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Section B

Learning about lunch disposal

LIVING LIGHTLY

Bonnie Stump

Dalton Rebecek is only 11 years old, but he has no qualms about speaking to the press. May 3 is a newsworthy day at Jo Ann Ford Elementary School; the lunchroom is beginning a composting program for food waste. As student council president, Dalton has been preparing his classmates for the inauguration of this new program, so he confidently explains it to me. The Ford lunchroom used to send 16 bags of trash to the landfill every day. With the new food composting program and single stream recycling, Dalton says trash will be reduced to only one bag a day, which will be "healthier for the Earth."

Jason Sanders, coordinator of recycling and composting for Texas Disposal Systems, is patiently herding 500 very noisy grade-schoolers through their first trash sorting line. Food, paper napkins and milk cartons go into the bin for composting. Water bottles and aluminum cans go to recycling. Styrofoam, plastic cutlery and sandwich bags go into the trash. While volunteers continue to teach proper trash line etiquette, Jason invites

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Adam and Paul Gregory stand in front of a finished pile of compost.

me outside (where it is blissfully quiet) to see the special dumpster where the food waste goes. The dumpster is equipped with a radio frequency ID tag. When the truck comes to collect the food waste, it will immediately record the source and the weight of the food so TDS will know exactly how much waste is being diverted from the landfill by each school. Ford is the last Georgetown elementary school to go live with the composting program, so Jason has data from all the other elementary schools in town, as well as from the Austin and Hays elementary schools. He confirms Dalton's claim that landfill waste will

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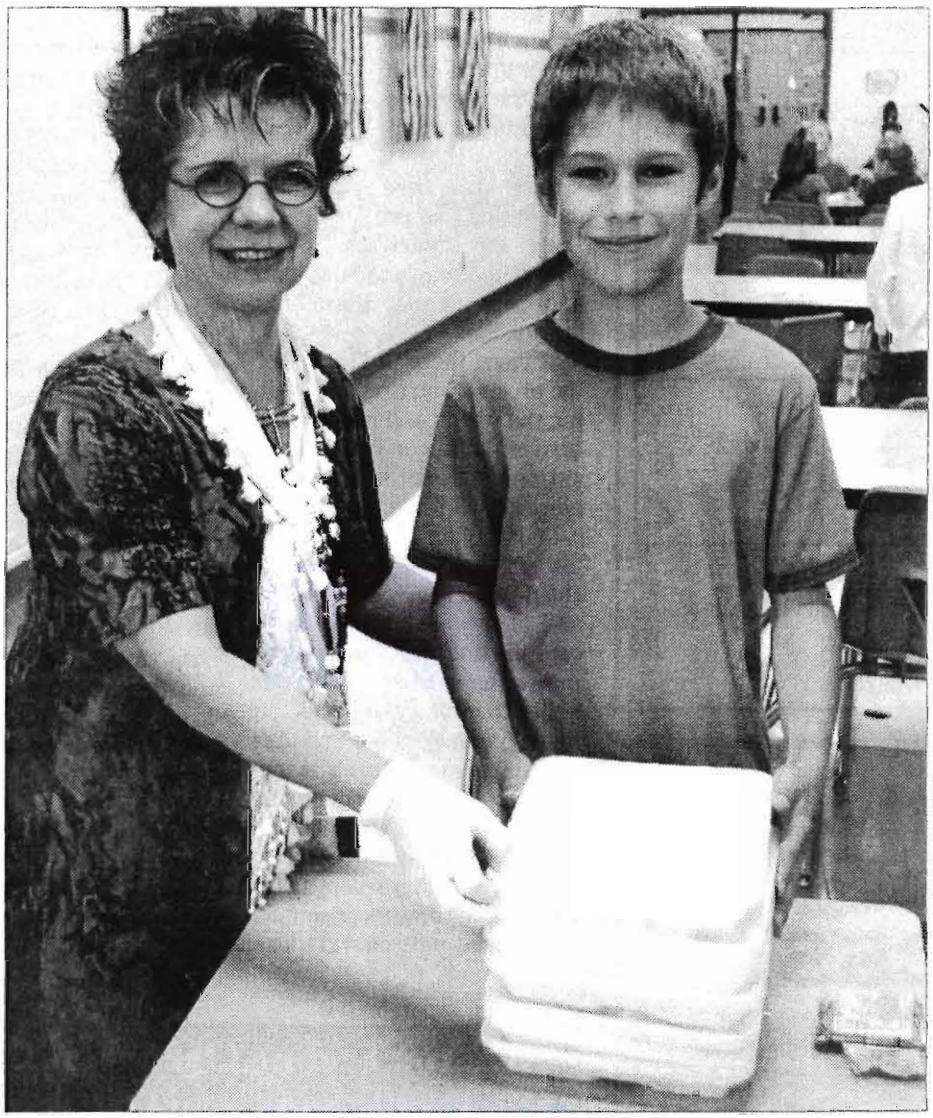
decrease from 16 bags per lunchroom per day to one or two. Mitchell Elementary, which was the first Georgetown school to begin composting and recycling, is now the champion of all the TDS Green schools. Mitchell kids recycled and composted more than 8,000 pounds of waste in April alone.

