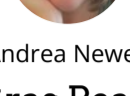




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Andrea Newell

Where Do All the Plastic Mardi Gras Beads Go?

They shine red, white, purple, silver, gold and green. Thousands of people cheer and struggle to catch them as dozens of parade floats glide by. Strands fly through the air, sparkling in the sun. They catch on electric lines, tree branches and streetlights. The music swells as and festival-goers merrily drape the beads around their necks.

What a waste.

Mardi Gras is one of the biggest annual celebrations in the U.S. Two weeks of revelry every February in New Orleans. Hundreds of thousands of locals and tourists flock to see a growing number of parades, where <http://www.visitlakeland.com/visitlakeland/about/krewe-history/> (float organizers) compete with each other to supply more and more beads every year to enthusiastic, ever-growing crowds.

Every year, 20 million pounds of plastic beads are shipped to the U.S., primarily from China, with 75 percent of them going to Louisiana. The City of New Orleans, overwhelmed by the sheer amount of trash generated from the parades, doesn't have a recycling program for them.

But that's not where this story ends. Because, as in so many communities, citizens are stepping up to make change. A few local organizations have stepped in to stem the tide of plastic flowing into local landfills by collecting and reusing the beads for the next year.

One organization, [Arc of Greater New Orleans](http://www.arcno.org) (<http://www.arcno.org>), has been reusing beads for twenty years. Margie Perez, the recycling coordinator, has seen tremendous growth. When she started five years ago, the organization reused 50,000 pounds of beads a year. In 2015, they collected and reused 175,000 pounds. Perez thinks that by the time all is said and done, 2016 will bring the greatest haul yet.

Arc puts the profit it makes from collecting and reselling the beads toward creating jobs for intellectually- and physically-challenged adults. Her staff has grown from two full-time workers to five. The organization makes about \$1 per pound of beads they reuse and the funds go back into the business. Arc runs several businesses that employ 80 adults. Other jobs Arc offers include groundskeeping, prepping food for the soup kitchen, and shredding.



beads sidebar2a

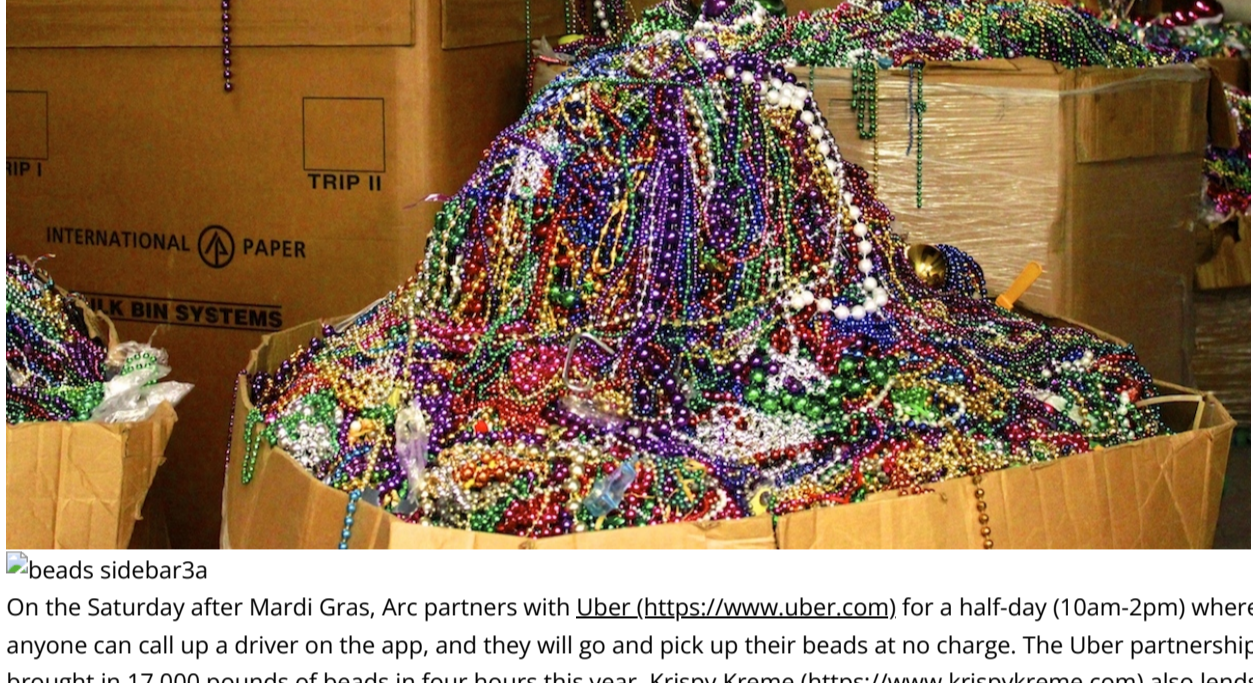
Arc of Greater New Orleans has several locations around the city, but the recycling efforts are housed in a large warehouse space in Metairie, miles from the French Quarter. It is filled with music and smiling people and, literally, tons of beads. Every day of the year Perez, her team and dozens of volunteers sort through up to 3,000 pounds of beads. They detangle them and repackage them for reuse.



