

Pick Up Artists: Driving Across America, Picking Up Garbage by John R. Platt

When most people see a fast-food bag fluttering on the corner of the highway, they probably shake their heads and keep on driving.

The Pick Up Artists aren't most people. These four young environmentalists are driving across America, conducting roadside cleanups and spreading the word about reducing waste.

After just three months on the road, the Pick Up America project has already collected more than 37,000 pounds of garbage. And they're only 340 miles into their 2-year, cross-country trip.

The project began March 20 at Assateague Island, Md. They aim to arrive in their final destination, San Francisco Bay, Calif., around August 2011.

The team knew what they were getting into when they launched their quest, but the amount of trash they have encountered has already surprised them. "I had no concept there was that much garbage out there," says Kelly Klein, Pick Up America's director of community outreach. "That was a big shocker for me."

Most of the garbage is what you'd expect: beer bottles, soda cans, cigarette packs and fast-food wrappers. "We can tell what the most popular beers and restaurants are in each area," says Klein. There are also plastic bags - lots and lots of plastic bags - as well as more distressing items like rusting appliances, smelly diapers and the weirdest thing they've encountered so far: a dead chicken lovingly taped up into an old shoebox.

A lot of the garbage has been there a long time. "It's amazing how many years some of this has obviously been sitting on the sides of our roads and in ditches," says Klein.

The Mission

Pick Up America isn't just about collecting garbage. "We're trying to promote the transition into a zero-waste society," says Klein. "We're hoping to raise awareness and show people a few things that they can do, and raise issues about the broader consumption stream and habits that make a difference in the long term."

As they move from town to town, the team spreads the word about their mission and their goals, including holding zero-waste workshops and other events. "We promote reusable products as the first step we can take to stop making and producing as much plastic," says Klein. "That plastic ends up sticking around forever. It's doing a lot of damage to our environment."

Helping Hands

"There's been great support from the communities we've gone through," says Klein. "Many people have helped us already." In addition to showing up for roadside cleanup projects, people have offered meals or opened up their homes so the team can shower or sleep. "They also help us connect with others in their community," says Klein. "That's been wonderful to see."

Every day is a new adventure, Klein says. "It's very rare that we know where we're

sleeping that night. We almost always find a place. With a very few exceptions we've found couches and floors to sleep on." So far, they have only had to spend a few nights in their brightly painted RV, nick-named Rosie (at left).

Not as many people have been willing to help pick up trash so far, but every volunteer makes a difference, says Klein.

5-7 Miles A Day

The pick-up process is slow work. "If it's just the four of us, we can cover 5 to 7 miles a day," says Klein. "That's a bit slower than we expected." If volunteers show up, they can move a bit faster.

The team had also hoped to do more community clean-up projects, but the roads are their top priority. "The roads are so dirty that in order for us to keep moving we haven't been able to do as many other projects as we'd thought," says Klein. But, she says they know they are already making a difference, so the effort is worth it.

How You Can Help

Pick Up America will roll into Covington, Va., on July 10 for its next big cleanup project, the first leg of its next wave of stops. "Look along our route on our tour page," says Klein. "If you know somebody or an organization close by, let them know we're coming. We need as many people as possible."

Manpower for pick-up days is essential, but there are many other ways you can help. "Take photos, write a blog, talk about what we're doing. It all helps," says Klein.

You can also buy Pick Up America T-shirts and reusable water bottles, or make donations to the cause (Pick up America is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit) through their website. "Right now, we're trying to raise enough money to afford health insurance for our team," says Klein.

And of course, you can take a few steps to reduce your own waste. "Number one, stop using plastic bags," says Klein. "Get a reusable bag and take it to the grocery store." Reuse your water bottles, and avoid fast food, since it comes with so many wrappers that end up in the trash. "Fast food is cheap, but it's not worth the price," says Klein. Also, be more aware of what you're throwing away, in case it can be reused.

You can also organize your own cleanup event in your area, and the Pick Up Artists can give you some tips to get you started, says Klein.

An Amazing Experience

"One thing that's been really inspiring is that we've put our faith in the country and these communities to help get us across the country and keep us moving. It's been such an amazing experience to see these people stepping up to support us," says Klein. "That's been refreshing and heartening. We're getting more and more hopeful and positive as this goes along."