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Taking on the trash

Equal parts environmentalist, Dumpster diver and recycling missionary, Kay McKeen finds a world of uses for other people's garbage

By Heidi Stevens Tribune Newspapers

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Kay McKeen has sent microscopes to Ghana, zippers to Ethiopia, textbooks to India and a baby grand piano to a high school on Chicago's South Side.

She outfits classrooms from Posen to Peoria. She turns wax nubs into bright, gorgeous crayons. She collects, sorts and donates hundreds of thousands of books.

She's equal parts environmentalist, Dumpster diver and missionary, and her motivation is simple: "If we don't rescue it, it's in a landfill forever."

McKeen, 59, of Wheaton, is the founder and executive director of SCARCE (School and Community Assistance for Recycling and Composting Education), a Glen Ellyn-based organization dedicated to collecting people's unwanted stuff and finding a use for it — from bottle caps and old keys to overhead projectors and, in one case, a 16-foot balance beam.

"It came from a school whose insurance no longer covered gymnastics," McKeen recalls. "We found a magnet school in Chicago that just happened to need a new balance beam."

As the world prepares to toast Earth Day's 40th anniversary on Thursday, there's plenty to give the green movement the blues: a global water crisis, a giant garbage patch in the Pacific, polar ice caps melting in the Arctic. But McKeen takes a different approach.

"People should feel excited," she says. "There are some amazing things happening."

Especially at SCARCE headquarters, a warehouse tucked into a nondescript brick office complex along Roosevelt Road. When you walk through the front door, tidy suburbia gives way to delightful chaos. Thousands of books line the walls from floor to ceiling. A shelving unit holds containers of American flags, dried-up ballpoint pens, eyeglasses, old keys, wine corks, cell phones and other items that often get tossed.

"It's not trash," McKeen says. "It's resources."

Resources for whom? You name it. McKeen funnels goods to recycling centers or groups that can use them.



The eyeglasses go to the Lions Club, where they're cleaned up and distributed to people in need. The Lions Club takes the keys as well, melting them down for the brass and scrap metal. Pens go back to their manufacturer for recycling. Wine corks go to teachers for art projects or Whole Foods for recycling. American flags go to the VFW for proper retirement.

"When I see an American flag sticking out of a garbage can, that drives me nuts," McKen says. "I've saved a number of those."

McKen thinks nothing of "saving" other people's trash. "Oh, I'm a Dumpster diver," she says proudly. "I even have a T-shirt."

Some items she'll dispose of in a greener fashion. Trashed fluorescent lights go to a household hazardous-waste site. ("All it would take is one crack and the garbage collector's getting a face full of mercury. You can't have that.") Other items she'll bring back to the warehouse. A flawless, oversize wall clock she rescued hangs above one shelving unit.

The group takes in a constant stream of donations as well. "Thousands of books go out and come in every week," McKen says.

McKen has been passionate about the environment for as long as she can remember. She put that passion to work in the late '80s as a volunteer with the Wheaton Environmental Improvement Commission and led the effort to build Wheaton's recycling center.

"We collected newspapers, cans, different plastics," she says. "But people always asked, 'What about books?'"

So she started collecting unwanted books and allowing others to pick through them and take what they liked. "Then I went to schools and saw them throwing out last year's math books," she says.

Someone, McKen thought, could use those books. And our landfills, in turn, could use a break.

An idea was born.

Twenty years later, SCARCE is collecting and distributing far more than books. The group doesn't have a formal system for connecting donated goods to the people who need them, instead reaching out to Rotary Clubs, nonprofits, schools and faith-based organizations through phone calls, e-mails and community events. The 12-person (mostly part-time) staff is buoyed by dozens of volunteers each month — ranging from high school kids seeking service hours to eco-conscious retirees.

"People ask who our marketing director is," McKen laughs. "That would be me. You want to know who cleans our toilets? That would be me."

But McKen, a lifelong Wheaton resident, and her organization have a global reach that is staggering in its breadth. A world map hangs on the warehouse's back wall with thumbtacks jammed into places that have received the group's bounty. Vietnam, Estonia, Chile, Mexico, Alaska, China, countries throughout Africa.

