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Brown Environmental Leadership Lab 2012

Action Plan Progress Report

Technology is the continuous trend setter, constantly improving and advancing; in with the new out with the old. So what happens to the old electronic devices that tend to be thrown away? They become e- waste and the nation currently dumps between 300 million and 400 million electronic items per year, and less than 20% of that e-waste is recycled. This concealed issue contributes to the issue of pollution which is a major environmental problem since harmful chemicals in the electronics contaminate air, water, soil, and people. What ends up in landfills slowly decays and releases harmful substances into the soil and air including mercury, CRT's, flame retardants, chlorine, sulfur dioxide, etc. A majority of our e-waste is exported to developing countries where workers are compensated a couple cents to dismember the devices without safety gear.

In these establishments e-waste is not recycled it is taken apart for the extraction of valuable metals and the rest is dumped on to the land. An example of a place like this is Guiyu, China. Guiyu has the highest levels of cancer causing dioxins in the world. 88% of children suffer from lead poisoning. Higher-than-average rates of miscarriage are also reported in the region. The issue of e-waste is only now beginning to be brought up to the surface of environmental issues.

It was a surprise to me when I heard about the issue of e-waste because most people especially the ones in my generation mindlessly consume these products. It is the norm to have a new phone every couple months and what most consumers don't think of is the process these products undergo to be made then disposed of. I have been guilty of doing so but our society doesn't bring these important issues to attention. To do my part in reducing the amount of e-waste found in our landfills and the amount being illegally shipped to foreign countries, I decided to educate people of the harmful impacts that e-waste can cause in the environment and hold an e-waste drive as part of my action plan. First, I researched places in Rhode Island that were certified to recycle properly and I came across a non-profit organization in Providence called Green Penguin.

Their motto, “technology is renewable,” encouraged me to contact them. I discussed with Jeremiah Joseph, a member of the Green Penguin team, and scheduled the e-waste drive for May 30, 2013 in my school, Blackstone Academy Charter School located in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Before Jeremiah came to pick up the e-waste I made sure to educate my school about the impact e-waste has on the environment around us. During morning meetings, when our whole school meets in the cafeteria for announcements, I would announce information about my action plan and I would show parts of 60 Minutes: The Electronic Wasteland and The Story of Electronics which can both be found on YouTube. I had two weeks before the e-waste drive to encourage people around me to bring their old, broken, absolute electronics so they could be disposed of.

I also personally went to each advisor to discuss with them and answer any questions they had. To serve as reminders I posted posters of accepted electronic waste around the school so people would know what they could and couldn't bring. Many people brought in their electronics and were happy to get rid of them. When Jeremiah came in to pick up the electronics we took some time to sit down and speak about my action plan. I had questions prepared to ask him and he answered each of them with a coherent explanation.

Since the E-waste drive was such a success the environmental class in my school is now taking it up as a project of their own. From now on E-waste Drive will be something that happens every year so that our community can consciously dispose of their electronics in a sustainable manner. I will be very happy to report back to BELL that I accomplished my goal.

Personally I think I have grown. Organizing this project alone was tough and sometimes I thought that nothing would work out. I feared no one would participate or listen. My advisors and teachers encouraged me to be persistent and determined and I always reminded myself that I was doing this to make the environment around me better. Doing this was like taking a step closer to becoming a sustainable advocate and working in that field. I have a relentless passion for conserving the nature. I also have become more comfortable speaking with large crowds whereas before I became really anxious. I have been sharing all the things I have learned because I believe that is the first step to change. BELL was a great program for me to be a part of and I feel very grateful I had the opportunity to be a part of it.