

Petrice Jones (00:03):

What's up and welcome to another episode of 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast. I'm your host, Petrice Jones. Today my guest is Kelsey Halling. Kelsey is the head of partnerships at First Mile, an organization that disrupts the recycling industry by bringing transparency to the first mile of the recycling supply chain.

Kelsey Halling (00:19):

To look at the plastic problem right now, recycling isn't going to get us out of the mess we've dug ourselves into. However, there are also many parts of the world where you can't yet cut out plastic.

Petrice Jones (00:30):

This first mile is where you'll find some of the people most effected by the plastic crisis.

Kelsey Halling (00:34):

I think that sometimes sustainability can focus almost exclusively on the environmental. If you're not including people as part of this process, then it's going to be difficult to really change things.

Petrice Jones (00:46):

Working with people on the ground in countries like Haiti, Honduras and Taiwan, First Mile creates dignified job opportunities. Local communities transform plastic bottles into recycled materials used by some of the world's most recognizable brands. HP, Reebok, Timberland, and Converse, just to name a few.

Petrice Jones (01:02):

Welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast.

Petrice Jones (01:08):

But first, some good news from around the reef. Local fishermen have teamed up with top chefs from around the country to transform trash fish into treasure. Trash fish, a fish species that are traditionally less known and underutilized in the restaurant industry are getting a makeover thanks to a community supported fishery that could. As part of the growing know your fishermen movement, companies like Dr. Dish help marine life ecosystems recover from devastating effects of overfishing caused by commercial fisheries, and this is how it works.

Petrice Jones (01:36):

Restaurants agree to buy a certain amount of fish fresh from Dr. Dish, but they don't get to choose that type of fish, small scale local fishermen in nature do. Which means sometimes getting fish that we're not used to seeing on a fine dining menu, like sheepshead, shovelnose guitarfish, and anchovies. His approach helps the seafood dinners taste to better align with their values. Trash fish equals treasure. Trash fish, trash fish, trash fish.

Petrice Jones (02:05):

So Kelsey, welcome to the show and thanks for being here.

Kelsey Halling (02:08):

Hi, thanks so much for having me.

Petrice Jones (02:10):

No, of course, of course. So, I would love it if you just tell us a little bit about First Mile and what it is that you do there.

Kelsey Halling (02:18):

We chose the name First Mile, because it refers to the part of the supply chain that we are most involved with. So the first mile of the supply chain, meaning where the actual bottles are being picked up and collected. In most supply chains when you start talking about where that material's coming from, it will either be at a country level or at the recycling facility. There is a whole couple of steps before then, which we refer to as the first mile before the material makes its way to a recycling facility.

Kelsey Halling (02:51):

So by being able to offer insight and data from this part of the supply chain that is generally a black box of information, we think that we can bring tremendous value to brands and also help them tell really engaging stories to their consumers about the impact that they're having by using this material. Then of course, this is also where the most vulnerable populations are working, and so the most intervention is needed.

Petrice Jones (03:17):

There's a lot of recycling supply chain conversations, and like you said, the typical focus is on environmental impacts rather than the human side of things. So, we'd love to just describe your perception of what climate justice means.

Kelsey Halling (03:29):

That's a great question. One of the phrases that we say often is there will be no environmental justice without social justice. Really understanding how those two go so well hand-in-hand, I think, is key. Sometimes sustainability can focus almost exclusively on the environmental, and if you're not including people as part of this process, then it's going to be difficult to really change things.

Kelsey Halling (03:54):

But in terms of climate justice and how that differs from climate change, my understanding and perception of it is that the places that we're about to see hit hardest by climate change are not the ones that have necessarily contributed to it. Whether because they haven't gone through the same industrialized process that we have, or are just responsible for generating less waste than some other larger nations

or areas of the world.

