

Marissa Jablonski

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Marissa Jablonski was an environmental advocate before she even knew what those words meant.

When her parents took her to Lake Michigan for the first time, she told her four-year-old self, “This is the most important part of our life.” And after her kindergarten class in Elm Grove celebrated Earth Day by screen-printing T-shirts with “Reduce Reuse Recycle” and learned ways to be good stewards of the environment, she went home and asked her dad why their family was throwing food waste in the trash. The two did some research at the library, came home and built a compost pile that is still being used to this day. And then there’s the time her dad was planning construction of a business building and Marissa asked him where all the birds would go when they clear-cut the trees, inspiring her dad to build an award-winning, serpentine parking lot that spared many of the mature oaks at the site.



That earnest, wholehearted concern and passion for the earth has not abated one bit.

Marissa, an engineer, global sustainability expert and environmental scientist, earned her master’s degree in civil/environmental engineering and a PhD in water and wastewater engineering at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where she now works leading the Freshwater Collaborative. Her mind constantly churns out thoughts and ideas on how to make the world cleaner and greener.



“My dream is to influence 8 billion people to care about Earth by making it a cool and important thing to do and by growing eco-consciousness. Can you imagine if the data center companies piped ocean water to a gigantic desalination plant in Nevada? They would build their data centers with a water recycling plant. And from this desalination plant, they could pipe water to Colorado and all the Southwestern states that are running out of water. And what if they just gave it to us and didn't expect anything in return because they've made so much money on our backs? These are the kind of big dreams I have. I want to make taking care of Earth as cool as making money.”

The project she’s really excited about these days is a TV series she created called “[Greenwashed & Confused](#).” Greenwashed means using misleading or false claims to make a business or product seem more eco-friendly than it truly is, while confused describes the complicated system of recycling. Marissa plans to film in cities around the world to showcase what is and isn’t working in waste reduction and recycling. The pilot episode is in the post-production stage, and Marissa hopes to pitch the series to major distributors early next year.

Her “Yay, go team!” excitement for the project is irrepressible.

“Imagine if this TV show takes off, and suddenly I get paid to inspire people to make big changes. I would go on a speaking tour and hire a band to open for me. It would be a rock-and-roll show with an environmental twist in the middle and end with a huge Q and A, like, let's solve this together.”

Her enthusiasm for all things eco-friendly makes her light up during a conversation. But sadness surfaces often, too. Five years ago, Marissa lost her partner, Milwaukee guitarist, songwriter and music producer Mike Hoffmann. She's still emerging from a dark cave of grief and finding ways to cope with loss.

“The loneliness is insane. But I feel really lucky that I loved so deeply. Mike taught me so much—the way he saw the world. He was a carer of dreams.”

When she hesitated to take a job in India, worried about sustaining a long-distance relationship, Mike encouraged her to go for it.

“He said, ‘We’ll figure it out,’ so I went to India three months every summer for the next six years. He was always saying to me, ‘Soak it up, Sweetie. You got this.’ He was my favorite person. I miss him like crazy.”



Q&A

Your career has taken you around the world. Give us some highlights.

I was hired by the State Department to work in Thailand, where I helped 65 hotels reduce their single-use plastics by 6 million pieces permanently in a two-month program that I oversaw. It was a team effort, but I created the model and got everybody on board and worked closely with the Phuket Hotels Association. That was success on a level I can't describe. I also designed an internationally recognized project in rural India for dye industries to affordably clean their wastewater.

You brought your plastics-reduction expertise to Rotary, too.

Oh, I love a good action. I'm proud to be part of an Environment and Ecology Committee initiative to make Rotary lunches plastic-free. Switching to cloth napkins and not using plastic dessert plates and forks prevents about 12,000 paper napkins and single-use plastics from ending up in the landfill each year.

What are some sustainability organizations you support?

Plastic-Free Milwaukee is awesome. Riverkeepers is one of my favorites. Sierra Club is doing great work and 360.org is doing amazing stuff. And shop local! I love Boswell Books. And I encourage people to use the libraries.