

# DUMPSTER ART

## BETHEL'S HEALTH MESSAGES

*"Art washes from the soul the dust of everyday life."  
-Picasso*

**D**umpster art is a creative idea put into practice in Bethel. It accomplishes many things. Two stand out: the artwork encourages appropriate use of dumpsters, and it provides a way to show important health messages in a fun, attractive way. We generally think of dumpsters as useful, necessary and functional, but we also often associate them with an apron of junk that hasn't made it into the box. This story will likely change the way you think of dumpsters, and perhaps how you use them. You will also discover how the painting, the competition, and the messages have changed people, a community, and the state.

Dumpsters are a fact of life today in Bethel. In centuries past, when Bethel was known as Mumtrekhlogamute, there was little, if any, non-biodegradable material to be discarded in the region. Almost everything the people had was used or recycled, and the population was much smaller. Bethel is now one of the largest communities in western Alaska. The larger population contributes to the substantial amount of material that has to be disposed of. The modern materials brought into the community need removal or processing when they become waste.



The creative minds of Bethel have put dumpsters to use and to community purposes way beyond the manufacturers' intent.



We have all heard many times that each person can make a difference and that the smallest effort can have huge impacts. Here is an example of everyday folks accomplishing this. We can take a lesson from the artistic people of Bethel who remind us that resources are all around us, and our best resource is often each other.

## THE WORLD IS MY CANVAS

### The Idea

"I coordinate the Clean-up/Green-up project for the community under a mini-grant. We decided one of the issues to address was the dumpsters and the areas around them. Part of the problem is that the dumpster openings are up very high and most families have the kids haul the

trash. They can't reach the openings. The Public Works Department also knew it was an issue and we needed to do something about it.

"I grew up in California and remembered that we did something with garbage cans once. If people could paint their garbage cans, why couldn't we do something similar with dumpsters?"

"We worked with the ReCycle Center that had leftover paint people had turned in. They had the paint, and we had the dumpsters. So we coordinated a system with Public Works to use the dumpsters. Anybody could adopt a dumpster. Public Works would go out and pressure-wash them. Folks got paint from the ReCycle Center and went out and painted those things. Then we got three of our biggest vendors in town, our local stores (Alaska Commercial Company, Swansons and ANICA) to donate prizes. The first year, prizes were \$400 for first place, \$300 for second and \$200 for third. We got people who worked in some form of the art field to be our judges, and off it went.

"The first time we did the contest we just had first, second and third prize. We had agencies, school teachers and kids who were painting, so we decided to have an adult and a youth division. That brought it up to six prizes, and the project took off again.

"This year nobody really bought into the dumpster project, maybe because we have been doing it for 5 years. We didn't have a flurry of them painted, but the ones that have been done are all over town. Maybe it's because people don't want to fight over painting over somebody else's dumpster.

"We had people who never thought about painting a dumpster. Then it became an argument about painting over 'my' dumpster. I mean, they went to the city council about this! I couldn't believe this was happening about dumpsters!

"Public Health Nursing, school groups and even individual youth have won. Kids have adopted dumpsters in their neighborhoods. They've painted fireweed and little kids pouring water on the flowers, and a big happy face with teeth. Some of the college students' work was remarkable. This idea also went to the Western Regional 4-H Leaders Forum in Washington some years ago.

"In rural Alaska, dumpsters serve a huge purpose. The Cooperative Extension Service Bethel District is 55,000 sq. miles. You think of it as pristine Alaska. There's little worse than coming to a rural community for the first time and seeing garbage on the ground. The Cleanup/Greenup Project and the Adopt-A-Dumpster Contest have helped make a difference.

"You just don't get it about living in 'Bush Alaska' until you come here!"

*-Janet Athanas, Bethel Parks & Recreation Department*

*Kids can make an amazing difference if they're not afraid to voice their opinions appropriately and ask for things.*

*-Janet Athanas*

*"My job is funded through the Cooperative Extension Service 4-H program in a shared position with the City of Bethel. So, a group of teens and an adult wanted something different to do in Bethel and formed a 4-H Skateboard Club. One of their initial decisions was that they needed a place to use their skateboards and wanted to develop a park. They went to a City Council meeting. The first time they gave a presentation, they were given property within an existing park to develop a skateboard park."*

*-Janet Athanas*

## Bush Marketing

“The dumpsters are owned by the City of Bethel. Every year there is a competition—there is the Fourth of July parade and the dumpster competition. Everybody gets a dumpster—the actor’s guild, neighborhoods, other programs. It’s an opportunity for everybody to have a billboard.

