

Petrice Jones (00:04):

Today, my guests are Gabe Wing from Herman Miller and Jane Abernethy from Humanscale. Herman Miller and Humanscale are both iconic furniture brands that think design and sustainability go hand-in-hand.

Jane Abernethy (00:13):

If you design a product using a certain type of plastic, well, that decision gets repeated hundreds of thousands of times a year in mass production. Depending on the type of product, it could be millions of times a year.

Petrice Jones (00:23):

They're going against the current and putting competition aside to collaborate radically as partners in NextWave Plastics, an initiative convened by Lonely Whale. As members, they've committed to keeping plastics in the economy and out of the ocean by incorporating recycled ocean-bound plastics into their product supply chains. We'll be talking about what they can achieve together and why we need to rethink the way we think about plastic.

Gabe Wing (00:43):

My right knee works, because there's a polymer holding that back together and some plastic anchors in my kneecap. So, this notion that all plastics are bad kind of flies in the face of that.

Petrice Jones (00:54):

I'm your host Petrice Jones and welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast.

Petrice Jones (01:02):

But first, some good news from around the reef. Incredibly exciting innovations in the packaging technology. You could see products packaged in plant-based plastics on supermarket shelves by 2023. Approximately 300 million tons of new plastics made from fossil fuels every year. Most of it isn't recycled and takes hundreds of years to decompose, and plant-based plastics could truly help change that.

Petrice Jones (01:25):

A biochemical company called Avantium in the Netherlands hopes to develop plastic made from plant sugars instead of fossil fuels. So theoretically, these plant-based plastics would actually break down in about a year when composited and within a few years under natural conditions. Innovation towards faster breakdown rates can be one piece of the puzzle towards reducing ocean plastic pollution, whilst also minimalizing reliance on fossil fuels.

Petrice Jones (01:47):

Now there is much to be learned and understood about plant-based plastics, but the idea of a plant-based bottle instead of a plastic one is certainly news we can all drink to. Cheers.

Petrice Jones (02:06):

So Jane and Gabe, welcome to 52 Hertz. Thank you for coming.

Jane Abernethy (02:10):

Thank you.

Gabe Wing (02:12):

Yeah, happy to be here.

Petrice Jones (02:14):

So, I would love to just get from each of you just a quick bit about your respective companies and you guys' roles within those companies.

Gabe Wing (02:23):

So Herman Miller, we're 100+ year old company. I would characterize our organization as a research-based company that uses design to solve problems. More often than not, our solutions come to life as pieces of furniture. We've been committed to sustainability for decades. I think what we're excited about with NextWave and working with partners like Humanscale is having the opportunity to work and collaborate and provide speed and scale to solving this global issue related to ocean-bound plastic.

Gabe Wing (03:02):

My role at Herman Miller and is I'm the director of sustainability for the corporation. My team and I have a role in shaping the overall strategy and help to make sure that we're doing our part to reduce our environmental impact. But more importantly, I think looking for opportunities where we can leverage the unique skills of our corporation and working with others to create positive social impacts.

Petrice Jones (03:24):

Great, thank you so much. Jane, love to hear from you.

Jane Abernethy (03:27):

Humanscale is a global leader in products that enhance health and wellness at the workplace. In practice that ends up being a lot of ergonomic tools like task lighting, ergonomic seating, keyboard trays and monitor arms. Things of a whole technology in a place that fits the human body, so that we don't have to contort our bodies to adjust to our technology.

Jane Abernethy (03:50):

Our founder and CEO has had an interest in sustainability since he was young. In the last, I would say, five, six, seven years, we've started a conversation around what does it really mean for us as a manufacturer of furniture. Where we've sort of landed on, if we stay in the realm of reducing the amount of negative impact we have on the world, we're never going to end up with the world that we want, a

world where we can thrive it and everyone can thrive.

Jane Abernethy (04:16):

So a few years ago we started thinking, actually, we have to reduce basically to 100%. That gets into your net zeros, your net zero carb, and that's your water and all that. Then we have to keep going and we have to start to replenish, rejuvenate, and start to heal the world. That will start to account for actions from the past and the folks who are not on the journey with us. So, I'm excited to be working with NextWave and Herman Miller on some of the things that can start to clean up and start to heal our world, as manufacturers, systematically, looking at how we can make things better off.

