

Your Junk is My Treasure

My Junk is Your Treasure

BY JUDITH CAPEN

Cautious: this story mixes enterprise with tree hugging. If you feel that action to reverse global warming is bad for business whereas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is the solution to energy woes, better stop reading now.

Years ago when Jim Schulman drove a Volkswagen Rabbit plastered with bumper stickers (Free Tibet, Save the Bay, Recycle: Once is Not Enough), I thought we were collectively fortunate to have him in the neighborhood: someone whose passion for social change had not abated with job, family and home owning. He was walking the walk.

Since we met him as a recent architecture grad, Jim has been an environmentalist, but it seems he has now created his life work: Community Forklift, a building materials reuse center.

When Lindsey, a recently Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design accredited coworker, and I ventured to Community Forklift to look around, Jim looked much the same as when I met him 20 years ago.

Our Thursday visit was a busy day at the Forklift. Jim, with customers, turned us over to 20-something Ruthie Mundell, in charge of marketing and community outreach and helping customers and donors. While Ruthie got loose, Lindsey and I wandered the warehouse, having already admired claw-footed tubs in the yard. (I appreciate their secondary market after searching for them myself.) The Forklift accepts more than construction materials: we passed three old Singer sewing machines (electric, alas, as I lust for a treadle) and some furniture to survey doors, windows, radiators, lumber, plumbing fixtures and appliances including three gorgeous vintage ranges.

Lindsey and husband, 30-somethings, own a thoroughly remuddled Capitol Hill row house where a benighted previous owner replaced solid wood doors with hollow core, installed horrible ranch molding, and carpeted old growth pine. Even as we toured the Forklift, the good flooring guys were taking paint off the floor and applying a penetrating finish. The domino effect was in full force for Lindsey. The floors looked fantastic, but the grossly undercut crappy doors

looked really bad. Wouldn't you know it: we found a number of appropriate five horizontal panel doors (at \$20 each!) among the doors and faceted glass doorknobs at the checkout counter. Plus paint to freshen up the closets.

Playing journalist legitimizes rampant nosiness, so I asked Ruthie what she studied in college. A degree in tree hugging, she said, environmental policy and a stint on an organic farm. Her enthusiasm made it pretty clear that the Forklift had given her a place to turn policy to action.

Time to explain the Community Forklift

Community Forklift, operated by Sustainable Community Initiatives, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, is a building materials reuse center. Think used or excess building materials. The new hardwood floor comes in 500-square-foot lots, but you only need 750 square feet, so instead of storing the left over 250 square feet, you donate it to Community Forklift and get a tax deduction. Or you're a contractor, and you have to demo the one-story kitchen as the first step in the addition project. You can pay tipping fees, in our region averaging \$46 a ton in 2004, or carefully disassemble the old kitchen and donate working appliances, framing lumber, and anything else still useable to the Forklift, saving

dump fees and getting the tax benefit.

Depending on time of year and amount of stuff, they may pick up your donation in their big Community Forklift truck or the Forklift pick-up. Summers, construction primetime, and the end of the year (the rush for charitable donations) are both busy Forklift pickup times.

Once your new floor is installed, you might become a buyer at the Forklift, finding an economical vintage lavatory and tub.

So far my description of how the Community Forklift works is couched in economic terms: tax deductions, bargains on used building materials; but all that is but the icing on the recycling.

It's really about our shared earth.

An incredible amount of the nearly trillion and a half pounds of solid waste generated every day in the United States is construction waste: estimates range from 15 percent to 50 percent, whether by weight or volume, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Every bit of debris diverted from that waste stream is less stuff to landfills, which are rapidly filling up and contribute to global warming. A reused appliance reduces the amount of clear cutting, mining and manufacturing required to make a new one.

