Sustainability Matters Now Podcast

Season 1, Episode 1. Sustainability and Individual Action: How One Person Transforms Campus Culture

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Hello and welcome to the Sustainability Matters Now podcast. My name is Tom Ritchie and today I'm really lucky to be joined by Gary Stocker, test engineer and green champion at WMG's Energy Innovation Centre at the University of Warwick. Gary, hello. Oh, hello there. Yes, yeah. Yeah, it's a pleasure to be here. Yes, you know, thank you for, you know, I appreciate you asking my opinions. Thank you. No, really excited to talk about the work that you've done at Warwick. And I wonder, Gary, what brings you to this conversation on sustainability, please? Well, put it briefly, I've always been interested in

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green issues going way back probably infant school sort of age. I was sort of brought up in the 70s and there's a lot of things aimed at youngsters both on TV and on the radio at school. What you'd call then a pollution sort of conservation theme you know so that got me into it and the parents they were both quite you know green minded and as I got older I started getting involved in practical conservation work and as time went on my solid writing articles and you know it's something I feel passionately about.

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So you've mentioned your experiences up to that point, but what is it particularly at that's brought you to this conversation today? I every company I've worked at and all of them, surprisingly, I going back, I entered first full-time employment, suppose, in about the mid 1980s. I all of them, when I've set up these recycling schemes, all of them have been encouraging to different degrees. But Warwick especially, I mean, they do make a big thing about being green. I mean, they are very green anyway, you know, compared to a lot of places.

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And so I thought, well, OK, I'll test the water. And yes, I mean, I've got a lot of encouragement from all levels, senior management right down to lowly people like myself. So yes, so I think the atmosphere at Warwick has been very encouraging. It's encouraging on a lot of fronts, whether it's social justice or in this case, it's green issues. And they've been very good. Yeah, and I imagine that's probably similar with lots of universities across the country where there is this leadership in this space now. it is, yeah.

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And I wonder Gary, you have been leading at Warwick a grassroots recycling effort across campus since before COVID. You did this piece collecting, I guess what we'd call niche recyclable materials, so soft plastics, cosmetic tubes, blister packs, dental products, pens, postage stamps, etc. And you've done this through, you set up series of collection boxes, I understand, across Warwick Manufacturing Group and the wider university. What prompted you to start collecting these materials that most people would just perhaps normally throw away?

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Well, it all started, I the village I live in, Rafford-Semmely, it's on Lemington Spars, Lower East Side, I suppose you could put it. And we've got a Facebook group in the village, which somebody else set up, I'm going to take credit for that. And it's called, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. And there'd been a lot of talk about recycling crisp packets, somebody had been campaigning about it and walkers started doing it. And they said on this site, they were going to set up a collection box in our local shop.

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collecting it for guide dogs for the blind who are in Leamington Spa. Presumably they were selling and getting funds. So that's how I initially started. And then of course COVID came along and messed things up a little bit. But after COVID, it became a bit more mainstream then. lot of supermarkets started collecting them. And around that time, a lot of these other shops and organizations, they started putting out collection bins for these other niche products like dental products and pens and all the rest of it.

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kudos to them for actually going out of their way to be a bit socially responsible. So, you know, that's what's initially got me going. And I started collecting it, you know, domestically, but I thought, well, people take crisps into work. So I just set it up in the buildings I knew I was familiar with and people started using them. And then when it came to these other niche products, I thought, well, you know, I've got an existing network there anyway. So I'll just extend the amount of things I collect in there. Yeah. I mean, that's great to hear. And it shows the impact that

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an individual can have. I wonder Gary, did you face any resistance or skepticism when you first started this on campus? No, everybody was actually very encouraging. One thing I did do was I went to the WMG buildings I was familiar with. mean, things like this, you've got to be diplomatic, don't go over people's heads. So I knew the best people to ask. There were a couple of managers in WMG, they were very encouraging. Boy, know, some good natured joking about it. Oh, you know, what are you collecting now? And all of a sudden, but no, I didn't.

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didn't encounter any resistance at all. I thought it would be positive, but I was actually pleasantly surprised as to how positive it was. I think that's great to hear as well. And I wonder, Gary, could you walk us through what you actually collect? So I've mentioned a few things and you've spoken about a few things, but I wonder why these specific items and where do they go once you collect them, please? OK, what do I collect? I'm going to have remember myself. Let's see. Soft plastics. They were the primary ones. I they were crisp packets and then it extended to become all soft plastics.

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And a subplastic is basically when you can crumple up, which more or less goes back to the same shape as before when you release it. I take those to the back entrance to Tesco's, and they've got a big collection stillage in there, so I just park outside. It takes less than a minute. Dental products, the dentist I use, they've got a collection box there. Also, boots in Lemington and Warwick, they've got collection points there. And they've also got a reward scheme as well, you know, you get a few points. Cosmetic tubes, again, they go into boots of chemists.

