

Roscommon Women's Network CycleUp Project is 'changing lives'

NORA FAHY, manager of Roscommon Women's Network believes that its CycleUp Project is changing lives.

If all started when a group of volunteers working in the RWN charity shop in Castlerea noticed that the bulk of donations were not being sold and that the options for disposing of unwanted garments were limited.

They investigated the most sustainable ways of dealing with textile waste and the result was CycleUp, a social enterprise that project manager Martina Hourigan points out is providing flexible paid employment while also tackling a pressing environmental challenge.

The pioneering initiative, which has given a purpose to many women who might not otherwise have readily available outlets for their skills, is also winning recognition from a number of sources.

When the RWN recently hosted their "Reuse Event 2021" at the Suck Valley Visitor Centre in Athleague, among those there to express support were environmentalist and broadcaster Eanna Ni Lamhna, Michael Ewing, the Chairperson of Roscommon Environment Network, and former Environment Minister and local TD Denis Naughten.

Dozens of women have already participated in textile up-cycling workshops where they mastered skills in sewing and design, and they now make and sell an array of beautiful gift items under the CycleUp brand.

One of the project backers, the international clothing brand Patagonia, is so impressed that it's invited the CycleUp Project to run a stall in its Dublin store on the weekend of November 13th and 14th.

The project also won a STAR award at the AONTAS Adult Learners Festival for Sustainable Development through Education earlier this year.

The theme of the RWN Reuse Event was that everyone has a role to play no matter how overwhelmed they feel about the threat posed by climate change to the planet.

"The scale of the task can create a feeling of helplessness and we hear that a lot from our participants," Ms Fahy told the gathering. She said on the other hand wom-

en involved in the CycleUp Project had for three years been doing their bit for the environment and that had given them a sense of purpose.

"It might not change the world but it has a value, when groups like this, do the grassroots stuff," she said. Eanna Ni Lamhna said while it might not be immediately obvious what people sewing clothes had to do with ensuring there were butterflies, birds and bees still flying around, in fact "there actually is a huge connection".

She said she grew up in an era when there was no plastic and children going to school carried their lunch in boxes made of metal if they were posh "and those who weren't posh had paper bags - which were grand if you did not have a tomato sandwich".

The broadcaster pointed out that this was a world with less material things but suddenly television and an explosion in advertising meant "we were all convinced we were not living a great life at all if we weren't getting new stuff all the time".

Ms Ni Lamhna said when her grandmother was born in 1900, there was one a half billion people in the world. "In the year 2000 we were up to six billion, four times as many. We are nearly up to eight billion now and by the time my little granddaughter Alice is an 80-year-old woman there will be over 10 billion.

"So there is a huge demand on the world's resources because there are more people. But there is only one world, there is no Planet B as they keep telling us, so what are we going to do about it?" We can't shoot half the people and say you shouldn't be there. We have to work with what we have got."

The environmental campaigner said that as well as the "reduce, reuse, recycle" message there should also be a focus on "refuse" because if we don't buy it we won't need to recycle it.

Lorraine Campbell RWN Board member said a lot of people who genuinely wanted to recycle were experiencing anxiety as they tried to figure out what goes into each bin. She pointed out that until recently many plastics were not allowed in the recycle bin.

"My mother was driven demented



Continuing upcycling outdoors.

trying to figure what can go into the blue bin. It caused her anxiety because she really wants to recycle."

Style adviser Maria Carton told those present she had a background in fashion, pointing out that this sector was "the second largest polluting industry in the world after fossil fuels".

When the price of clothes tumbled, quality was also affected, Ms Carton stressed, so consumers were buying more as a result. "So you hear women with bulging wardrobes saying they have nothing to wear. That type of shopping is just not sustainable", Ms. Carton warned.

"My message to people here is to try and buy less but buy better. Fashion is a massive industry that needs to be tackled."

Michael Ewing told those present that just as people in the 19th century had died of a disease called consumption, consumption was still claiming lives.

"Consumption is killing people all over the planet. And it is killing plants and animals," he said.

The planet was limited in size as were its resources, which were being abused and thrown away, he warned. "If we keep on doing this our human species and a lot of other species will be wiped out by our behaviour".

Praising those involved in the CycleUp Project for creating awareness he urged them to take action "in any way they can".

Some speakers spoke of the obstacles still there for people trying to

make a difference.

Commenting on the extra charges at some recycling centres for objects like aerosol containers and paint cans Ms Fahy said: "that is very difficult for ordinary people. That euro or two euro is going to be a deterrent because two or five euro is a lot at the end of the week for some".

Deputy Denis Naughten said the poor quality of air in this country was a concern given that one in five Irish children suffer from asthma, and one in 13 adults suffer from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. "We have people who are gasping for breath, all because of the fossil fuels we are putting into the atmosphere," he said.

The former Environment Minister said the average Irish household was throwing out €700 worth of food every year. The cost of living was about to go up, one in 10 Irish people suffer from food poverty "and yet we were throwing away 1.1 million tons of food every year in this country", said the Independent TD. Buying in season was carbon efficient and cheaper, he stressed.

There was a lot of positivity at the RWN event where those involved in the CycleUp project showcased their skills with a display of items ranging from handmade face masks and aprons to Christmas wreaths.

Councillor Kathleen Shanagher cited examples of worthwhile community initiatives such as the Roscommon Lamb Festival's pallet up-cycling competition where dis-

carded pallets were adapted into garden furniture, window boxes and shoe shelves.

She also praised Killeevan secondary school students who had started a "straws suck" campaign convincing many businesses in the county to do away with plastic straws.

Councillor Laurence Fallon said that while climate change deniers were getting fewer, the throwaway economy was posing a lot of challenges.

"The old washing machine is thrown out and not repaired" he said. "We buy bottled water. If we were really serious about the environment we would have the water coming to the supermarket in large containers and you could bring your own bottles".

The trailblazers behind the RWN CycleUp Project continue to thrive. "As well as producing high quality upcycled textile giftware, home-ware and fashion items under the CycleUp brand, we are now entering an exciting phase with the training element of CycleUp", said Martina Hourigan. A number of women involved in the project have completed the QQI Level 6 "Training, Delivery and Evaluation" course and are now qualified to deliver upcycling courses and workshops around the region. In other words they are spreading the message.

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