

Women Who Mean Business

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Heidi Sanborn

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By Danny King – Contributor

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As founder and executive director of the Sacramento-based nonprofit National Stewardship Action Council, which she started in 2015, Heidi Sanborn set a goal to "lead the nation on how to deal with our recycling crisis."

While that may sound like an unrealistic goal, it makes perfect sense to people who have worked with Sanborn.

After spending the better part of two decades working with local governments at reducing waste by helping them build out recycling programs, Sanborn, as the founding executive director of the California Product Stewardship Council in 2007, helped flip the script on waste-reduction responsibility by focusing on the producers of the goods instead of the end-users.

That meant taking on everyone from mattress makers to the carpet industry in an effort to address the growing landfill problem by mandating producers to spend more on recycling systems. One of Sanborn's more notable wins was getting Gov. Jerry Brown to pass SB 212 in October 2018. Under that law, California became the first U.S. state to establish a take-back program where pharmaceutical companies are obligated to fund systems that collect needles and medicines from homes in order to address widespread public-health issues ranging from needles injuring sanitation workers to drugs feeding the opioid crisis.

"She takes on the biggest fights, and gets industries that don't want to change to change," said Jordan Wells, special projects manager at the NSAC, who's worked for Sanborn for six years and considers Sanborn her mentor. "I call her a rock star."

Sanborn's recycling efforts started at an early age. She remembers as a 7-year-old being "horrified" when people would litter at her neighborhood park in Wilmington, Delaware. She eventually started her own version of a newspaper route, where she would convince neighbors to stack their old newspapers in their garages.

"I'd collect them in my little red wagon, and when we had enough to fill the station wagon, we'd go to the paper recycler downtown, weigh the car and get paid for it," Sanborn said. "I was in third grade."

After enrolling at Long Beach City College, which she paid for by singing and playing bass in a band ("I sang Stevie Nicks songs," said Sanborn), she took a test at a counseling center that revealed her optimal career as an environmental lobbyist. After transferring to the University of California Davis and graduating in 1992, Sanborn worked her way into the California Integrated Waste Management Board, where she was part of the first all-woman team heading California's waste-management efforts in 2000.

Having worked within waste management from the government, nonprofit and consultant angles, Sanborn has garnered a reputation of both authority and integrity that's made her a valuable asset for other nonprofits targeting the challenges that face California, according to Jay Hansen, CEO of the California Foundation on the Environment and the Economy. Sanborn, who's worked with Hansen for about two years and serves on the CFEE's board of directors, has, among other things, helped coordinate trips with local officials to Seattle and Portland in order to glean information about those cities' composting programs.

"Legislators like safe and easy things, but these problems are hard and require steady leadership," said Hansen. "She's unafraid of having tough conversations."

Sanborn said that the impact of Covid-19 has made those conversations even tougher because the combination of financially strained public resources and the increased use of non-recyclable plastics will likely cause the state's recycling rate this year to recede to pre-2018 levels. While the state in 2011 set a 75% goal for recycling through source reduction,

recycling and composting by 2020, Sanborn estimates that California may be as low as 35% this year, and bemoans a lack of labeling consistency as a reason why the numbers aren't higher.

"Everyone's confused on how to recycle because the labeling is all messed up," said Sanborn "You shouldn't have to read a phone book to recycle. Everything should be labeled trash-only, recycling or composting. Wouldn't that be nice?"

As for her pioneering role as a woman within the waste industry, Sanborn tries to be philosophical, if not blunt, about her efforts.

"It's not glamorous. I work around landfills. This isn't interior design," she says. "For me as a woman, I give back to Mother Earth. It's taught us everything we need to know. I follow her lead."

Heidi Sanborn

Title: Founder and executive director, National Stewardship Action Council

Education: Master's in public education, University of Southern California; B.A., political science, University of California Davis

Age: 57

Top lesson learned in 2020: "Be flexible! Just like a palm tree in a hurricane, bend so you don't break."

Biggest hope for 2021: "People finally put community before self. We are stronger together to protect people and planet! United we stand, divided we fall."

Most memorable mistake you've made during your career: "Trusting someone who had not yet earned my trust."

One piece of advice you'd give your 21-year-old self: "You can do anything so go for it!"