

From trash to tote

With used bags of all shapes and colors, Bend woman 'upcycles' what would have been trash into bags, wallets, belts and more

By Kate Ramsayer / *The Bulletin*

Published: June 28, 2010 4:00AM PST

Sara Wiener's garage studio is overflowing with plastic bags.

Yellow Les Schwab tire bags, stuffed with the long, flimsy bags newspapers are delivered in are in one corner. Boxes filled with colorful tortilla chip bags, empty Oreo packaging and other snack wrappers are against another wall. Washed pet food bags are in another pile.

The bags are the raw materials for Wiener's new venture — she makes and sells reusable tote bags, purses, wallets, belts and many other products, created almost entirely from plastic that otherwise could have ended up in a landfill. It's not recycling, she said, but upcycling — using materials destined for the trash to create something of equal or greater value, without spending all the energy involved in recycling the original materials.

"It was such a perfect opportunity to do something that I believe in," Wiener said.

Through her company, Sara Bella, she hopes to keep plastic bags from the trash, both locally and in other communities, and to involve others in the effort.

"It was just a natural thing for me to do," she said, noting that she previously made fleece products. "It was different working with fabrics you buy by the yard to (working with) a fabric I had to construct literally from trash."

The basic process of turning a piece of trash into a reusable bag or other item is pretty nontechnical, she said.

The main ingredients in the material are newspaper bags. Wiener flattens out three or four of them, stacks them up, layers them in between parchment paper and then applies heat.

"We iron those layers, and they fuse together into a sturdy piece of plastic — but it's still totally flexible," Wiener said.

She recently partnered with Central Oregon Resources for Independent Living to hire people with disabilities to iron the newspaper bags together to create the panels that are the backbone of the projects.

Then comes the colorful part. Wiener irons on an additional layer of plastic — a bread wrapper with an interesting pattern, for example, or a red-and-white Target bag, a green FootZone bag or a Disney store bag emblazoned with princesses. Sometimes she'll use scraps left over from other projects to create confetti-type designs.



Ryan Brennecke / *The Bulletin*

Sara Wiener trims a plastic rice cakes bag before using an iron to fuse it with other flimsy plastic. Her company, Sara Bella, creates colorful panels from bags destined for the trash, and then uses that "fabric" to sew totes, purses, belts and more.



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Sara Wiener trims a plastic rice cakes bag before using an iron to fuse it with other flimsy plastic. Her company, Sara Bella, creates colorful panels from bags destined for the trash, and then uses that "fabric" to sew totes, purses, belts and more.

Then she cuts the panels into strips, and sews different strips together, looking for fun and colorful combinations.

"I love doing this part," she said last week, fanning out a handful of strips. "I have this whole bunch to pick from — it's like candy."

The sewn-together strips are now her fabric, and she cuts out patterns and sews up seams and attaches straps, snaps and zippers.

A ready supply

"It evolved very quickly to something that became a passion," Wiener said. "I just took off with it and went to a whole new level with ironing plastic bags."

Wiener also has branched out to cut up and craft products out of the heavy plastic banners that places like the Old Mill District and St. Charles Bend aren't going to use anymore. Some print shops also send her banners with typos or mistakes. Some she simply cuts into the appropriate pattern, and some she cuts into 2-inch strips to weave into a bag.

And because crinkly snack bags don't iron well, she sews them directly onto old, washed-out pet food bags — sturdy materials that the people at Pet Express save for her.

"It's a nice way of using lots of bags," she said. And the brands, pictures and colors make for colorful finished products.

Her friends and neighbors also know to save bags for her, Wiener said.

Sometimes a friend will save up bags for her, other times neighbors will simply drop off their unwanted bags on her porch.

"It's shocking how fast my supply grows," she said.

Wiener estimates that since March, she has gone through 10,000 newspaper bags — which can't be recycled in the big plastic bins, and which she likes to think of as rescued from the landfill.

She doesn't worry about her supply of bags running out — in fact, Wiener said, it would be great if she was put out of business by a lack of plastic being handed out at stores.

Wiener doesn't take bags at stores, she said, though she did buy a plantain snack from Trader Joe's because of the cute monkey picture on the bag.

Spreading the word

She sells the totes, purses, wallets, cell phone holders and more online and at craft fairs, and recently got an order for 210 cell phone holders from a woman who runs Sprint stores.

Online, the plastic bag totes sell for \$35, banner totes range from \$24 to \$44, and purses sell for \$24 or \$39.

She's also started selling products through stores in Bend, including FootZone, Kaleidoscope and Camalli Book Co.

The bags are attention-getters, said Tina Davis, owner of Camalli.

"They're so lively and colorful, kind of like Sara," Davis said.

Customers are very conscious of how many shopping bags they use, and the environmental effects of all the plastic, she said. Many will bring



From used plastic bags, newspaper bags and banners, Sara Wiener creates items such as tote bags, cell phone holders, purses, wallets and belts.

their own reusable bag to put purchased books in, she said, so the Sara Bella products were a natural fit for the store.

"I love to explain to (customers) what they are," Davis said.

And Wiener is trying to spread the word about the upcycled bags, especially in other countries where people can easily get the raw materials and sell the finished products for profit. She recently taught a class in a village in Mexico on how to make the crafts, and has been invited to give a talk at the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh.

"My idea is to spread this very nontechnical skill or craft around the world," she said.

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Published Daily in Bend Oregon by Western Communications, Inc. © 2010

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