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Film peeks into family's waste disposal

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Trash talk filled Galaxy Cinemas in Guelph yesterday morning as hundreds of high school students got a glimpse at one family's garbage production.

Students from six local schools were bused to the Woodlawn Road cinema to watch Andrew Nisker's documentary, *Garbage! The Revolution Starts at Home*. The screening was sponsored by Tim Hortons.

Nisker cajoled his friends -- Toronto couple Michele and Glen McDonald, parents of three -- into saving three months' worth of household garbage. The reluctant family agreed to store all their trash in the garage.

The result was both enlightening and a little disgusting.

"My feeling is, if you wait for governments or corporations to make changes, you will be waiting a long time," Nisker told his audience, speaking of the value of personal initiative in reducing pollution and garbage. "The revolution starts at home."

He urged the students to be conscientious about the products they buy and to take steps to avoid items accompanied by a lot of packaging.

"Or you have the right to take the product out of the packaging and leave it in the store for them to manage," he said.

If stores were forced to deal with packaging waste, they might stop using so much, he said.

In the 45-minute film, which has been seen in more than 200 communities around the globe, the McDonalds make rough estimates of the amount of the garbage they will produce in three months, factoring in special occasions like Halloween and Christmas, both heavy wastepaper-producing days. Their estimates are way off.

By the end of the experiment, the garage is running out of storage space, they have run out of patience, and they have produced 83 large bags of garbage and 320 pounds of wet waste.

Interwoven into the story are facts about where our garbage goes after it is picked up from the curb, what cars and household cleaning products are doing to the quality of the water in our rivers and lakes, and what actually happens to all those blue bag and organic items destined for the recycling depot or the composter.

The answers aren't pretty, and demonstrate the continuing, long-term damage household waste has on the environment.

Guelph Mayor Karen Farbridge spoke to the students after the screening.

She didn't sugar-coat the city's garbage record. While it's true, she said, that Guelph is accomplished at recycling, residents produce an above-average amount of household waste.

"People tend to think that when you put your waste in the blue bag and put it on the curb, it's someone else's problem. But it's not -- it's everyone's problem."

Cate Bester, 18, a John F. Ross CVI student, said the idea that her generation is more environmentally enlightened than the older generation is not necessarily so.

For her part, she tries to buy used items when possible and reuses as much paper as she can.

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