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Local Salon Donates Excess Hair to Clean Up Oil Spills

By Jennifer Wake



Salon Cartier owner Robin Cartier sits next to approx. 10 pounds of hair clippings being donated to make oil spill hair mats
Photo Jennifer Wake

Each week at Salon Cartier on Olympic Boulevard, nearly five pounds of hair clippings, which had been destined for the downstairs dumpster, are now being boxed up and sent to a warehouse in San Francisco as part of a massive operation to create mats suitable for cleaning oil spills.

The mats were originally invented by hair stylist Phil McCrory of Smartgrow.net following the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska after he noticed how oil clung to the hair of otters.

"You shampoo your hair because it gets greasy," explains McCrory on the Matter of Trust Web site -- an ecological public charity founded by Lisa Craig Gautier. "Hair is very efficient at collecting oil out of the air, off surfaces like your skin and out of the water, even petroleum oil. Hair is adsorbent (as in "clings to" unlike absorbent which is to "soak up.")

The mats, which are typically the size of a doormat, have been used throughout the country and across the globe to clean up oil spills affecting waterways.

Salon owner Robin Cartier had heard about the hair mats several years ago, and had been intrigued, but forgot about it until Stefani Martin brought up the idea at a staff meeting five months ago.

"It's amazing to see what you think is waste and what you can do with it," Cartier says. Prior to their participation in Matter of Trust, Cartier says they simply threw away any excess hair, aside from 10 to 12 inch-long strands that would be donated to Locks of Love which makes wigs for cancer patients.

"It's nice to be able to do something every day," she says. "Our clients are in awe. They're excited that they're actually helping. Parents will show teenagers their cut hair and explain that we're going to make mats out of it to clean water and soak up oil."

Last November, Matter of Trust used the mats at Ocean Beach to help soak up some of the 58,000 gallons of bunker fuel that leaked into the San Francisco Bay from the Cusco Busan cargo ship after it hit the Bay Bridge.

To close the recycling loop, used oil mats are sprinkled with oyster mushroom spawn (donated by Paul Stamets of Fungi.com), which shoot out millions of roots, clinging to the mesh of the oil-soaked

mats, breaking down the hydrocarbon bonds in the oil and turning the toxic waste into landscape-grade fertilizer.

Martin says the project is "a practical, hands-on study to further the cause of efficient closed loop systems for oil spill cleanup - from collecting the hair, to the creation of mulch and the many steps in between."

After last year's oil spill in the Black Sea, Matter of Trust sent hair mats to Russia and has also worked with Korea to utilize the technology to clean up its contaminated shorelines. According to the organization, there were 2,600 oil spills in the world last year - many of which affected our environment - and there are more than 370,000 hair salons in the United States that cut about one pound of hair per day, much of which ends up in landfills. The hair mats provide an ecological "win-win."

Salon Cartier sees more than 130 clients a week (95 percent of whom are from Lamorinda), and collects between two to five pounds of hair clippings for the project each week. "I would see the garbage fill up, and now it all goes," Cartier says.

Thanks to Main Street Postal & Business Center in Walnut Creek, which has partnered with Salon Cartier, there is no cost for the salon to participate in the program. The postal center generously boxes and pays to ship the excess hair to Matter of Trust.

"I called [Main Street Postal] to see if they would be interested in helping Mother Earth," Martin says. "Manager Cate Venables did not bat an eye. She has been a fundamental part in making this possible. I wish there were more people willing to use generosity in their lives."

For Cartier, it's simple. "It's just people taking the time to do something," she says. "They can even use pet hair and individuals can get involved. This helps otters and sea life as well as provides clean water for our kids; it's so important."

For more information about Matter of Trust and its Oil Spill Hair Mats, you can visit their Web site at www.matteroftrust.org.

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