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Postage stamps, use postage stamps. There's somebody in the Materials Engineering Center, he actually collects them. I normally give them to him, but failing that, you got the Cats Protection Lease Shop in Lemington, they take them. Other charity shops do as well. Castle Hill Baptist Church in Warwick, they collect them and so does the church in our village. Also with the soft plastic, there's certain types of soft plastic I collect at work and they're doing a recycling project in the Materials Engineering Center. So I uh drop those off there.

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Yeah, it's perfect for what they want. So basically getting two birds with one stone is being recycled and it's going towards a project which will help recycle other things. Why do I collect them? Well, first of all, they're nice and easy to collect. You just go around with a large shopping bag and put them all in there. One thing to remember is if you're dropping off recyclables, if you're driving miles out your way, you're creating lots of pollution. So I go to Leamington and Woyk anyway, so it's just a case of dropping them off at the same time. So you don't create any additional pollution, see. So you get the full benefit from it being recycled.

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And I wonder Gary, it's great to hear this kind of story of the impact you're having locally on the Warwick campus. And there'll be people listening who on their own campuses in different parts of the country might be wondering how could they do the same thing? And so I wonder, how did you find out where these materials could be recycled? And are there any items you wish you could collect, but perhaps can't find any recycling solutions for yet? That's a very good question actually. It's basically just keeping your eyes open. I mean, I've got a bit of a homing instinct for finding these things out and it's just keeping your eyes open really.

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You know, other people told me as well, oh yes, another thing I collect, is corks out of wine bottles. And my brother actually told me about those. The one thing which I do do, yes, pens, I do collect pens as well, so I forgot to mention that. And Rymans Estationers, they were collecting those, all well and good, and they just stopped. It wasn't their fault, they just said they're not dropping the box down anymore. So what I can do with them is I'm involved with Kenilworth Recycling Group. I just drop them off there every so often. There's also some hard plastics.

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I mean, I did about this when I studied material science. the problem with hard plastics is they are very difficult to break down and there's risks of contamination. know, hard plastics would be a useful thing to do, but I don't know if the technology is there or not yet, really. I think what shines through from what you've said is the importance of having a wider network. And I mentioned earlier on the impact that one person can have. And maybe I kind of rephrase that because it sounds like you're part of a much wider network of people.

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And with that in mind, know that you collect the boxes from across Warwick Manufacturing Group and the wider university once a week. How did you build this network and how can people engage with it? What you said is very, very important. Yes, when I do all this, know, people say, oh, well done, blah, blah, blah. And as I say, look, yeah, OK, but people who do deserve the credit are the people who support this, you know, who give you encouragement. know, it's as Isaac Newton once said, I got to where I am by standing on the shoulders of giants. I'm not comparing myself to Isaac Newton.

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But yeah, so that's very important. If you've got a good network, people know what you're interested in, know, being in good relations with people, it's a good idea to do that anyway, but that certainly helps. Now, yeah, I did sort of mention it before, how I actually initially set the network up was by buildings you're familiar with, you knew who to ask. You say, hey, you don't mind if I do this? Oh, what's all this about? You tell them, oh, that's fine. So I tend to put these collection boxes into the kitchen areas, because that's where people are more likely to eat and all the rest of it. So I did do this and we've got some

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green teams on the Microsoft Teams page. And I just shared what I'd done. Anyway, got a life of its own after that. People say, oh, you've set it up. Could you set it up in my area? So you had people approaching me at the end of the day, you see. So I didn't have to do too much, you actually setting up then. was people approaching me. yeah. And I guess, you know, you obviously, you're a green champion at the University of Work, but you're also a test engineer. How do these roles complement each other? And do you see ways that your engineering background?

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influences the way that you approach sustainability challenges? Yeah, that's a very good question actually. I think because I work in the Energy Innovation Centre, I mean that is to do with getting greener, it's never going to be perfect, about getting greener energy. that gets your mindset at work into getting into a greener sort of area. So, you know, that certainly helps and the good thing about that is, you know, I mean obviously I've got a network of people in the test engineer sphere.

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We've also got another network of people in the green champion sphere. So you've got two networks and you've seen you can combine them, know, you know, that, does have its uses. Engineering background has

been very useful. did combined engineering at Compton Polytechnic. And on this course, it wasn't just the nuts and bolts on the technical side. It was all the complimentary things like problem solving, uh, logistics, things like that. So that's, that's been very useful. Let's flip the question the other way. Has your sustainability work as a green champion changed how you think about your engineering?

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It has in some ways, yes. I've had people coming up to me, I obviously, if you're testing things, you're going to create waste. I've had people approach me saying, hey, you we've got all this. I mean, think copper foil is one thing. Now we've got all this stuff. How do we deal with this? know, we don't. There's most people I think want to do the right thing. So, yes, it's probably been me up to a point, but it's probably affected other people in some ways because I'm sort of this go-to person. So other people have sort of done it for me, really. Yeah. Trying to get the department more sustainable. Yeah.

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And it's really interesting again to see the ripple effects, I suppose you would say. Yes, that's a way of putting it, ripple effect, yeah. I wonder Gary, what's been the most surprising thing that you've learned from running this initiative? It's been very positive. Most people want to try and do the right thing. But even having said that, I mean, I've been very surprised with the positivity I've had as a result of all this. One thing which I have noticed with what you can recycle, what you can't recycle, even I will admit, it can get confusing.

