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St. Petersburg Start-Ups Make It Easy to Go Green

That chair you bought may be made of 99% repurposed plastic.

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99recycle

Three enthusiasts and an old garage is all it took to make a plastic-processing machine and then launch 99recycle, a brand that is now renowned across St. Petersburg for its handbags, fashion accessories and items of home decor made from processed plastic and textiles. The story of how it happened told by the brand's co-founder Anton Rykachevsky was one of the inspiring presentations at the Ecodays Weekend held at The Third Place creative space this month.

The event brought together pioneers of small eco-conscious businesses in St. Petersburg to "show and tell" for a wide range of audiences, from dedicated environment-conscious activists and curious fashionistas to the general public. The last group tends to believe that an eco-friendly lifestyle is admirable but would be a bit of a stretch to engage in it personally.

The Ecodays' organizers tried to show the fun side of their lifestyle and showed how to make it easy.

"Our goal is to show the public, businesses and the government just how valuable recycled material can be," Rykachevsky said. "We think the best way to do that is to create a cool product made out of 99% of recycled material and to use every opportunity to talk about it. What really makes us happy is when we discover that someone who bought a chair from us and learns that it was made with recycled plastic begins to consider separating their garbage and using recycling bins."

Rykachevsky and his counterparts were really pleased when a company that buys their textile fiber told them they were thinking about raising prices. "It's a sign of a shift in mentality: they've realized that the textile fiber is not something from the waste bin, but a useful resource," he said.

Environmental blogger Anastasia Prikazchikova guided audiences through eco-trends in fashion and shared useful lifehacks on labeling. She explained when you can really trust the eco, bio and organic labels on products, and how to read between the lines of the descriptions.

Mikhail Shcherbakov, who runs the Krupa online store, described running a zero-waste shop, where they sell more than 800 kinds of cereals, pasta, dried fruit, spices, tea, coffee, dairy products as well as beauty and cleaning products. Their couriers use only public transport to reduce their environmental footprint. And Krupa employs reverse packaging: for example, the couriers delivering purchases collect glass containers from the customers that are then used for cleaning products.

The weekend also offered a chance to literally try your hands at turning garbage into something useful. One of the masterclasses demonstrated how to make a poster or a passport holder from used plastic bags, which were turned into polythene sheets using a thermal press.

Ecodays' participants argue that it's easy and fun to start living a more ecological lifestyle; you don't have to be a saint or even pretend to be one.

"I do what I can at any given moment, like I use reusables totes when I shop and separate household garbage. But if I have a craving junk food from a fast-food place with piles of disposable dishes, I'd go for it," Rykachevsky said.

"You can start by placing plastic or glass bottles in the specially marked separate waste containers. That doesn't take much effort and you immediately feel like you're making a useful contribution," he said. "Or you can try to visit one of those shops that doesn't use packaging just to see what it's like. And if you feel you need a powerful shot of inspiration, just come for a tour of our studio to see a pile of processed waste turning into a fabulous design object!"

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