Training for the Future: Zero Waste USA is preparing the Next Generation of Zero Waste Campaigners and Technicians

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The Recycling Cornucopia Project

Zero Waste USA

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In its 26 years of work, Zero Waste USA (ZWUSA) has played an essential role in the US Zero Waste movement. Its associates have prepared more Zero Waste plans than any other organization, developed a tool kit on local recycling initiatives for the [USEPA](https://www.epa.gov/transforming-waste-tool), organized well-attended national and international conferences, and assisted numerous community organizations.

The contribution that will further thrust ZWUSA to the forefront of the Zero Waste Movement is its Training Program, which trains Zero Waste technicians and citizen activists. The courses have also proven valuable to municipal and county solid waste and recycling managers. Among the latter group Susan Strand, City of West Sacramento, CA, assessed her classes:

“The courses identified practical tools for information gathering and generating community support to make change possible at the local level. Having students work in groups and give presentations expanded the knowledge base of each student and broadened the discussion. The exercises provided pretrial, real world, examples for applying the tools identified in class and helped hone essential communication skills.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Since 2015 the program has trained over 1,500 individuals in scores of cities throughout the US. Instructors are drawn from the Zero Waste USA team, including Ruth Abbe, Rick Anthony, Gary Liss, and Portia Sinnott --- all veteran Zero Waste organizers and educators, plus a small but growing group of associates.

While ZWUSA offers these popular classes at conferences such as Waste Expo and Resource Recycling, most classes are held online. The Zero Waste Associates Certification Series is an interactive 7-week intensive course with 4 hours of assignments per week plus group project meetings starting in week 3. Each group must prepare a Zero Waste Planning Project for a specific city, county, campus, or enterprise. A panel of experts, familiar with the research locations, provides constructive critiques followed by a class discussion.

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Zero Waste Project Review Committee

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The fee for the series is $300. Scholarships and group rates are available. Class sizes vary from 12-15 students.

The course attracts citizens and people starting careers in Zero Waste. Let’s meet some of the recent Zero Waste USA training alums:

Ashpreet Kaur is a student at the University of Florida in Gainesville who is earning her PhD from the School of Natural Resources and Environment in Interdisciplinary Ecology, with a concentration in Sociology. She is extremely well read in Zero Waste literature and has written articles for various journals. She is committed to a career in Zero Waste as an educator and consultant. Her team focused on a Zero Waste Planning Project for Orlando, Fl, and her engagement with local officials paved the way for a job offer as the Zero Waste Coordinator in Charleston, SC. Kaur learned about the ZW USA Training Program through a colleague at the University of Florida, Amanda Waddle.

Waddle took the course in 2020 to advance her knowledge and proficiency. Already committed to a career in Zero Waste, she directs programs for Gainesville’s Repurpose Project, an expanding reuse enterprise operating out of a new warehouse paid for by its donation and customer base. She assists schools and businesses in moving toward Zero Waste in the facilities they control. She has a Master of Science degree in Interdisciplinary Ecology from the University of Florida. Waddle created a Zero Waste planning project for Gainesville, FL, during her 2019 Zero Waste USA course. Given her expertise and experience, ZWUSA recruited Waddle to become an associate instructor in 2021, and is now a senior instructor. Further, Zero Waste Associates, a consulting firm affiliated with ZWUSA, hired Waddle as a consultant to assist them with Zero Waste community planning.

Amy Maron is the Zero Waste lead for the Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club of Montgomery County, MD. She is a veteran environmental and recycling activist and a careful student of political and environmental development s in the County. Most recently, Moran has been selected for the County’s Solid Waste Advisory Commission. Moran is currently engaged in an effort to close a county-owned garbage incinerator is a member of a citizen advisory panel that is overseeing consultants developing a Zero Waste Plan for the county. She took the Certification Training in 2020. “The course gave activists the tools and strategies to more effectively advocate for waste diversion programs in their communities.”

Jeremy Drake started eyeing a career in Zero Waste planning in 2010 when he received a Professional Certification in Resource Management through the California Resource Recovery Association. In 2013, he relocated to Missoula, MT, where he initiated the grassroots push that culminated in the City of Missoula adopting a Zero Waste goal and in 2018 was the lead author of the Missoula ZERO by FIFTY Zero Waste Plan. He launched his own company, Strategy Zero Waste Solutionsin 2020 to assist Missoula County Public Schools in planning and implementation of Zero Waste programs. In 2021 Drake took the Zero Waste USA training series to hone his skills in market analysis and metrics. Zero Waste Associates hired him to work on several planning projects including Broomfield, CO, Delaware County, PA, and Washington, DC. With this experience under his belt, Zero Waste Associates named Drake to be the project lead for a waste reduction strategic plan for the City of Helena, MT.

Stephanie Compton is a veteran anti-incineration and Zero Waste activist from Baltimore. She is a policy and outreach coordinator for the Environmental Justice Network, which has had an important presence in the efforts to transform Baltimore's solid waste and recycling systems.

She was motivated to take the Zero Waste USA training program for a very personal reason. “Everyone was telling me I was an expert in Zero Waste, so I wanted to ensure that I was.” She undertook the program in 2022 in a class of 30 students and paired off with a colleague to prepare a Zero Waste analysis of her hometown. She credits connecting with Zero-Waste-driven Baltimoreans as a primary benefit of the experience. She and three other students in the class formed a network for brainstorming business ideas that are needed for a Zero Waste economy.

Is she now a Zero Waste expert? “I am getting there,” she replied. “Everyone should become familiar with Zero Waste. It applies to us every day.”

“We like to think the training protocols we developed are also a mentoring process for young professionals interested in Zero Waste,” said Portia Sinnott, the head of training for Zero Waste USA.

The seeds of a Zero Waste economy are already planted and growing in the current throwaway economy. “We are working to prepare both citizen campaigners and technicians to help fight for and provide the hard numbers to achieve Zero Waste in the US,” pointed out Rick Anthony, Vice President – Advocacy.

1. See, <https://zerowasteusa.org/training/>; Also see, https://zerowasteusa.org/class-descriptions/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)