Food waste composting is not just for little kids. At Southwestern University the cafeteria in the Red McCombs center is now diverting more than 90 percent of its waste stream away from the landfill and will save $10,000 a year by doing so. Gary Hertel, Georgetown Facilities Manager for TDS, shows me a special door at the back of the kitchen where food can be thrown directly into a collection bin, and another chute where recyclables such as cardboard boxes slide into a huge compactor. I don't see any place for regular trash so I ask Gary where it is. Before he can answer, a janitor comes out with a single black plastic bag and sets it primly on the curb. This kitchen feeds 1,000 people a day, but there is so little trash generated that after lunch a golf cart comes by and hauls the few bags to a dumpster at another location.

After the food waste is collected at the schools, it is hauled down to the Texas Disposal Systems facility at Creedmoor, just southeast of Austin. I am greeted there by Adam and Paul Gregory, sons of founder and CEO Bob Gregory. Rarely will you meet two young men so enthusiastic about recycling. Adam is only 27 years old, but led the design and construction of the 107,000-square-foot Materials Recovery Facility (MRF), pronounced "murph" in dump-speak. Adam proudly shows me huge bales of plastic milk jugs, bimetal cans, and aluminum stacked in endless rows. He explains that in order to make a profit, sometimes TDS has to hold onto the bales temporarily and wait for the right market price. Recycling not only makes money by saving valuable resources, but also keeps 300 tons of material out of the landfill every day. Adam thinks that with diligent materials recovery he can make this landfill last 100 years. Paul, the older brother, is no less committed to the long view. As long as every man, woman and child in America continues to discard over 1.25 tons of trash every year, their family business will have plenty of opportunity for innovation. Both brothers have business degrees but confess that they have little interest in mundane matters such as quarterly profits. They prefer to focus on long-term projects such as harvesting methane gas from the landfill to run the materials recovery facility, a process that should be operational within two years. They are also looking forward to opening a safari park in the buffer zone surrounding the landfill and have already collected more than 2,500 exotic animals, many of them being endangered species. As we drive off-road in the grass among antelope and bison, I forget that we're in Texas, much less in a landfill.



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Principal Jennifer Mauldin and Dalton Rebecek begin composting at Jo Ann Ford Elementary.

Paul is in charge of composting the food collected from the schools. We drive his truck back to the big piles where the children's lunch leftovers have been ground up in a five-to-one ratio with chopped brush. The piles are called "static" piles because they are allowed to sit for the six months required for the milk cartons to disappear. Twice during that period, they are stirred up and blasted with water cannons to keep the decomposing bacteria active. The temperature inside the piles rises to 140 degrees Fahrenheit from the metabolism of the bacteria, killing seeds and pathogens. In fact, the piles get so hot that they can catch fire if they are allowed to get too big. After six months the compost will be ready to be sold through the Garden-Ville outlets as a valuable source of organic humus and nitrogen for lawns and gardens. It can also be used at TDS's tree farm on the premises.

Lunchroom leftovers are only a small part of the composting operation. Other piles contain such sundry items as animal manure or waste liquids from the Borden dairy and the Coca-Cola bottling plant.

The brothers admit that these massive, hot compost piles are also an expedient way to dispose of rare fatalities among the wildlife. Last year George, a 20-year-old American bison, died peacefully of old age. He was suitably mourned and then, rather than digging a really big hole, George was interred in a compost pile. After 10 days there was nothing left but hooves and teeth.