Kelsey Halling (04:21):

You also have to keep in mind that being able to pay attention to climate change is a relative privilege. To be able to hold mental space and capacity to worry about that or strategize around the ways that your choices or the money you're spending, or the politicians that you're voting for affect that, requires the ability to be able to think of those things.

Kelsey Halling (04:45):

When you are more in day-to-day survival because of the income that is critical for you to make or the climate emergencies that you're already dealing with in the place that you live, then it becomes much harder to take on how to help contribute to stopping climate change.

Petrice Jones (05:05):

Walk me through the typical supply chain and how different people play their role along the way to create a really good transparent supply chain.

Kelsey Halling (05:14):

The way it works is individuals, which we refer to as collectors, pick up the plastic waste. That might be from the landfill, it might be that they go around to their neighbors and pick up the plastic waste that they have, that goes into our recycling network. Obviously, the sooner we can intercept it before it gets to a street or a canal or a landfill, the cleaner and higher quality it is.

Kelsey Halling (05:39):

Those individuals bring the bottles that they've collected to collection centers, and these are all independently run small businesses across the country. The waste they bring is weighed, they're paid with cash per pound. That center separates the plastic and then we'll bring that to the recycling facility. At the recycling facility, the bottles are either baled and stored or go through a wash and grind line, which turns the bottles into this confetti, basically, this plastic confetti.

Kelsey Halling (06:11):

Typically then that's when it gets exported and goes to the US, and then it gets extruded further melted into pellets, so that it's a more uniform material. By that point, you have essentially the same basic polymers as virgin polyester. You should be able to start utilizing that, whether it's in injection molding or blow molding or fiber for textiles, which is where we started.

Petrice Jones (06:40):

So, I would love to hear about how Haiti came into the mix and you decided that this was what you want to do and go down this social

enterprise route.

Kelsey Halling (06:48):

Haiti became our starting point, because our CEO went there following the 2010 earthquake, and originally just to do relief work. But on that first trip, one of the first things that he wrote in his journal was if Haiti could turn trash into money, equals good. That idea essentially became the foundation for our business model. So, by the time that I heard about it and was introduced to the idea for the business, it was already rooted in Haiti.

Kelsey Halling (07:17):

I knew very little about Haiti before then and had not necessarily planned on that being a country that I spent a ton of time in or would work in, or have any professional involvement with, but it captured my heart really, really quickly. It's an easy place to fall in love with, and it is incredibly close to the US, which I don't think a lot of people necessarily realize.

Petrice Jones (07:45):

Realize, right.

Kelsey Halling (07:46):

Only about 700 miles from Florida.

Petrice Jones (07:49):

I read that you were the first woman to run across the whole country. Is that true?

Kelsey Halling (07:54):

Yes. Yes, as far as we know.

Petrice Jones (07:57):

So, how did that happen?

Kelsey Halling (07:57):

Yeah, completely accidentally. Oh, well, I mean, not completely accidentally, it took a lot of training. But that was-

Petrice Jones (08:04):

How far is it?

Kelsey Halling (08:06):

A little over 200 miles from the North Coast to the South Coast. It was probably the craziest thing I've ever done, but also one of the most fun and rewarding experiences and adventures.

Petrice Jones (08:19):

What conversations did you have with these people from Honduras and Taiwan and Haiti, and what did you learn?

Kelsey Halling (08:24):

Well, the culture around recycling is so different in each country. Taiwan has taught me way more about recycling, and it's an interesting case study in terms of a country's waste management. Because when their government decided to really invest in recycling, they certainly put in municipal programs run by the various governments, but they also invested in this individual and private enterprise in recycling. So they took both approach, because they wanted to collect as much waste as possible.

Kelsey Halling (08:59):

So in Taiwan, a lot of the centers that we're working with have been in this business for 30 years, they've been doing it twice as long as I have. Honduras is a little bit more mature than Haiti, in terms of just recycling having been around. But I remember talking with our recycling facility partner, it's this great company called Invema, and the owner was telling us how when he first got started, he told people that he would come and pay them if they would collect aluminum cans for him.

