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Environmental Activist Groups Partner To Share Plastic's Polluted Plot

By KATHLEEN SHAW Daily News-Record

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Takeout orders have been a lifeline for eateries, and stores have asked customers to check reusable bags at the door to reduce contamination during the pandemic. Foregoing environmentally conscious practices during a global health crisis is immediately beneficial to society, but the additional plastic consumed during this period will outlive everyone.

Synthetic plastic was invented in 1907 and has grown to be ubiquitous in everyday life, but research shows thin plastics such as shopping bags can take 20 years to decompose and traces from a single plastic bottle can stick around for 450 years.

“Everything is plastic, and we thought that all this could be recycled and reused. I mean, that’s what we were told and encouraged, but we know now that is not the case,” said Jo Anne St. Clair, chair of Climate Action Alliance of the Valley.

Earth Day Every Day of Harrisonburg, VA and CAAV are co-hosting a free screening of “The Story of Plastic” throughout this week and providing a community discussion with a panel of environmental activists on Monday evening to discuss what St. Clair describes as the “insidiousness” of plastic.

Earth Day Every Day is an environmental advocacy nonprofit founded last year under the umbrella of Blue Ridge’s New Community Project to educate and engage individuals with renewable and sustainable daily life tools and practices. Several activities from Earth Day Every Day have been put on hold due to the pandemic, but the group is determined to celebrate its first birthday on Monday with the film screening and discussion.

Conversations surrounding the detriment of plastic’s prominence and its broken down counterpart, microplastics, have been brooding for years but are steadily becoming more commonplace, even making it onto the cover of National Geographic’s June 2018 edition.

“We have a whole host of problems all the way from the large scale dumping of plastics in Southeast Asia and in Indonesia, any number of Southeast Asian countries to then those materials getting into the ocean ... and the breakdown of those materials into very small fragments in the ocean and getting into our food chain through ingestion by fish,” said Leslie Grady.

Grady was formerly a professor of environmental engineering at Clemson University and Purdue University before retiring in Harrisonburg and joining CAAV. He is one of four panel members for Monday’s community discussion.

Joining Grady on the panel are Skyline Middle School science and history teacher Virginia Healy, Earth Day Every Day founder and chair Elly Swecker and James Madison University physics laboratory manager Art Fovargue. Bob Bersson, founder of the Interfaith Initiative for Peace and Justice in Harrisonburg, is moderating the panel.

Broadway resident Faith Sams began following Earth Day Every Day’s movements this spring, when a planned lecture on reduced waste living piqued her interest. Sams said she registered to watch the film with her husband because she hopes making changes at home and in her routine will provide for a cleaner, brighter future for all.

“I moved here partly because the Shenandoah Valley is so beautiful, and I hope we can preserve her beauty and the environment,” Sams said. “I have been making swaps in our household for a while but there is always more that I can do. ... I hope to watch the film with my husband so that he feels the same level of intrinsic motivation to be conscious of our use of plastic. It’s helpful when the whole household is on board with a mission and lifestyle that takes planning to accomplish.”

“The Story of Plastic” is a documentary about the global harm of plastic pollution, starting with its history inside the 1930s industry manufacturing plants into modern-day landfills and poisoned populations. Grady said plastic’s evil has been brushed off for years because the main trash-exporting nations neglected the capacity of Asian communities, but attention to plastics is growing as the main shipping places for the nation’s “recycled” trash runs out.

“Even when we quote, were recycling plastic, most of it was being sent to Asia, and it was just ending up in dumps over there. And they didn’t have either the mechanism to deal with it nor the regulations to deal with it. It was a deplorable thing to happen, frankly, and it puts a big black eye on the plastics industry in general that they allowed that to happen,” Grady said. “Essentially, they were

selling snake oil in a sense because they were talking about, 'Oh, we can recycle those things' when in reality, at the time, there were very few mechanisms or means of carrying out that recycling."

James Madison University student Conor Burch worked through Bluestone Communications to provide public relations for Earth Day Every Day this spring. Burch said he is interested in watching the film and values the nonprofit's dedication to bringing real, tangible change to the area.

"They help transition online activism into real life activism in Harrisonburg. I think this is important because it's easy to be content with only voicing your opinions online," he said.

Over 70 people have registered to view the film since Wednesday morning and the link is available to 180 participants.

Questions for the community discussion can be submitted to contactcaav@gmail.com until Sunday at 4 p.m.

Registration for the film can be done on Eventbrite, and the film link is valid until Monday at 7 p.m., when the panel begins.



Contact Kathleen Shaw at 574-6274 or kshaw@dnronline.com. Follow Kathleen on Twitter @shawkareport

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