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I think with plastics, and I mean, I'm into it, I know a bit about it. And you can understand other people who probably aren't quite so passionate about it, thinking, oh, what the hell do we do with this? And so that doesn't really help, Matt, I've got to admit. But there is a lot of research, I think some of it's going on at Warwick, you know, to try and make plastics more recyclable. So, so yes, it's been a very positive, know, very positive, really. Yeah, it's great to hear. And you've been doing this for over five years now, Gary, what keeps you motivated and what impact do you think that this work has had on the campus culture around sustainability?

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Sometimes you can get a bit daunted. see all the things happening to the environment locally, nationally and internationally. think, how much of a difference are you making? You feel a bit like poor King Canute trying to keep the tide back. It can get bit daunting, must admit, but there's a few things that keep me going. oh When I get time to watch a lot of films, you often find the hero or the heroine in the film, they're insurmountable odds and they think, no.

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If I don't do it, who is going to do it? It's the same here. I if I didn't do it, who would do it? mean, there's lots of people on campus, don't get me wrong, who do a hell of a lot, probably more than I do even. But you think, if I stopped doing it, it would land more time and trouble on their shoulders. I mean, I'd be

letting down the people who have been encouraging me and most importantly, be letting down Mother Earth. So you don't want to let people down really. Also, I mean, I should imagine it's probably got people thinking about the environment a bit more.

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Well, some of them have told me, you know, they've spoken to people about it. They tried to get greener at home. So that's the more direct effect. I think also some of the things I had been collecting, batteries as well, you know, well, the university itself, I don't know if it's because of what I was doing or what, but I mean, they started collecting batteries now and you do get those different committees and different projects going on. And, you know, I do get people saying, oh yeah, you know, would you like getting involved with this? So, you know, I think I must be making a positive effect, you know, for people to ask.

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I think absolutely, Gary, and from the way you described it and the work you've done, it does allow people to say, yeah, I'm going to do this as well. Do you give other people permission to do the same? Yeah, yeah, thanks. The last thing I wanted to ask Gary, thinking more broadly, what steps do think we can take to ensure a more sustainable future, please? I think society as a whole is changing. It's turning in that direction. The trouble is it's doing it with all the speed and turning circle of a First World War battleship, not very quick and a very long, turning circle. So I think things are getting better. There's individuals.

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there's lots of items on the internet, there's lots of books telling you how you can have a greener lifestyle and you can do it without really having a detrimental effect on your lifestyle. I mean you don't have to go and live in a cave or anything like that. At the end of the day we do need more direction from business, big business especially, and governments. Now I think, well I certainly get the impression that some businesses are doing very well out of destroying the environment so if you make it unprofitable for them they'll stop doing it.

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Better still, if you can give them financial incentives to help the environment or at do less environmental damage, they're more likely to do that, simply because it makes them look better. But also with governments, the current government, when they're trying to do lots of green things, I think I agree with their sentiments, but you've got to look at environmental things, from A to Z. You've look at the whole picture. There's no use trying to solve one problem and creating another. One example is solar panels. Okay, you want solar power.

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Brilliant, excellent idea. The problem is the way it works is that often it's put on productive agricultural land, which then means you have to import more food from abroad with the associated food miles. Why not put them on public buildings as a matter of course, encourage people to put them on domestic dwellings. And there was some talk of putting them in car parks sort of as a car port type thing. Why not

do that? That'd be a brilliant idea. Another one is they're trying to make UK industry greener. Again, brilliant idea, totally agree with it.

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The only problem is with the way it works is that it's making things more expensive for business in this country, which means that a lot more foreign imports are coming in who have probably got no environmental restraints whatsoever on the way that things are made and also using fuel to bring it in from abroad. mean, again, give UK industry incentives, financial incentives, and or make sure that imported goods are having to use the same restraints, know, environmentally on how they make things. And that's the way to do it, you know.

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So yes, there's lots we can do and I think these things are happening gradually but they could really be doing with happening a lot quicker, I think. You've done a great job there, Gary, at exploring the sustainable future and the complexity of that system. The roles that individuals can play, the roles that governments can play, the roles that business can play. We all live on the earth at the end of the day. We're all going to pull our weight, yes. Yeah, and I think it's important that we don't always look for that silver bullet and actually realise it can be small changes that we make through to large changes that are led by governments that can help us ensure a more sustainable...

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future. And the silver bullet hit the wrong target, that's the problem you see. You've look at the whole picture. Exactly. Yeah. It's really important to understand, as you say, that you're not causing a problem over here because you're focusing on a problem here. Exactly. Yes. Thank you so much, Gary. Amazing to speak to you and to hear about the work that you do at Warwick and also the wider impact you have on sustainability and recycling in the local area in Warwick. Well, thank you. Really look forward to speaking to you again in future. Definitely. Thanks so much for joining on the podcast.

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Thank you for showing an interest, I've enjoyed doing it. Yeah, I I look very much forward to speaking to you again. Thanks, Gary. Cheers, bye. See you later. Bye-bye.