Jane Abernethy (04:51):

My role within the company is I'm the chief sustainability officer. At a high level, it means setting our overall strategic goals with our stakeholders, our CEO, and then making sure that it's embedded in everything we do.

Petrice Jones (05:03):

Thank you so much, Jane. So, what does sustainability have to do with designing office equipment in general? Because it doesn't seem like something that an ordinary person would put together. So, what are those things have to really do with each other?

Jane Abernethy (05:19):

In some ways to me, I couldn't really see them separately. I come out this historically as an industrial designer, designing products, and I couldn't help in that role but think through the fact that everything I designed, and now as manufacturers we're in this situation where everything we manufacture, all those decisions get repeated. If you design a product using a certain type of plastic, well, that decision gets repeated hundreds of thousands of times a year in mass production. Depending on the type of product, it could be millions of times a year. That product might be in production for several years, 100 years, depending how often the product lines change.

Jane Abernethy (05:54):

So the decisions going into mass production, to me seem very important, really pertinent to sustainability in creating the world that eventually we all live in. So, I would think anyone who's dealing with manufacturing and mass production sustainability should be on the forefront of what they're thinking about, just because our large influence as manufacturers.

Petrice Jones (06:15):

I listened to something from William McDonough and he had mentioned the key thing about design, and when you make something it's actually about the intention. [inaudible 00:06:26] seems to sign the inception of a product rather than what happens at the end. Do you guys have a

definition, a personal definition of what good design looks like or what good design is?

Jane Abernethy (06:37):

Good design is going to also be informed by having the appropriate fit for the need that is there. If you don't have the appropriate fit, you design a product that people don't need, and that's 100% waste of resources. Designing a product that people actually enjoy using, that they love to interact with, if it gets broken, they are very likely to fix it, to do what they can to keep using it. Some products even retain and grow in value over time.

Jane Abernethy (07:04):

Those are your most sustainable products, because those materials that you use continue to be in use for a long time. The durability is a very important part, repairability, and then of course, thinking through what happens at the end of life, is it something that is easy to deal with, could easily be recycled to become other products?

Jane Abernethy (07:22):

Throughout that, there's also a perspective to make better choices between different materials, and then using materials themselves are not containing toxins and they're not bringing chemicals of concern to our customers. I think a lot of details go in to making sure that there's a holistic product that someone enjoys using and wants to use for a long period of time.

Gabe Wing (07:45):

I think the way that Jane characterized it fits very well with how we think about it at Herman Miller. If I was to tell you what I think my job is in really simple terms. From a sustainability perspective, my team and I relentlessly ask the same question, have we made the best choice possible? Whether we're looking at the materials we use, how we put them together, the chemicals inside those materials, have we designed for disassembly?

Gabe Wing (08:12):

I think we're constantly probing and evaluating our designs through that lens and trying to push our corporation and our suppliers and our partners to a better spot. I think of us nudging people a little bit further than they might otherwise go by asking that question in a relentless manner.

Petrice Jones (08:32):

It feels as though, especially in the last 10 years or so, people have very much considered plastic to be bad. How do you guys see that are they ultimately good materials and bad materials that shouldn't be used?

Gabe Wing (08:44):

I guess on my end, and I don't think we live in a black and white world, putting the wrong plastic in the wrong application is clearly bad. There are certain materials that, in my opinion, should be removed from the marketplace, whether it's flame retardants or certain types of halogenated polymers that bring a lot of baggage with them. But on the flip side, I tore my patella tendon playing basketball a couple of years ago. My right knee works, because there's a polymer holding that back together and some plastic anchors in my kneecap. So, this notion that all plastics are bad kind of flies in the face of that.

Gabe Wing (09:18):

So, I think it's incumbent on us to make sure we're using the right materials appropriately and then working to think about them in a circular manner. I think if we do that, we can get past this notion that plastics are good or bad from a black and white perspective. That's kind of my thinking on it.

Petrice Jones (09:35):

I want to really hone in on what you guys do with NextWave, and I want to talk about ocean-bound plastic as a material. How does ocean-bound plastic fit into you guys' concept of design, sustainable design?

Jane Abernethy (09:50):

I think it's really interesting how you ask the question, because as far as design of a product, the product itself is probably not going to be that much different, because resourcing the material in a different place. The big challenge for us is then to get our supply chain team to work deeply with these other suppliers to limit where they can look. The overall products are probably not going to look significantly different.

