery stores such as Trader Joe's and Fresh Market, along with produce it gets from the university's UGArden.

With labor mainly from UGA student volunteers, Campus Kitchen takes that donated food, then prepares it for distribution mainly to food-insecure grandparents who are helping raise their grandchildren.

"Athens is doing quite a bit better than a lot of places around the country," Greenfield said.

Tweedy is hoping Athens can do more, though. More grocery stores donating food they remove from shelves could help lower the number of food-insecure families and people in the Athens area, she said.

Individual people can help, too, Greenfield said - first of all by asking grocery stores to donate food instead of dumping it.

We can also relax our own aesthetic standards for the appearance of food, cut down on our own food waste at home, grow our own food, and support local farmers, he said.

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