

Published April 17th, 2019

Burton Valley student pushes school to go green this Earth Day

By Pippa Fisher



Fifth-grader Julian Jackl shows off the new silverware that will be used in the Burton Valley Elementary School lunchroom. Photo Pippa Fisher

Burton Valley Elementary School is ditching the use of plastic utensils in the lunchroom starting April 22, appropriately enough on Earth Day. As impactful as that is, it is all the more remarkable for being introduced by an environmentally conscious fifth-grader who, following his passion, has made it his mission to effect change in the community, replacing plastic utensils with reusable metal flatware.

Julian Jackl is no ordinary fifth-grader. As part of the school's "green team" - made up of fourth-grade students who are tasked with sorting through the aftermath of lunches, putting food scraps in the compostable bin and sorting the recyclables from trash - Jackl became concerned last year that the plastic utensils were being placed in trash. "Surely that's a mistake?" he asked and was discouraged to learn that since the utensils had food on them, they did indeed end up in landfill.

From there he went down what he describes as "a rabbit hole," researching where the trash goes, contacting Republic Services for confirmation, researching what types of plastic was being used, even finding a case study - a school in Minnesota that made the switch to reusable utensils. Jackl looked at using compostable materials as an alternative, which turned out to be an expensive option.

In the fall of 2018 Jackl ran for student government on his sustainability platform. He watched the documentary "A Plastic Ocean" while preparing his speech and learned that even some recyclable plastic ends up in the ocean.

He did not get elected.

"At first I felt defeated," reflects Jackl, but says that his parents reminded him that he didn't need to be elected to create change.

Jackl got to work sending emails to the school principal and vice principal, copying the Parent Association president since the PTA oversees the hot lunch program.

PTA President Neda Wilson says that Julian was so passionate that he pursued his goal by pushing the issue with both her and the school administration. "He scheduled meetings in the most professional way, came armed with stats, case studies, and a financial model," she says.

"It took him to come in and open my eyes," says Wilson. She notes that in a school of Burton Valley's size, with 800 students, the amount of plastic being saved from the landfill is huge. Roughly 300 meals are served daily which means that, with the use of reusable metal flatware, 45,000 plastic utensils annually will be saved from landfill.

Wilson helped Jackl work with the hot lunch program company Sodexo to implement the changes. Through their contact at Sodexo, another school in the area - Wagner Ranch in Orinda - heard about the initiative and has decided to make the switch as well.

And that is Jackl's goal. "I am very proud and excited that this can help," he says, noting that his aim is to reach out to other schools in the area, across the state and across the U.S., to share the BVE story to make a global change for the benefit of the environment.

Jackl is spreading his message. He presented his initiative to the April 16 Lafayette School Board meeting. He is scheduled to appear in the mayor's weekly video on April 19 and will have a table at Lafayette's Earth Day celebration April 28.

Jackl's parents are understandably very proud of their son. His father, Jay Jackl, describes him as a very empathetic person.

"He's very persistent," explains his mother, Chastity Schults. "He always does research and comes up with a

persuasive argument."

He is certainly persistent. BVE Principal Meredith Dolley explains that Jackl knew and understood that getting rid of plastic utensils and using silverware for hot lunch would be a big undertaking. "That didn't stop him. Julian persisted, researched and engaged not only our administration, but also our PTA."

Dolley continues, "Julian's goal and mission was to help Burton Valley become more green and more sustainable. However, the outcome has far surpassed what he set out to do. He is a strong example for all the children and adults at Burton Valley and beyond, that when you persist and you stay true to your passions, you really can make a difference."

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