"Kay is just an infectious person — in a good way," says volunteer Steve Kenny. "She was one of the original tree-huggers when it wasn't cool."

Kenny, a retired Glenbard South High School science teacher, has assembled a group of volunteers to take apart, clean and replace the mirrors of old, donated microscopes. They deliver them, reassembled, to a local

church that organizes missions to Africa.

"We just sent three of them for a high school in Ghana," McKeen says. "But when they got there, we're told, they were better than what the hospital had. So one went to the hospital. The church told us the doctor had tears in his eyes because now he was able to diagnose malaria.

"We're throwing out stuff that can help save lives."

Much of what the group rescues stays local. More than 80,000 books — some donated, some rescued from school trash bins — sit in the SCARCE warehouse waiting for educators to come claim them. McKeen urges teachers from all over the state and every type of school to check out the selection and take whatever they need for their classrooms, all free of charge. (Staplers, binders, posters, yarn, magazines and countless other materials are there for the taking as well.)

Scarce also participates in the DuPage County Catholic Charities Back-to-School fair every August. Last year the group donated 11,000 books to 1,147 local families.

"The environment wins, the kids win, the taxpayers win," McKeen says. "It's a win-win-win-win."

St. John Lutheran School in Wheaton has turned to McKeen for textbooks, supplies and, perhaps most important, environmental education.

"She helped us put together a composting program for our lunch food," says Sheryl Duff, a fifth- to eighth-grade science teacher at the school. "She taught us to use our leftover milk to water the trees on our property — it's mostly water, and a little calcium is good for the trees, so now that doesn't go in the garbage either.

"She's just a wealth of information," Duff says. "There's so much going on in that head of hers. She makes you aware of things you just wouldn't know."

For McKeen, who received an Illinois Environmental Hero award from then-Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn in 2008, her work is a natural extension of a life spent savoring the planet.

"My little Polish grandma moved in with us when I was in fourth grade," McKeen recalls. "She would pull an apple branch down and say, 'These blossoms will open tomorrow.' And they did. My Irish grandma would write poems about flowers. You know, photographs were expensive. But she would see flowers and write about them on cards. And birds. It was never, 'Look, there's a bird.' It was, 'There's a yellow-breasted warbler.'

"We grew up with people who wouldn't hurt anything," she says. "My dad planted trees everywhere we lived. You didn't hurt things. You didn't waste things. We were lucky."

The year ahead is a big one for McKeen. She turns 60. SCARCE turns 20. And her marriage, like Earth Day, turns 40. She knows the challenges that lie ahead for her organization and the people it serves — environmental, educational, financial. But she remains optimistic.

"Little things really do add up," she says. "They really do matter. Forty years ago nobody even used the word 'environment.' We get so excited when we see what people are doing now."

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**3 places where
you can make
a difference**

Greeting cards:

You know those singing greeting cards? "It if lights up and sings, there's a reason," McKeen says. "That reason is hazardous waste." The cards contain minibatteries and speakers, which mean stainless steel, copper, nickel cadmium and brass are getting tossed in the garbage or recycling. McKeen recommends taking apart the cards, recycling the paper and sending the batteries and speakers to a household hazardous waste center. Or not buying the cards.

Medicine:

Don't flush it down the toilet, which sends it straight to our waterways, harming fish and aquatic animals and contaminating our drinking water. McKeen says six police stations in Chicago and stations throughout DuPage County have Rx boxes where you can drop prescription and nonprescription medicine to be taken to a medical incinerator. "Most antibiotics and hormones break down with heat," she says. Go to "recycling info" on the SCARCE Web site,

bookrescue.org

, for more details on drop sites.

Water:

"Get a rain barrel," she says. "Our color hoses have lead in them and your home water has chlorine in it, which kills bacteria — good and bad. If you're watering your tomato plants with the hose from your house, the plants are getting lead and chlorine, the leaves turn brown, the soil doesn't get as much nutrients."

Collected rainwater is a better watering option, and better for filling birdbaths as well, McKeen says.

— H.S.

How to donate

If you've got items to donate, contact the group between 9 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday at 630-545-9710.

"Contacting us first is best," McKeen says. "We might know someplace closer that needs the stuff, and driving is fossil fuel."

Find more information on the group's Web site at

bookrescue.org

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