beads sidebar1a

They have three large spaces filled with beads that need to be sorted and a sad, lonely corner where 20,000 pounds of broken beads lie unwanted and unusable. The pile grows every day, but Perez can't bring herself to throw them out and add their number to the landfill.

The organization has reached out to the community and placed purple bins around the city for people to drop off unwanted beads year-round, so there is a steady flow into the center. In the time Perez has been there, awareness has grown throughout the region, along with the amount of donations.



beads sidebar3a

On the Saturday after Mardi Gras, Arc partners with [Uber](https://www.uber.com) (<https://www.uber.com>) for a half-day (10am-2pm) where anyone can call up a driver on the app, and they will go and pick up their beads at no charge. The Uber partnership brought in 17,000 pounds of beads in four hours this year. [Krispy Kreme](https://www.krispykreme.com) (<https://www.krispykreme.com>) also lends a hand with an annual drive where they reward customers who donate beads with a free dozen donuts.

"Every year the Krispy Kreme drive gets bigger and bigger," Perez says. "It averages more than 50,000 pounds of beads."

In Mobile, Alabama, Krispy Kreme also does a bead drive after Mardi Gras, with the beads going to a local school – all 106,000 pounds of them. The school was overwhelmed and called Arc to come get as much as they could transport, so they brought 60,000 pounds back to New Orleans.

Schools in New Orleans are also getting in on the act. Right now 15 schools are competing to gather the most beads, with the top two schools both having more than 5,000 pounds of beads each. The school that gathers the most beads will get a \$1,000 grant from Arc.



beads sidebar4a

Perez is pleased with the response they've gotten from the community, but wishes the city would step up and commit some resources to tackling the rest of the bead problem.

"We're conscious of the need for recycling, but New Orleans is a city that is very resistant to change. They don't have the resources, so they would rather throw [the beads] away."

A few years ago, Perez says, Arc came up with the idea of having a parade float, called Catch and Release, at the end of parades with bins that revelers could throw their beads into immediately, so fewer strands might end up in the street. Instant recycling. It turns out that there is an ordinance on the city's books that prohibits parade-goers from throwing anything at floats for safety reasons, even though the Arc float was unstaffed. Some parade organizers complained, too. Arc tried to have the idea brought to a vote at city council, but it never came to the table, and the float had to be retired. And the beads keeping piling up.

Arc is one of several organizations in New Orleans that recycles beads, Perez says. But it isn't enough.

"We could have 100 places recycling 100,000 pounds, and it still wouldn't be enough. And what happens to the rest of those beads?"

No one knows, because Perez says that a filmmaker (maker of [Mardi Gras Made in China](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0436569/) (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0436569/>)) that once tried to gain access to the local landfill to see the discarded beads was refused access, and she doesn't know of anyone who has been able to see.

"What we're trying to do is not shame people [about this], but people need to be called out."

Perez encourages people to "throw smarter and less."

Arc has a Fair Trade section, with cloth Frisbees and fabric boas from Guatemala and paper beads from Uganda that they try to encourage krewe to throw instead of plastic. It's a hard sell because they are more expensive, but people do keep them, rather than toss them into the street, because they are better quality. Some krewe are also starting to throw useful items like bottle openers and flashlights, instead of single-use plastic trinkets.



Paper beads made from magazine pages.

This year Arc is on track to recycle 200,000 pounds of beads – their capacity. As for the future? Perez hopes that people throw less, throw smarter, reducing the number of plastic beads used, and that the city decides to invest in some recycling efforts, too. Businesses, schools and individuals are whole-heartedly working to help clean up the city and keep plastic out of their landfill. Think of the progress in the city could make if its leaders stepped up to this worthy challenge.

What do you think is the best way to reduce Mardi Gras plastic pollution? Let us know in the comments below!

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