“Students did the actual painting. They were 6<sup>th</sup> graders when they did the painting in 1998. We put the dumpster right at the corner in front of the building for Public Health Nursing and the YK Health Education Department, the ‘Y’ in town, the center of town where there is an all way stop so it is really difficult to not see a bright red dumpster with a skeleton head, and that really started a flurry of all these programs—we’ve had diabetes, immunizations, clean water, exercise, and AIDS dumpsters. Ours was the first health one although there was one down by the harbor that had been there for many, many years—about remembering your PFD—personal floatation device. It was the one that set the trend.



“This is a much bigger Public Health Story than the dumpster contest itself. That was the beginning of a year-long campaign that brought the clean air ordinance to the state of Alaska. It was a very large public policy victory! There is a much bigger story than merely the painting of the dumpsters. The dumpsters were one means of communication to support the policy. But there was a much bigger motive behind it than to entertain folks at the stop sign. The main idea was to get the community to gather together and to agree that second hand smoke was a very dangerous toxin that we were allowing persons to spread into the buildings of our community. It was also to get the city council to pass an ordinance to ban smoking in all public and enclosed spaces. It passed unanimously in 1998.

“That education component was driven by a class of sixth graders from Kilbuck Elementary School who did all sorts of interesting things, they created editorial cartoons, wrote letters to the editor, painted the dumpster, did radio advertisements, had a “blow bubbles, not smoke” parade through the center of town, testified before the council on the dangers of second hand smoke, went to Chamber of Commerce and City Council meetings. They even presented awards to members of the community who already had smoke-free businesses, for protecting the kids from exposure to second hand smoke. They were very active in all of these areas which really brought attention to the issue. Even people in the community who smoked themselves realized that children cared about the air that they breathed and made sure that everybody understood the risks they were creating. When everybody understood, they agreed on this ordinance. It is in its fifth year now.

“Since then Anchorage has gone smoke free and Juneau has gone smoke free. Both of those campaigns cited Bethel’s successful passage of the ordinance as examples that it could happen. Only one of those twenty-three kids now smokes—five years later in high school.”

-Caroline Renner, Bethel Tobacco Control Alliance

*“It is the most important public policy to change (indoor clean air ordinance) that a community could make to impact public health, and that’s just a fact.”*

-Caroline Renner

*“Many of these kids had never been to any kind of Chamber of Commerce or City Council meeting. They didn’t understand the effect an individual can have on their community.”*

-Caroline Renner

## **Some Dumpster Themes**

*Blow Bubbles, Not Smoke*

*Water, the Drink of Life*

*Stop the Pop*

*Immunize—On Time,  
Every Time*

*Imagine Water without  
Fish*

*Tobacco—America’s #1  
Killer*

*The 5-a-Day Food Pyramid*

*Remember to Wear your  
PFDs  
(Personal Floatation  
Device)*

*Kids are Our Future, Have  
You Hugged Your Kids  
Lately?*

*Pick Up Your Litter*

*D.A.R.E. to Keep Your Kids  
Off Drugs*

*311—The Non-Emergency  
Phone for PD  
(Police Department)*

## **A Volunteer’s Memory**

“It really affected my family—it helped my dad quit smoking, that’s the important thing. We wrote letters to the editor and talked to him. We just started forming little groups and painting dumpsters and trying to get the community into it too. I guess that more time went by and we brought up the subject to end ‘freehand’ smoking in Bethel and we got an ordinance passed that it was illegal to do that.

“The whole class wasn’t involved; just certain ones that wanted to stay after school an extra half hour or something like that and help out.”

*-Justin Lefner, Student*

## **Here Comes the Judge**

“I wasn’t surprised at being asked to be one of the judges, I had known about the project almost from the beginning. My son was involved and my sister-in-law started it. It was certainly not the usual art form. The ages of people involved in one way or another was probably eight to the fifties, with most of the actual painting being done by ten to seventeen year olds. The quality was varied and often quite good.

“It blossomed in so many ways. Sometimes there is even a shortage of dumpsters available for adoption. Children were actively involved in not only the painting, but town government, businesses and organizations. Most dumpsters were done by organizations or businesses but quite a few were done by neighborhoods also.

“Somebody even made T-shirts. They went out and took pictures of the projects and had them transferred to T-shirts which were then sold. They sold out fast, you can’t get them anymore. They’ve become collector items.”

*-Reyne Athanas,  
High School Art Teacher  
& Dumpster Art Judge*



## WHAT NUMBERS CAN TELL US

In a program like the Bethel dumpster contest, it can be hard to be specific about the numbers of people affected, or to evaluate quantitatively the effect of the campaign. But there are numbers that tell a story. For example, “22 out of 23 youth involved never started smoking” is great progress in any program. Such a record may encourage sponsors, and help keep the program going. It certainly helps participants feel good, so they may go on to more ambitious efforts.

