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### Protecting the Planet One Upside Down Sticker at a Time

A young girl with wildly curly hair and blue paint stretching up the span of her arms shyly hides behind her mother's legs, reluctant to help lead me into the store, the Refillery Co., that she has become well acquainted with since it opened in June. I will later discover that her name is Alex, and learn from the show of fingers she holds up when I ask her age, that she is four. Her mom, Jasmyn Blanchard owns the Refillery Co., which sits tucked away in a strip of stores off Wrightsville Ave.

At this local hidden gem, customers can find a plethora of environmentally friendly products such as toothpaste tabs, shampoo and conditioner bars, and bamboo hair brushes, but the main star of the show is the table that sits in the center of the room. Large containers cover every inch of the wooden surface and are filled with products such as hand soap, laundry detergent, lotion, all-purpose cleaner, and SPF. Here, customers can fill containers, either brought from home or paid for at the shop, with various products in an effort to reduce plastic waste.

"I think that there has been a good amount of people that do like this," says Blanchard, while for a brief moment, Alex is preoccupied chasing Olive, the family's Beagle, throughout the store. "I feel like sometimes refill shops can come off as like a fad. Like, temporary."

And while they have taken social media by storm, refill stores like this one have also been popping up throughout the country. They're becoming one of the newer faces of sustainability. But when the face of a movement is one that isn't accessible to everyone, especially poorer communities, the inclusivity and effectiveness of the activism becomes questionable.

“I do think reducing waste is important on a individual level if you can,” says Casey Shotton, the Sustainability Coordinator at UNCW. “It is privileged to say that. I used to be really into zero waste, being zero waste, personally. It's really hard. It's expensive. It's really expensive.”

At her store, Blanchard puts in effort to maintain prices that won't break the bank. When compared to other brands that label themselves as “green,” products at the Refillery Co. are often comparable, if not cheaper. To buy a 23.1 fl oz bottle of Seventh Generation free and clear detergent at Target, a customer would pay \$0.61 per ounce. At the Refillery Co., unscented laundry detergent is sold at \$0.35 per ounce. Mrs. Meyer's lavender-scented hand soap is sold at \$0.39 per ounce as opposed to the Refillery Co, where lavender hand soap is sold at \$0.37 per ounce.

Accessibility to products that create little to no waste, are environmentally friendly and have clean ingredients isn't something only for those with money. Environmental activism and work are for everybody, no group can be forgotten.

“A lot of the times people forget the fact that social sustainability is just as important as environmental sustainability, that it's all interconnected,” says Felitia Lee, the Chief Sustainability Officer at UNCW. “By creating people as less than is a problem.”

And North Carolina has a long history of painting people as less than through environmental injustice. Just under a three-hour drive from Wilmington sits Warren County. In 1982 the state had to decide where a landfill of toxic waste would be dumped. Out of every option those in power chose the poor and predominantly Black community of Warren County. Protests ensued and upwards of 500 people were arrested for the crime of wanting to protect their

home. These protests resulted in North Carolina often being cited as the birthplace of the phrase “environmental racism.”

“Our world is not sustainable if we are not taking care of the folks who cannot necessarily take care of themselves,” says Amelia Woodruff, the Recycling Coordinator at UNCW. “I believe we are defined by how well we take care of our weakest individual. If we pursue sustainability without also pursuing equity and without also pursuing accessibility to these resources, then we're just going to further increase wage gaps, are going to further increase disparity.”

Just a mere 0.4 miles, a simple seven-minute walk, from the Refillery Co., sits Vesta Village. It is one of the 16 communities found in Wilmington that are a part of the Wilmington Housing Authority’s initiative to ensure accessible housing for low-income individuals. Out of the 120,324 people living in Wilmington at the time of the 2022 census, 18.8% of them are living in poverty.

The poorest communities are the ones that will carry the brunt of the burden of the climate crisis. By 2030 the World Bank reports that between 68 and 135 million people will be pushed into poverty due to the impacts of a changing climate.

“I know around here there’s a lot of gentrification, especially in the area the shop is in. It’s a weird thing to kind of be involved in because I feel bad that we’re taking over,” says Blanchard. “I want everybody to be able to use what we have and be able to afford to use what we have.”

As North Carolina’s coastal regions are beginning to see the rumblings of the consequences of a changing climate, Wilmington has a lot at stake when it comes to the

environmental crisis. This is part of the reason why the city has a goal of reducing greenhouse emissions by 58% by 2050.

“I think we’ll be able to beat that 58%,” says David Ingram, the Sustainability Project Manager for the city. “We really want to be able to make this city a very livable, sustainable, environmentally friendly city.”

The Refillery Co. is one of the many key players in creating this eco-conscious community. Their [Instagram](#) account, which has amassed close to two thousand followers, highlights Wilmington residents’ eagerness to protect their home and create a better future one small change at a time.

“The way that sustainability is on social media it's like this aesthetic vibe,” says Blanchard. “It doesn’t need to be that. It could be reusing a shirt and cutting it into little towels to use. You can use vinegar to make your own cleaners.”

Financial privilege is not a requirement for living an environmentally friendly life, but those who lack it are the ones who suffer the consequences of the deteriorating health of the planet the most.

When Alex’s tiny blue hands placed the sticker, stating how much my container weighed, upside down on my jar, it acted as a reminder of the generation the Earth is being passed down to. This is the generation that the actions taken now will greatly impact. When it comes to all forms of justice, whether social or environmental, kids like Alex count on the people of today to make a change.