

case 1-428-670
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DEJA SHOE (A): Creating the Environmental Footwear Company

Julie Lewis' interest in recycling began in the early 1960's when recycling wasn't fashionable. Recycling in her home was done out of necessity. She helped her mother crush aluminum cans and return them to the local recycling center. She became concerned with environmental issues as a high school student when national attention was focused on the first Earth Day and water restrictions made news in her native California. With the encouragement of her teacher, Lewis made a video on the "State of the Environment" for a class project. Combining her environmental awareness with her instilled habit of recycling, she endeavored to launch a program whereby students would sift through landfills to extract recyclables. However her effort was discouraged by landfill owners concerned about potential liabilities.

When she became active in environmental issues again years later, Lewis took note of existing recycling programs. Although her Oregon community had one of the most ambitious curbside collection programs in the state, little of the material collected was actually recycled. Most consumer products still used virgin materials in production processes, as potential uses for recyclables were largely misunderstood or unexplored. The faults in the recycling programs spurred her to act:

The problem with the mandatory programs was that they didn't have any markets for the stuff, so a lot of it was put in warehouses and ended up in landfills anyway. Nobody wanted to pay to warehouse it and wait for markets to develop. I thought, 'This is so stupid!' They should have thought of markets before they had this mandate. And so that became part of my mission - to create markets for recycled materials. I thought somebody has got to do this. I thought of shoes because, going back to my childhood again where I wore sandals from Mexico that had tire rubber soles, I thought we ought to be recycling tires again and putting them into shoe soles.

Lewis began calling mills in the southern United States to inquire about the possibilities of making a shoe fabric out of recyclables. After the mills did not respond to her inquiries, she contacted Bill Bowerman, founder of Nike and fellow Oregon resident, in order to discuss the viability of producing a recycled shoe. Bowerman recognized that the footwear industry engaged in wasteful practices and was intrigued by Lewis' idea to produce shoes from recycled materials. Bowerman recruited Nike executives to facilitate Lewis' interactions with manufacturers and with product designers. In the meantime, Lewis secured a \$110,000 grant from a local agency that funded projects that attempted to broaden the market for recycled materials.



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