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'Mr. Recyclable' stays busy making sure nothing gets wasted

By VICTOR A. PATTON

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ATWATER -- It's not uncommon on a typical day to see Tony Shukle taking his morning stroll through his Atwater neighborhood, picking up cans, bottles or any other item that can be recycled.

As those who know the 60-year-old retired seventh-grade science teacher will tell you, he's not your typical recycler.

A former teacher at Mitchell Senior Elementary School, Shukle has collected at least 100 tons of recycled goods over the past four years, garnering him the nickname "Mr. Recycle" among his peers. "I have a badge that says 'Recycling Czar' on it," he laughed.

Even though he's been retired since 2004, Shukle spearheads recycling efforts in the Atwater Elementary School District, collecting recyclables from schools in the district. Last year, Shukle played an active role in helping the district recycle 38 tons.

And even though he's retired, Shukle isn't planning on throwing in the towel on recycling anytime soon. "I hate to waste things," said Shukle, explaining his philosophy. "I kind of collect junk, and put it to good use somewhere down the road."

When it comes to recycling, Shukle is no newbie.

As a youth in Rancho Cordova, Shukle first became inspired to recycle in 1967 by his physics teacher, Donald Yost.

On weekends, residents would bring their newspapers to a location, where Shukle and volunteers would bundle them for recycling purposes.

After Shukle was hired to teach at Mitchell Senior Elementary School in 1972, he started placing cardboard boxes in every classroom for students to put their paper waste. Back then, old newspapers and paper would be collected at St. Anthony's School in Atwater.

Although Shukle's recycling spirit wasn't exactly in vogue among the masses in those days, it wouldn't be long before others caught on. By 1991, Shukle and others were collecting thousands of pounds of paper for recycling.

Since 1992 Shukle has worked with many recycling agencies to pick up recyclables from the school district. Shukle retrieves the recyclables from eight district schools and brings them to a central location at Mitchell Senior Elementary School. The recyclables are picked up about every five weeks by American Recycling, a Modesto-based company.

Shukle even climbs into the large 40-foot container where the recyclables are collected, flattening every piece of cardboard to ensure that no space is wasted.

Shukle said the recycling program at the district has led to lower costs for trash pickup. He said the district has decreased its number of trash Dumpsters by three in recent years, which means less money spent by the district on disposal costs. "At this point, it pays," Shukle said.

The \$144 start-up cost to help launch the district's current pickup program with American Recycling was paid for by Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG). Jennifer Halpin, recycling MCAG information specialist, said Shukle's role is vital to the district's recycling efforts. "If he didn't do it, someone else might not. He's a great worker in that sense," Halpin said. "He's recycling things that would otherwise go in the trash -- and he's very meticulous."

Shukle also encourages those in his neighborhood to recycle. He hands out flyers to residents, inviting them to bring any recyclables they need to get rid of to his home. The haul includes cardboard, newspapers, magazines, glass bottles, aluminum cans or junk mail.

Shukle and others sent 300 boxes of textbooks to schools in Africa instead of discarding them. "Even though they were outdated books, they were books," Shukle said. "They were thrilled to get them."

Shukle's efforts in the community don't stop with recycling. He also spends every day of the week volunteering at a variety of locations, such as the Merced County Food Bank, Castle Air Museum and Meals on Wheels, and the VA clinic in Atwater.

Despite his diverse volunteer efforts, recycling will always hold a special place in Shukle's heart. "I'm not a fanatic about it, I don't think," Shukle smiled. "I've had more than one person say, 'Why do you do this,' and I say, 'It needs to be done.'"

And indeed, he does get the job done.

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SUN-STAR PHOTO BY MARCI STENBERG

Tony Shukle collected at least 100 tons of recyclable goods over the past four years. The retired science teacher was inspired to recycle by his physics teacher back in 1967.