

Sustainability Initiative Project Zero Debuts with a Bang



Liz Torrey
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At the close of the school year, St. Andreans banded together to participate in the School's first ever "Project Zero"—an all-School effort to reuse, repurpose, recycle or donate as much as possible (clothes, shoes, school supplies,

toiletries, you name it) as students moved out of dorm. While recycling and terracycling bins were always available to students during the move-out process, an overwhelming amount of unwanted, but still usable and useful, items remained—an issue that faces colleges, universities, and boarding schools nationwide. This year, Project Zero allowed the St. Andrew's community to divert an additional estimated 30 cubic yards of material that would have otherwise gone to a landfill.

Organized by Associate Director of Admission Kristin Honsel, the week-long project began at the outset of finals week with the appearance of labeled cardboard boxes on every residential corridor. Each box accepted one of 15 different categories of goods: clothing, electronics, sporting equipment, food & drink, toiletries & cosmetics, and so on. As students packed and cleaned their rooms, they deposited unwanted items in the boxes. Anything in a box was free to anyone in the St. Andrew's community—with the understanding that donated items were not to be resold for profit.

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"When Kristin Honsel first told me about her idea to radically reduce move-out waste at the end of the year, I knew immediately that our community would step up to the challenge," said Director of Sustainability Diana Burk. "For me, Project Zero was incredible because it involved our entire community in a project that epitomized the three e's of sustainability: economy, ecology, and equity."

Honsel originally came up with the idea for Project Zero with a colleague during her first year living and working at Taft School in Connecticut. "I started to hear about how every family who's ever lived at a boarding school has at some point been on a dumpster diving mission [during move-out] as a year-end tradition," she recalled, "so my friend Kathleen Plunkett and I started the conversation and began creating a system for collecting, organizing and donating." Honsel and her family later moved on to work at Peddie School in New Jersey, and the project migrated with her, making its debut under the name "The Peddie Purge," where it has become a part of the fabric of the school. Six years later, the Honsels moved to the shores of Noxontown Pond and again began the initiative at St. Andrew's, calling it "Project Zero", a name coined by fellow environmentalist and Science Department faculty member John Burk.

"When I came to St. Andrew's, there was already an incredible foundation in place, with the School's focus on sustainability, the environment, teamwork, leadership, respect and community," Honsel said. "So I knew that this project would be well received from the start, and it was! When John suggested the name, I knew it was perfect for this initiative. It was easy to understand that the goal was to leave the school year with zero waste."

"Although I knew the School would embrace Project Zero, I was just blown away with the amount of support, energy, and how much our kids and faculty stepped up from the get-go," she continued. "The rising seniors set a tone that was really incredible, and class after class just followed suit. Beyond that, there were kids who were showing up to volunteer regularly that didn't have to show up—they had already done their shifts with their class, but they continued to volunteer because they wanted to have an impact, and there were faculty who did the same. It's asking an enormous amount at the end of the school year, when everyone is exhausted and we've all got finals on the brain, so that was just incredible."

At the end of the week-long effort, with the exception of a few bags of trash, all items left in Project Zero Headquarters were either recycled or donated to a variety of nonprofit organizations. The majority of items were donated to [Appoquinimink State Service Center in Middletown](#), which assists local families in need with everything from food to clothing, shelter to social services. "I was expecting them to take just clothing," Honsel said, "but our contacts, Valerie Bradshaw and Michelle Moody, became our Project Zero angels. They showed up on the very last day ready to work, and said, 'We can take every single thing in this room. We'll put it out a bag at a time and it will be gone in two weeks.' So we sent over three huge vans packed to the gills. When their clients come in [to the State Service Center], they can take what they need. Knowing that these donations would go directly to the people in our community who need it was the best reward for all of our hard work."

Other organizations that received goods from Project Zero included:

- A van load of books to American Association of University Women, which holds book sale fundraisers to support women's education
- Five large bags of sneakers to Nike Grind, which recycles sneakers into rubber-based materials for playgrounds and basketball courts
- Five large bags of clothing (too worn out to donate) to textile recycling
- Six boxes of school supplies to the Middletown Boys & Girls Club
- Fifteen desk lamps and a box of lightbulbs to the Wounded Warriors vet house in Middletown
- Fifty bras to local women's shelters (in addition to the 240 bras students had collected during a bra drive for women's shelters earlier in the school year)
- Pillows that could not be donated were collected by Sarah Binder, a member of the Facilities team, to make dog beds for rescue shelters

Lots of apparel and dorm room items were also absorbed by the St. Andrew's Alumni Clothes Closet (the STAACC), which is open to students and faculty during the school year and raises funds for the School's financial aid program; all items are only \$1.

"We tried to stay as local as we could possibly get," Honsel said. "It all stayed within a 40 minute drive. We didn't want to use gallons of fuel to fly anything overseas when we knew we could impact our local community. Each year the only thing that I wish I could see is exactly how much stuff we actually save from a landfill, but because items go just as fast as they come, we never have a chance to see it all in one place. In the end, that is really the best kind of 'problem' to have!"

"Project Zero helped our St. Andrew's community and our Middletown community by directly donating items to those in need," agreed Diana Burk. " It also helped St. Andrew's and our local community economically by allowing us to pay less for our waste disposal at the end of the year, and by infusing local non-profits with needed donations."

Beyond helping our community, Honsel would love to see and hear a change in the language surrounding unwanted stuff start. In an ideal world, she explains, the words "donate" or "recycle" would be the first terms used when looking to unload unwanted stuff, rather than "trash" or "garbage." "There is a different visual associated with each of those words," Honsel said, "and those visuals are connected to intentional actions with environmental impacts."

As for what the students might have gotten out of the experience, Honsel lists a number of benefits: "From an environmental standpoint, I think being able to see the enormity of everything that would have gone to landfills, all in one place, was a really strong statement. You could hear it when the kids walked in—they'd say, 'Oh my gosh, we had no idea.' I think they saw that second-hand is okay, that there's no shame in taking something that somebody else doesn't want and making it your own. I love overhearing kids say, 'Check this out, I got it from a Project Zero box!' I think they saw that many hands make light work, and that even ten minutes of volunteering makes a difference. They saw what can happen when a lot of people chip in to do what is right."

"But Project Zero isn't just about doing what is right," she concluded. "It's also about coming together as a community, and believing in a vision. I wanted them to see that you can have an idea and make it grow. It just takes work! This project is physically impossible without a massive support system- across the board. I am grateful to be a part of a community that goes the extra mile and does so with a laugh and smile."

Ultimately, this project is only one faction of how the SAS community works each day to lessen their environmental footprint, and Honsel looks forward to continuing to work with the campus community in working to make a difference. Her long-term goal is to share her approach with other schools that are interested in starting such an initiative, and with that in mind, she encourages others to reach out as she is happy to share all materials needed to get things rolling. "The process is actually quite simple," she said, "It just needs someone to lead the charge and rally the troops!" For more information, please feel free to contact Kristin via email at khonsel@standrews-de.org.