Kelsey Halling (09:29):

He came back the following week and they didn't have any cans, and he said, "Why not?" They said, "Well, we thought you were kidding. Who's going to pay us for trash?" He's like, "No, I will pay you." Then in Haiti, that was sort of our experience, especially once you started to get outside of Port-au-Prince where the recycling facilities were. Out in the provinces, it just wasn't a practiced or really heard of.

Kelsey Halling (09:54):

I remember I was explaining that our company was going to buy it from the recycling facility and eventually help turn it into fabric. I'm doing this very broken French, and they're just looking at me like I'm nuts.

Petrice Jones (10:05):

Right.

Kelsey Halling (10:07):

But some members of the community were walking down the road and stopped and watched as one man came over to me and he was like, "Did I just hear properly that you're going to take this plastic and turn it into fabric and people are going to make money for it?" I said, "Yeah, that's what we're trying to do." He kind of lit up, and he's like, "When people learn that, their lives are going to change."

Petrice Jones (10:29):

That's really sweet.

Kelsey Halling (10:30):

So you also get conversations like that where you're like, "Oh, we're onto something here." But I will say is there's so much pride in this work. When we talk about eco warriors or people fighting plastic pollution, these are the folks on the front lines, they are doing the real work every day, and I don't know that we necessarily know about them.

Petrice Jones (10:52):

Right. I remember I read something that said that you believe recycling is magic and the true climate change heroes are entrepreneurs turning waste into resource every day.

Kelsey Halling (11:03):

Yep.

Petrice Jones (11:03):

I think that was it. I couldn't agree more. One key thing that I would want to hear from you is how do I, Petrice Jones living in Los Angeles, how do I do something about this, even as an average Joe?

Kelsey Halling (11:15):

Yeah, it's tough, right? Because there's plenty of things that we can do individually to lessen our footprint and impact on the world, but at the end of the day, the individual impacts that we're having are small in comparison to the industrial processes that are really put into place.

Petrice Jones (11:33):

Right.

Kelsey Halling (11:34):

You have to get a little bit smart about policy and what is out there and what's being proposed and who is voting for what. Not only of course at the national level, but at your own local level or municipal level. If you're not seeing anyone in those places talking about sustainability or climate change, then you should feel free to engage with them as one of their constituents and ask them why not, just try to start driving the conversation.

Kelsey Halling (12:03):

Then at the consumer level, brands take their cues from consumers. When we first started really engaging with brands in 2014, 2015, we would talk to the ones that were either already using recycled material and were interested in the story, but not necessarily ready to change their supply chains, which is fine. Or we talked to other brands that would say things like, "Well, we tried recycled a couple of years ago and it didn't really sell, and our consumers aren't really asking for it."

Kelsey Halling (12:33):

Then as, I think, the movement around ocean plastic has really picked up and consumers have become much more aware of just what a problem plastic pollution is, but now you have every huge brand in the world has this big commitment to utilizing a certain amount of recycled plastic by 2025 or 2030.

Petrice Jones (12:53):

Everybody's picked these big goals out now, just to show that they're doing something, or at least they're saying something.

Kelsey Halling (12:58):

Yeah.

Petrice Jones (12:59):

That's great, because it means we know what the whole entity's accountable for. So, obviously companies like you and HP and all these others are taking steps to solve these problems. So, I want to know about what other companies can do to be more like you guys and how we get companies to start taking more responsibility for something that they get the most profit out of.

Petrice Jones (13:20):

I believe everything should come in equal parts, in that sense. If you get the most out, you should be putting the most in. How do you suggest that we start to replicate models that you've created at First Mile and replicate what Hewlett Packard has done?

Kelsey Halling (13:33):

I think in some ways it ties back to nonprofit versus corporate America. To HP's credit, they have just been a really bold and brave partner in saying, "We know the change that we can have by utilizing this material and driving demand." I think that the way we've had these industries separated, there are the nonprofit charities over here and they do all the good, they're responsible for that. Then there are the corporations over here and their responsibility is solely to the shareholder and making them as much money as possible.

