

IN THE NEWS



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by **Rosemary Parker**

Refill U.P. helps residents kick the plastic habit

The world is awash in plastic waste, and a new business in the Upper Peninsula is tackling that pervasive environmental problem one day, one person, one shower or one load of laundry at a time.

Refill U.P. in Hancock invites customers to hang on to those containers that pump, spray or pour and to fill them up again from the store's bulk product line of household cleaners and bath products. The store sells refillable glass and aluminum containers as well, for those who prefer to purge plastic from their lives.

What's the matter with plastic? Even with aggressive recycling programs, only a fraction of the world's plastic containers are actually recycled. Those that are landfilled eventually break down into microplastics, tiny beads that wind up in waterways, wildlife, and even our bodies.

According to the National Ocean and Atmospheric Association, plastic is the most prevalent type of marine debris found in oceans and in the Great Lakes.

In response, refilleries are springing up in cities around the country, allowing customers to buy products by weight or volume, filling their own reusable containers.

Refill U.P. is the Keweenaw Peninsula's first zero waste refillery.

Here's how it works at Refill U.P.:

Customers can bring their own containers – any size they wish, from trial size to bulk — or they can purchase reusable glass or aluminum containers or select containers provided by community donations.

If customers are purchasing refills that are charged by weight, the empty container will be weighed first so customers pay only for the product.

Customers refill their containers with one of the refillery's environmentally friendly products — as much or as little as they need. The store then measures the purchase and customers pay.

The back story

When Briana Tucker's partner Travis Wakeham gave her a few sustainable household products for Christmas 2020, it set her thinking about what more she could do to help address such a pervasive problem as plastic waste in her small Houghton County community.

Her answer: A New Year's resolution to use less plastic herself in the coming year.

One simple way to do that, she thought — purchase refills of the home care and beauty products that routinely are packaged in single use plastic containers.

But Tucker found that what seemed a simple step was easier said than done from her home in the remote Upper Peninsula.

"Once I started diving deeper into different plastic-free options, I was buying those things online," she says. "But I was like, 'I don't want to buy these things online.'"

Then during February, Black History Month, she learned of a young woman in Ohio who had started a refillery business.

"And I was thinking to myself, 'this is something that we could potentially see ourselves doing.'"

After all, by making it easier for herself to step away from plastics, she'd be helping others in the community with the same interests who were encountering the same obstacles.

Wakeham enthusiastically agreed, and the couple set about turning that dream of a business into a reality.

Entrepreneurial resources

Tucker and Wakeham both work at Michigan Technological University in Houghton— she as an associate director for the Enterprise Program and Wakeham as an assistant teaching professor and academic advisor in the Department of Biological Sciences.

She had already attended a workshop at the Small Business Development Center, where she was paired with mentor Daniel Yoder who helped her develop a roadmap for the business. From there, the couple also worked with Jason Mack from the Michigan Tech Smart Zone and other mentors from Michigan Technological University as well.

Yoder, senior business consultant for Michigan Small Business Development Center, says it's the business of the statewide network to help entrepreneurs like Tucker and Wakeham start and grow businesses in Michigan through planning tools, business consulting, market research, and community connections.

"Our services are free," Yoder says, "funded in part through cooperative agreements with the U.S. Small Business Administration, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and in the Upper Peninsula, Michigan Technological University."

The couple also networked with refilleries in other parts of the state to see how they operated.

"Just talking through these things with these people who have, you know, been supportive from the get go...and talking to the subject matter experts, it was kind of like a support bubble from all over," she says.

So they took the plunge, using their Covid stimulus checks as seed money, opening their storefront in October 2021.

How it's going

"I think that what really helps us and sets us apart is that we are doing this for our community and we are doing it in a small and local way," Tucker says. "That, I think, is what people like."

Part of the business, she says, is helping educate other people about the need to reduce plastics and live more sustainably. The store now carries a variety of eco-friendly products, and has hosted work sessions on craft projects to build community while helping people adopt eco-friendly habits.

The first year of business has gone well.

Looking to the future, Tucker says: "Oh man, I think our goal for one day— likely not necessarily anytime soon— would be to eventually be able to have more hours (other than just weekends.)."

"We're excited to go into year two."

Yoder says Tucker's success with Refill U.P. is a result of "her passion for sustainability and her intentional collaborations with the entrepreneurial community."

"Briana's personal drive and motivation, coupled with our business guidance and experience, have helped her grow from an idea, to selling at local farmers markets, to having a brick and mortar retail shop."

"I'm so proud of Briana," Yoder says, "and it's been a pleasure for me to support her goals. I look forward to seeing Briana's continued success as she continues to grow Refill U.P."

Refill U.P. is located at 323 Quincy St., Hancock. The store is open 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. For information, email refilltheup@gmail.com or go to <https://refilltheup.com/>.

Rosemary Parker has worked as a writer and editor for more than 40 years.