Jane Abernethy (10:16):

In fact, the one product we have on the marketplace that does incorporate ocean plastic in it is a product that's been out for a number of years. Then what we did is on the backend, we changed the source of where that material came from, but the actual product itself has not changed. But it looks at how we operate as a business, how we interact with our supply chain in a deeper way.

Petrice Jones (10:35):

So, it's more so that you find ways to incorporate into what you're doing rather than having to take yourselves away from your current mission in order to incorporate more.

Jane Abernethy (10:45):

Yeah, and I think the interesting thing is that it's not necessarily on our designers and engineers in the R&D team, the big push and the big amount of burden is more on our supplier team who go out and vet suppliers, who work very closely with our suppliers, who find sources

of materials. That's where it's a significant amount of work.

Gabe Wing (11:07):

Yeah, I think the issues that Jane brought up are certainly struggles that everybody in NextWave deals with. I think the things that excite me and the team at Herman Miller, in addition to the environmental story that you get out of using these materials though is the social impact that you get to make. So as you stand up these supply chains in different parts of the world, we're creating jobs and income for people who otherwise wouldn't have them. Our business is creating livelihood for people that wouldn't have otherwise had jobs. Those things seem to resonate with our employees, and I think it's a way that you can engage your workforce.

Gabe Wing (11:47):

So I think of these NextWave materials as ocean-bound plastic as a platform, that we should be looking at how do we incorporate across all the things that we design, so that we not only get the environmental benefit, but also the positive social impact.

Petrice Jones (12:01):

How is you guys' work with NextWave making it easier for companies to access ocean-bound plastics?

Jane Abernethy (12:08):

Well, I think one thing that's very useful is having a group of manufacturers come together. First, the signal that there is a customer base, a ready customer base of folks who are thinking of setting up a business in this area, that that's a signal to them that it's worth it. Then there's also, as Gabe had mentioned, the social impact. This is one where we get a lot more sensitive to what's happening in our supply chain with these ocean-bound and collecting the material back, but there can be unintended consequences.

Jane Abernethy (12:36):

This has been one thing that's been very helpful in our discussions with NextWave and talking with other suppliers, is thinking through how do you dig deep enough into your supply chain until we're getting to where the source of the materials coming from? Then when we get there, what is the best way to interact with them?

Jane Abernethy (12:51):

It's not always so straightforward from where we sit in our offices in North America, having no perspective of what other people's lives might be like. So we can make a blanket rule that we don't accept this or that, but sometimes that doesn't make sense in context for the people there. Working with NextWave, we've been able to look at what are the frameworks for evaluating the social impact in these supply chains? How do we go about evaluating them?

Gabe Wing (13:18):

Yeah, definitely. I think there's a huge benefit to sitting around the table with like-minded companies, and some of them maybe are a little bit further on their journey than others. To be able to borrow a lot of the supply chain work that a company like HP's been doing fantastic work in Haiti, recycling bottles and turning them to inkjet cartridges. So, having them be really transparent with where the issues are and the improvements they made, I think shortcuts it for everybody.

Gabe Wing (13:48):

So, I think Jane touched on the fact that we can all pool our volume and so we can get there faster with less effort and make a bigger impact. That's what I really love about NextWave, is a lot of ideas like this, people sit and talk about what they're doing, but NextWave, we're actually making an impact on a daily basis and we're doing versus just talking.

Petrice Jones (14:12):

I think that seems to be the overarching goal across the board is how do we make it easier to do the right thing? So these materials, what have they been like to work with?

Gabe Wing (14:24):

I wouldn't say it's been completely seamless, there is a difference in these recycled materials. Whether they're ocean-bound or not, recycled materials have a little bit wider variance in their properties. But once you characterize that, our engineers can work around it.

Jane Abernethy (14:38):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I've also found that they're not so drastically different from existing materials. So sometimes it's a design challenge, sometimes it's processing the material slightly differently, drying it in a certain way. There's different things we can do to set things up so this system can run. So, those are all within the realm of a normal amount of work you would have to do to set up a material, or potentially more work, but not 100 times more work, it's in the reasonable ask of our engineers and developers and our suppliers to go through. It is asking a little bit more, but it's not asking for the moon or anything.