Kelsey Halling (14:08):

A lot of these corporations have CSR projects, foundations, or contribute in the charitable aspect of things, but what if they had the opportunity to tie that impact directly into their course of business? If they can start to find ways to creatively combine their foundations and their supply chains, or if they're looking at the corporate donations that they're giving and asking, how did we choose this cause and this charity, and what does this have to do with whatever product it is that we make?

Kelsey Halling (14:43):

If there isn't a really clear line there, then maybe reconsider how you could shift some of the resources back into your day-to-day course

of business and operations, allowing you to become a more responsible company in that way. That's something brands can do and companies can do.

Kelsey Halling (15:04):

From a consumer standpoint, I think, like in the movement that we were trying to start in recycling with paying attention to the social impact a lot to the food movement. So, with people saying like, "Well, where did my food come from? How long did it travel to get here? What was the farm like? What was the name of the chicken?" If you're doing that joke. But we really feel the same way, where did my stuff come from? That's just as important as what we're going to do with it or what I'm going to get out of these products once I own them. I hope that as more and more consumers ask that question, brands realize that they have to be able to give an answer.

Petrice Jones (15:42):

So, consider the big picture every time you purchase something. Which is difficult, especially for people in survival mode, or just trying to get through the day, that's where the corporate responsibility really comes in to make that decision to go, "I'm going to do better by the people." Because often people can't do better by themselves, because their options are limited.

Kelsey Halling (15:58):

Yeah, and I think brands also, they have to weigh a gazillion different priorities. I've also seen so many just get frozen at the aspect of sustainability, because they'll want to start something and then realize like, "Oh, but we're not doing everything perfectly." I think that there's a real call-out culture in sustainability, which I don't think is necessarily the most effective thing, but it exists.

Kelsey Halling (16:27):

So I certainly understand their hesitation in that, but we don't have a way of producing things that creates no impact on the environment or socially. So if you're going to sit around and wait until things are perfect, then things are going to get really bad really quick.

Petrice Jones (16:43):

Well, that's it, isn't it? Is you're putting people into three different categories. It's the people who are doing great, and then there's the people who aren't great, and then there's the people who are trying to do better. Often they're the ones under the most fire, because I always say that we focus on progress, not perfection. Because if you always want perfection, you'll never start, essentially.

Petrice Jones (17:03):

Like you said with this call-out culture, people are scared to take a step, because they're going, "Oh, I've stopped using single use

plastic water bottles." I go, "Yeah, but you still eat chicken."

Kelsey Halling (17:11):
Right.

Petrice Jones (17:11):
They're like, "Yeah, I do, but I also stopped doing this." This is the thing that makes people shy away from it, because you know you're in a big group of people who don't care. There's a safety in numbers with the people who are doing a lot less.

Petrice Jones (17:26):
But yeah, so where are you guys at now? Obviously, COVID-19 is riddled the world and changed everything for a lot of people. How has it affected you guys?

Kelsey Halling (17:37):
Well, like you just said, it's affected everywhere in the world, so we're no exception. In Pittsburgh, the other half of our business is a direct-to-consumer brand called Day Owl that sells backpacks that utilizes, of course, First Mile material. They have retooled the Pittsburgh space to be making face shields during this time for hospital systems, so creating extra personal protective equipment. It's just been amazing to see.

Kelsey Halling (18:02):
In March we were fulfilling and distributing backpacks, and then in April we were producing face shields. So, it's just super inspiring to work with teams that agile and can respond to this is what's needed right now. Then obviously, we work with a lot of apparel brands and so retail's been hit really hard by this, so I think there's a lot of uncertainty in moving forward. The fashion and apparel industry is going to look very different at the end of this.

