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Kingbin: Fisher a master of philanthropic recycling

By LISA COLEMAN BRADLOW

Ted Fisher is a gentleman and a scrapper. Which means that he has started a clothing donation business that works as much to improve local communities as it does to be a profitable business. These two aims are the combined force behind County Recycling, the mojo of a company trying to do the right thing and be successful.

Fisher's cheerful looking clothing donation bin — emblazoned with his friendly corporate mascot "Binny" — has recently been placed at the Scarsdale sanitation station. His bins are new and improved, featuring tamperproof design and state-of-the-art GPS monitoring systems. Fisher noted these features are necessary since other bins are routinely targets of theft by the unscrupulous.

"The municipal recycling of textiles is a huge market, but I see it as a global movement," he said. Fisher is a tall, strapping man, with a ready white smile and a friendly, energetic manner. Earlier in his career, he made a small fortune selling custom suits, describing that time as his "wolf of Wall Street era." He received the key to the city of Rye when he was 15 for saving the life of a high school football teammate, lists in his corporate information kit the dozen organizations to which he regularly contributes, is a single father of two teenagers and a self-described Buddhist.

"Textile recycling is the only area with both environmental and philanthropic levels," he said, noting that 90 percent of clothing is recyclable, but only 20 percent currently is recycled. The rest gets thrown into landfills. Consider that one rubber-soled shoe takes about 50 years to break down.

The hard truth is that Americans discard an average of 68 pounds of textile waste each year, which amounts to well

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SCARSDALE INQUIRER/JIM MACLEAN

Ted Fisher and "Binny" at Scarsdale's clothing donation and recycling bin.

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over 25 billion pounds of clothing annually. Around the world, 70 percent of the population wears secondhand clothing. Almost half of recovered textile waste is sent abroad to more than 100 countries, where resold clothing and shoes provide thousands of jobs for small entrepreneurs and their families. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports that clothing and textile recycling has a greater impact on reducing greenhouse gases than the recycling of yard waste, glass or plastic.

Fisher explained that in the way he has structured his business, everyone can come out ahead. This year, Fisher and his team have bins at about 100 sites in the lower New York state region. He takes pride in “making alliances, not just throwing bins onto lots.”

“I call it conscious capitalism, and I’m proud for my company to be profitable, as long as it has merits.” Fisher noted that Goodwill takes in more than \$4 billion annually, and the Salvation Army as well, doing good, helpful work, all while employing people and paying decent salaries.

Fisher’s business model involves renting space for the placement of his bins. Since a bin is not large, and often placed in a spot that’s not prime real estate, many partners use the rental money paid to them by County Recycling as direct income for community causes and activities, such as recreation department projects and scholarship funds. To get promotion help for his bins, Fisher prearranges that a certain percentage of the value of his bins’ donated clothing will be given back to the community.

Fisher’s income comes after the bin donations have been sorted for pieces appro-

priate for local giveaway programs. County Recycling sells the rest by the pound to graders and sorters. Of these textiles, 45 percent is exported for affordable clothing, 30 percent becomes industrial wiping and polishing cloths, and 20 percent is reprocessed into fibers for furniture’s stuffing, insulations, soundproofing and carpet padding, even for making new clothing. Ultimately only 5 percent is unusable in any way. Fisher’s motto is “wear, donate, recycle.”

County Recycling has 16 bins in Co-op City in the Bronx, 10 in Rochdale and 14 in Mount Vernon from which Fisher said, “Safely 75 percent of the bin profits goes directly to fund community causes. I have had the ability to create giveaway programs for companies and fund all sorts of community projects, like the scholarship fund my bins support in Mount Vernon. We’ve raised ten of thousands of dollars by now.”

Fisher has no shortage of good ideas for his business. “For instance, there should be clothing drives all over schools as fundraisers,” he said.

He intends to make his Giving Bus into “a self-contained dispatched mobile relief and resource unit.” Fisher hopes it will be the first of many such vehicles that are able to go where there’s a need for clothing — to homeless shelters, providing people with coats and shoes, even appropriate work clothing, to disaster sites to disperse necessary clothes, and also to run regular donation pickups and distribution.

He is promoting his “Shoes for a Cause” hitch-trailer, which he imagines can be a drop off point for used shoes at multiple events, such as marathons, fairs, festivals and concerts. And he is finalizing a

deal with a major supermarket chain that involves over 100 locations and a unique method of community outreach involving gift cards that will be routinely donated to needy families.

His vision includes having 1,000 official donation zones and soon the ability to distribute over \$2 million each year to local and national charities, causes and nonprofits. “And through the process,” he said, “we will divert textile waste from ending up in landfills, and create careers, provide affordable clothing and help global free market enterprise.”

Fisher is enthusiastically spearheading the creation of legislation for the donation bin industry in New York, actively pushing his ideas for local zoning and regulatory ordinances to municipal boards.

“I know I’m opening up a Pandora’s box, but the industry needs to be regulated,” said Fisher. He noted the recent settlement Attorney General Eric Schneiderman settled for \$700,000 with an operator of about 1,100 clothing donation bins who rented the names of several charities he had painted on the bins, and sold the clothing for a profit of several million dollars annually.

“There is no charity in this business,” Fisher said. “But I see that along with making money, you can actually help thousands and thousands of people, recycle what would otherwise be environmental waste and landfill, and truly help the world. There is nothing wrong with good intentions.”

He added, “Karma is amazing.”

To find a nearby drop zone, visit findbinny.org or phone (800) 261-7099 for a home pickup. More information on secondary materials and the recycled textiles market can be found at smartasn.com.