Jane Abernethy (15:17):

I do find also with these, one of the challenges is the consistent supply, because it's not like we have 2,000 suppliers of ocean plastic that we can choose from.

Petrice Jones (15:27):

Right.

Jane Abernethy (15:28):

When things shut down, we only had say one supplier of a certain material. So that, of course, in fact, we can't just go to a different supplier, because that's the commitment we've made. I think that's part of the reason we want to see this grow and expand, so that there are more suppliers available. Then eventually, we would like to see it to be rather normal to source material that's ocean-bound. In fact, if it's not even an exciting story to talk about, that would be a great world to get to, is that we're just using that material very regularly.

Petrice Jones (15:57):

So normal is boring, I like that. What is one thing that you guys are as a company doing to go against the current?

Jane Abernethy (16:04):

So, one thing I'm really excited about is that we're trying to take on manufacturing while making the world better off. So of course when we manufacture, we use resources to manufacture. We've been working hard to quantify what are all those resources we use, but then also extend past ourselves, past our own company in our normal sphere of influence to start to create more positive impact in the world.

Jane Abernethy (16:30):

We've been partnering with schools, with other folks to try to create energy savings programs, water savings programs, things that will have a measurable, positive impact. Ultimately, where we'd like to get to is to have the amount of good we're doing in the world in a measurable way that we could show that that is larger than the amount of resources that we're using to manufacture. So it's a journey that we're on, we're excited about progress toward that.

Petrice Jones (17:00):

That's fantastic. That's not the Living Product Challenge, is it?

Jane Abernethy (17:03):

Yes, that's one way that we have had an indicator of how we're doing. We have two products that are fully Living Product Challenge Certified, have been audited to demonstrate they give back more than the use of water, energy and carbon. We have another 23, so we'll have 25 products altogether by the end of this year that we aim to also be in that situation.

Gabe Wing (17:24):

One of the most important things our business is focused on is sustainability, and the task of taking that commitment and integrating it across the collection of brands that make up Herman Miller Group. We're made up of nine separate brands today. Not all of them have the same amount of experience in trying to make the world a better place, and so I think the challenge and the opportunity today for my team is to work together with those companies to achieve the vision that I

think we're all striving toward. I'm excited to continue to work on developing a strategy to make that happen.

Petrice Jones (17:58):

That's fantastic. So, I wanted to just get a little bit more into you guys as two separate entities, who are essentially direct competitors, but it seems as though you have put it aside and decided that sustainability and sustainable practices and our future as a planet is far more important. Can you elaborate on if you guys have had any thoughts or things that have come through from that? Is there anything that you guys have noticed that's different working in this space as someone that you are working with and kind of in competition with?

Gabe Wing (18:29):

In the area of sustainability, my belief is that I think we've got a lot to gain by working together where it makes sense. So we can compete on cost and quality and design, but I don't believe that we should be competing on sustainability. By working together in a NextWave type model, we can get there faster and cheaper together.

Jane Abernethy (18:50):

Yeah, I couldn't agree more.

Gabe Wing (18:52):

I think if we can affect the changes that Humanscale and Herman Miller are talking about from a regenerative standpoint, we know the planet can get better, we can sort of heal it. One of the byproducts from the pandemic is that we saw what could happen if we change the way we do business as usual and truly become sustainable. I think it just reinforces the importance of the work that we're collectively doing to make the world a better place, because it can get better, we just have to be willing to invest the time and effort to change the way we create things.

Petrice Jones (19:29):

Well guys, thank you so much for being on 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast, and thank you guys for all your continued work.

Jane Abernethy (19:37):

Thanks for having us.

Gabe Wing (19:39):

Yep, thank you.

Petrice Jones (19:41):

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

Gabe Wing (19:46):

The first Cradle book written by Bill McDonough and Michael Braungart

would be something that I'd say it's worth reading. It's required reading [inaudible 00:19:54] our team at Herman Miller for sure.

Jane Abernethy (19:58):

I would add the book *Design Is The Problem* by Nathan Shedroff. It goes through a number of different approaches to sustainable design, and it has a very good perspective around what design can and can't do.

Petrice Jones (20:11):

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Petrice Jones (20:23):

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.

Petrice Jones (20:36):

Subscribe to 52 Hertz wherever you get your podcasts. I've been your host Petrice Jones, thanks for listening. Until next time, tune in to 52 Hertz and tune out plastic.