Petrice Jones (18:35):
Yeah, let's talk about that, because like you said, everybody's taking a huge hit and these fast fashion companies, not least of all. Which is great, frankly, I make no bones about it. It's great to see, not to see people losing profit, but if people are losing profit, it means that less money is being made, which means less clothes are being made.

Kelsey Halling (19:00):
Right.

Petrice Jones (19:00):
Which means less materials are being used and we're treading more lightly. This is almost a golden opportunity for brands to do better, because in my simple head, significantly easier when you have less demand. So, what do you suggest for them? How do we get them to do

better coming out of the gate rather than reverting back to the old way of business as usual?

Kelsey Halling (19:21):

I think one of the reasons they've been so hard hit is because as consumers we've been kind of trained to we'll know that, A, there's always going to be something new. Especially if you can get something from there that's already on sale, it'll be extremely cheap. So, you don't have any qualms about getting a \$5 going out top that you wear once and then decide you don't really like, or it falls apart after you wash it or whatever happens to it.

Kelsey Halling (19:47):

No one's going out right now, so there's no need for a \$5 going out top. The curtain's been pulled back just on that needless consumption. The rule of thumb that I know is loaded in a lot of the sustainable fashion circles that I always try to follow is if you're not going to wear something at least 30 times, you don't buy it.

Kelsey Halling (20:09):

Also, recycled materials still have a higher price point than virgin materials. Right now with what we're seeing happening in the oil industry, that is going to be continuing for some time. So, it's a very purposeful choice when a brand is going to switch to a higher cost material. I would love to say that it will eventually achieve price parity, but I just don't know if that will be true.

Kelsey Halling (20:33):

Consumers will hopefully start to be a little bit more aware of what they're buying, and not just in terms of do I like this and will I wear it 30 times, but also what are the impacts that's happening? Where did it come from? Textile chains and apparel chains are long. Most brands consider yarn a raw material, even though there's, of course, several production steps that happen before you get to yarn.

Kelsey Halling (20:56):

So there's a lot of unknown, which is the reason that we got started in that industry. We wanted to be able to offer a very transparent supply chain from the actual raw material on the ground, all the way through.

Petrice Jones (21:09):

Well, if it makes you feel any better, with your 30 wear philosophy, I've been wearing the same pair of sweatpants for approximately, it must be coming on 83 days, something like that. So, I'm really creating some balance in the world, yeah.

Kelsey Halling (21:24):

You're doing your part for climate change, yeah.

Petrice Jones (21:24):

Yeah, exactly. You're welcome. Kelsey, it's been an absolute pleasure to have you on and to interview you, and to get an insight into all the incredible work that you're doing. I just want to firsthand just thank you for your work and for your efforts, because I know that doing things that are genuinely in service in the world is often a path less traveled and is often an underappreciated one. So just from me to you, thank you very much for everything that you do.

Kelsey Halling (21:52):

Absolutely. Would love to do it again and thrilled with the work that Lonely Whale's doing and that we get to participate with it.

Petrice Jones (22:00):

Hey listeners, just before you go, here's a quick ocean saving tip for you from our guest.

Kelsey Halling (22:06):

I would say at the consumer level, is asking more and more questions of your brand. Where is this coming from? Are you using recycled material? If you are, where is that coming from? Would you consider either partnering with us or one of the other groups that exist in the world that are working on the front lines with the communities involved in collection? The more demand we can drive for this material, the more value it will have, and it won't land up in our oceans.

Petrice Jones (22:33):

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Petrice Jones (22:45):

52 Hertz is a podcast from Lonely Whale. Our show is produced by Emma Riley and Mindy Ramaker, with writing from Kyrsten Stringer and audio engineering by James Riley. Special thanks to Young Hero, Emy Kane, Kendall Starkman, and Danny Witte. Subscribe to 52 Hertz wherever you get your podcasts.

Petrice Jones (23:02):

I've been your host Petrice Jones, thanks for listening. Until next time, tune into 52 Hertz and tune out plastic.