Other numbers can be useful for reporting the level of activity in such a project: the number of dumpsters used, number of organizations and individuals involved each year, and dollars raised from local businesses for prizes each year. The level of activity can be interesting to both participants and outside observers. Measuring the “impact” of such a project may be possible with either quantitative measures (like immunization rates or smoking prevalence changes) or qualitative data, such as the opinions of people in the community about how it has affected their lives.

Qualitative data refers to the information about opinions of participants involved or of other key people in the community. Qualitative results reflect the experience of the individuals. It can be included as valid data in research and in grant proposals, if it is collected and reported objectively and carefully. There are several ways to look at this story from a qualitative point of view. One way is to consider the range and the inclusiveness of the project:

- A Parks and Recreation Department project for cleaning up around the dumpsters moves into art and community beautification, with a public/commercial partnership (stores donating cash prizes) and inter-departmental cooperation.
- It then evolves into a wide-ranging health promotion campaign, energizing intergenerational and intercultural groups.
- The positive public and political action results in adoption of a local bylaw that sets legal precedent. It becomes the basis for similar ordinances in three cities in Alaska.

Or, you can look at how individuals make a difference by creating partnerships of citizens with their governments and with local businesses:

- A Program Director with a very small grant (\$1,500) comes up with an unusual idea for painting dumpsters that the City Council, Public Works Department and the Recycling Center endorse and support.
- Families, neighborhoods, programs and organizations get involved and energized, and volunteers from 8 years old to 50 and up apply for the messy job.
- Youth get behind the program, and the messages, so strongly that they become involved with local businesses, the newspaper and city government.
- At least one entrepreneurial person gets a successful small business enterprise out of it.
- Five years later, youth continue to become involved with city government.
- Anchorage and Juneau pass indoor clean air ordinances partially based on Bethel’s success, then Barrow joins the list.
- Beyond the cities, many villages and towns have either formal or informal rules that accomplish the same purposes. In fact, 123 Alaskan communities have some form of formal or informal indoor clean air policy (from information provided by the Alaska Native Health Board, Support Center for Tobacco Programs).

To tell about a project's effects, you can also consider using percentages. You can report the percentage of stores involved, or the percentage of council people voting positively.

The big story here is simple and awesome. Twenty-three sixth graders from an interior elementary school helped change the course of the future for six hundred thousand Alaskans!

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

The joy of brainstorming with a group is that it is energizing to think “outside the box,” which is exactly what must be done to create a new angle on doing things that get your audience's attention. There is a wealth of common-sense information among average people who take advantage of the freedom to create.

**If you have an idea for a project, who might you consider approaching to help get it rolling?**

- Talk to your city, town or village governing body. These are people, your neighbors, who are actively looking for ways to make the community better.
- Who would benefit from what you are trying to do? Perhaps a petition or a committee might be formed to come up with a plan.
- Have you talked with local business people about your idea? As with the people in government, these people too are neighbors and have a stake in the community.
- Even if the people you talk to can't give you much help, they might know someone else who has experience in what you are trying to do. Don't be afraid to ask for phone numbers of anyone they think might help.
- Search on the Internet for other program ideas. It is quite possible that someone else has had a similar idea, saving you a lot of work.
- Feel free to contact your legislators for help. They might know of resources that nobody else has thought of.



## TO FIND OUT MORE

Financing Health Promotion through Sport and Arts Sponsorship  
[www.who.int/archives/ntday/ntday96/pk96\\_8.htm](http://www.who.int/archives/ntday/ntday96/pk96_8.htm)

Canadian Social Marketing Resources  
[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/socialmarketing/2/resources.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/socialmarketing/2/resources.html)

Social Marketing  
[www.mkt4change.com](http://www.mkt4change.com)

Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development:  
The Social Marketing Concept  
[www.foundation.novartis.com/leprosy/social\\_marketing.htm](http://www.foundation.novartis.com/leprosy/social_marketing.htm)

Creative Problem Solving  
[www.vta.spcomm.uiuc.edu/PSG/psgl4-ov.html](http://www.vta.spcomm.uiuc.edu/PSG/psgl4-ov.html)

Project Renaissance  
[www.winwenger.com/mind.htm](http://www.winwenger.com/mind.htm)

Alaska Native Health Board, Support Center for Tobacco Programs  
3700 Woodland Drive, Suite 500  
Anchorage, AK 99517  
(907) 743-6118

Alaska Health Education Library Project  
[www.ahelp.org](http://www.ahelp.org)

Alaska DHSS Division of Public Health, Health Promotion Unit  
[www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chems/health\\_promotion/default.htm](http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chems/health_promotion/default.htm)  
(907) 465-3027

## REFERENCE CHAPTERS IN HEALTHY ALASKANS 2010, VOLUME I

Chapter 6. Educational and Community-Based Programs  
Chapter 11. Environmental Health  
Chapter 16. Maternal, Infant and Child Health  
Chapter 18. Immunization and Infectious Diseases

## NOTES