Jim, Ruthie and the rest at Community Forklift are demonstrating the viability of green collar jobs in a new green industry. Interestingly, this is an organization in an industry based on cooperation instead of competition. Forklift's handouts and website emphasize the role of their particular reuse center as a part of a bigger network. Ruthie said each of the other "Architectural Salvage & Building Materials Reuse Centers" in the area (listed on Forklift handouts) has its own niche. One has a really good tile selection. And she characterizes old reliable Brass Knob as the antique store to the Forklift's thrift store.

"The makers of particle board everything and the landfill industry are our true competition. They're the ones who profit from a throwaway society," she said.

Instead, the Forklift stimulates green businesses, rapidly becom-



The big Community Forklift truck next to the dumpster that arrives with construction salvage, a few tubs in the foreground.

ing the anchor business in an eco-industrial complex at their location in Edmonston, Md. Selling building materials for reuse turns out to be good for associated not necessarily green businesses. Someone buys a lavatory and needs faucets and fittings, bought at the hardware, and a plumber. Ruthie said they get a lot of support from the business community, including donations from mom and pop hardware stores like our own Frager's or booze from Schneider's for the recent volunteer party.

Community Forklift, open just under three years, has, at their guesstimate, facilitated the reuse of more than \$2 million in building material value. They began with three employees and now have 10, all earning living wages. Their 40,000 square feet is the largest reuse center in the area. Even though it's a nonprofit, it isn't a charity. They pay market rent on the warehouse, and while money gifts are gratefully received, the operation is funded on the proceeds of sales.

"Our customers are everyone," Ruthie said. "Homeowners, landlords, property managers, contractors. And a lot of regulars."

While we sat at an oak table, ("We only take solid wood furniture, no particle board,") we watched activity in our slice of the warehouse: a man with a box of plumbing fittings, a woman buying paint, a family looking through carpet squares, a drop off, and a contractor-type looking at light fixtures. "Amazingly diverse," Lindsey observed.

Here are the links:

Read about the Community Forklift at www.CommunityForklift.com.

Visit their warehouse at 4671 Tanglewood Drive in Edmonston, Md. It is really very close to the Hill, just beyond Cheverly where we made so many trips taking kids to the pool. Or call 301-985-5180. (Hours Wednesday noon-7, Thursday and Saturday 9-5. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are big intake days so lots of new stuff on the floor on Thursdays.)

You can volunteer for \$5/hr. in store credit or for the good of it. You can work with construction materials, sorting nails and screws, accepting donations, ringing up sales,

or take on a special project such as working out the logistics of donating the Forklift's collection of broken porcelain to rebuild oyster beds in the bay. Educational volunteer opportunities abound spreading the word or putting together workshops like a recent one on toilet repair. Even if you're not currently engaged in a renovation project, you can become involved.

The Forklift serves a community and social function, too. They host a regular singles volunteer event, unofficially called "Meet Hot Handy-men and Fix it Chicks," that Ruthie said brings a social life to her. Sometimes, she said, they think they should be called community uplift because of all the community building that goes on, including corporate groups doing team building. "I love my job," Ruthie said.

Of course you can always donate to the Forklift.

With all this feel-good, one suspects an ugly underbelly. Jim summarized it: "Working with used building materials is not for the faint of heart." But living in old houses isn't for the faint of heart either, nor is restoration. However difficult, finding missing bits for our old houses is easiest and most likely to succeed at places like the Forklift, Brass Knob and other reuse centers.

Another downside is visible in the lighting fixtures section that looks like where ugly went to die. But I suppose if the choice is to buy ugly new or ugly reused, the second is better. And you can always hope. On our day, a brand new, very nice Rejuvenation fixture hung among the rest.

Finally, if all the social objectives seem too touchy-feely for you, Community Forklift still offers tools, trucks and lumber.

As if we needed any other validation that this is a topic of the moment, in the very week I'm writing, the Washington Post published a piece about salvage of architectural bits and the Brass Knob. The planets align.

Judith Capen, Capitol Hill preservation architect, is an enthusiastic member of the Church of Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. You can reach her at judith.capen@architravepc.com. ★

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