



We Can Do Better!

Jasper Ralph

Martha's Vineyard, USA

Jasper was sitting in a restaurant enjoying a cool drink on a hot summer day. As he played around with the plastic straw he'd been served, he wondered, "Why do they automatically give you straws, even if you don't ask for them? That's weird: if people don't really want a straw, it's just a waste."

Jasper had been aware of plastic pollution in the oceans, and how harmful it is to marine wildlife, for some time. "Plastics wash up on our beaches, and kill our seagulls, dolphins, and even whales," he says. It's been predicted that by 2050, the oceans will actually contain more plastic than fish. When he was in elementary school, Jasper organized beach cleanups, and posted pictures of himself on social media, to motivate others to join him.

Jasper's home community prides itself on its commitment to its many sustainability initiatives. A picturesque island off the southern coast of Massachusetts, Martha's Vineyard is known as a beautiful vacation spot. Celebrities appreciate its low-key lifestyle. Presidents and other dignitaries treasure its quiet respite from the pressures of world affairs. During the summer, the year-round island population of 20,000 swells to more than 100,000. And almost everyone there is concerned about the rising sea levels, and its effect on the island. In the winter, and at high tide, major roads are washed out. Waterfront homes have been moved back onto land; after one big storm one home even fell off a cliff. "Sea levels are rising faster here than in other places," Jasper says. "When climate change happens, islands are the most affected."

Jasper decided he wanted to do something about this problem. He knew that his local community was passionate about sustainability. Jasper hoped that if he shared his passion and vision with others, they would join him.

So, as a 3rd grader, he joined his fellow 8th-grade students from the West Tisbury School to start the "Straw Free MV" initiative, and encourage people to stop using plastic straws. The students started by visiting restaurants and take-out counters around the island: they would boldly walk in and introduce themselves to the staff. "Hi, we are Straw Free MV. We're a group of kids on the island," they would say. "We are concerned about plastic straws. They're wasteful, and they're harmful to the environment. We'd like to ask you to give straws only to those customers who ask for them, or to not use them at all."

Jasper and his friends created "Straw Free MV" stickers to give to the restaurants that agreed to join in this effort. Restaurant owners proudly displayed them, and began giving out straws only to the customers who specifically asked for them. The students also created educational postcards that restaurant owners could place on their tables. And they suggested alternatives to plastic straws, like paper straws, or reusable straws that people could carry with them. Jasper carries his own stainless-steel straw in his backpack, and he keeps another one in his mom's car.

Sometimes the students' reputation would precede them. One day they visited the Black Dog Café, a popular restaurant located right next to the ferry in Vineyard Haven. "We assumed that since it was such a big restaurant, they wouldn't want to help us," Jasper says. But when they arrived there, the manager was excited to see them: "Oh, great, Straw Free MV, we've been waiting for you!" she said. She took all of their postcards, put them out on the tables; and asked for more.

While reducing the use of plastic straws was an important first step, Jasper knew there were other wasteful practices, like single-use plastic bottles of water and soda, that needed to be addressed. With such a large tourist population, these

plastic bottles were everywhere on the island—strewn along the beaches, and filling up the recycling bins and landfills. “Plastic doesn't just go away,” Jasper says. “Almost everything else breaks down and decomposes. But if you have a plastic bottle that you use for just two seconds, it will be in the world for thousands of years.”

So Jasper and his fellow youth activists set themselves a new goal. They developed a plan to introduce a bylaw that would forbid the selling of single-use plastic bottles that held less than 34 ounces. They called their new group Plastic-Free MV, and they campaigned tirelessly for their cause.

To gain a broad base of support and build a strong grassroots movement, they organized educational forums at the local libraries. They would put up posters, set up chairs, and then share what they had learned through their research with the audience. In their PowerPoint presentations, they gave a brief overview of current climate science, and discussed how plastic production is accelerating the climate crisis. “We are producing more than 300 million tons of plastic each year, 50% of which is for single-use products,” reads one slide. “We can do better!” says the next. After their presentations, they would open the forum up to debate. “We take time to answer people’s questions,” says Jasper. “It’s important to listen to people’s opinions,” he adds. “The only way anything is achieved is by working together.”

“Sometimes people who come to the forums yell at us. They want their single-use bottles! They want their convenience,” Jasper says. “We explain that it’s really not about just one person – it’s about the whole world, and we all need to help, because this is a major global issue.”

The next step for Jasper and his young changemakers was to present to the selectmen and concerned citizens at the island’s town meetings, urging them to adopt the new bylaw. So far three of the six towns have done so.

This work is not always easy, and not everyone is happy about the new rules. “Some businesses don’t really like the bylaw,” Jasper says. “If you are a store owner or a distributor you can’t sell single-use plastic bottles under 34 oz. Some shops would like to keep the plastic bottles; it’s been hard to get them on board.”

As these youth activists have learned, in the political world, it’s always important to be on high alert. For more than a year, they’d been speaking at selectmen meetings, carefully presenting their ideas, and respectfully encouraging dialogue about this issue. But then, when the time came to create the warrant for the town meeting of Tisbury, the Board of Selectmen simply decided to take it off the agenda. “One of our parents saw on Twitter that this happened,” says Jasper. “They ran right over to the meeting, and said, ‘Stop! You can’t do that!’” It took three days of bickering, but eventually the bylaw was put back on the agenda for the town meeting - to be held on June 13, 2020.

Jasper’s activism has now grown beyond Martha’s Vineyard. As a young environmentalist, he knows how important it is to strengthen one’s network and get in touch with other activists. So in September 2019, inspired by Greta Thunberg’s speech about the urgency of addressing climate change, he and a couple of friends went to New York City to join the climate strike.

For Jasper, seeing so many others marching together for the climate and taking steps – even little ones – to protect the environment is really important. “We made signs with a little polar bear on it, and then we marched along with everyone else,” Jasper says. “It was really inspiring to see that everyone cared enough to come down there, just to march for climate action.”

Jasper believes that children all over the world should be more aware of the power and influence they have. “We really do have the power to change what is happening,” Jasper says. “Adults listen to us: if it was just a bunch of adults saying we should have this bylaw, it might not have been passed. But when they see that kids are standing up for something, it makes it look like it’s really important.”

Jasper is convinced that his activism, and that of his friends, can have a large impact. He hopes that the changes made on Martha’s Vineyard will inspire tourists to introduce sustainable practices in their own communities. “Maybe if they see what we’re doing, they’ll go back to where they live, and they’ll say, ‘Hey, why don’t we do something like that?’” Jasper says. “So, it can just spread.”

*when they realize that what they do truly makes a difference,
can indeed change the world.*

Jane Goodall

Call to Action: Adopt sustainable practices in your life: bring your own straw. Bring shopping bags to the market. Every bit counts. **Check out:** www.plasticfreemv.com; <https://www.instagram.com/plasticfreemv/>
https://www.facebook.com/pg/plasticfreemv/about/?ref=page_internal

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