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DOCUMENTING WASTE

Film tracks family's garbage production

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Catherine Porter

Environment Reporter

The McDonald family knows their garbage intimately.

They lived with every used plastic fork, balled-up candy wrapper and ripped shred of holiday paper for three whole months. Instead of chucking it out of their home – and minds – every week, they stored it in their increasingly pungent and maggot-infested garage.

"It was eye-opening," says Glen McDonald, who reluctantly agreed to the project as part of his friend Andrew Nisker's documentary on household garbage, called *Garbage! The Revolution Starts at Home*.

The idea was to document how much garbage a typical family in Toronto produces – in diapers, takeout containers, magazines and plastic bags. The family was filmed in 2005 during the most consumer-frenzied season of the year: Christmas.

"The McDonalds produced more waste in December than October and November combined," said Nisker, who wrote, shot, directed, produced and edited the 76-minute film himself.

In his film, Nisker also looks at the less tangible garbage we create daily. He shows viewers the sludge at the bottom of the sewage treatment plant that is regularly trucked to a Michigan dump,

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the oily "road runoff" from our cars' dripping exhaust pipes that snakes into our rivers and streams, and the chemicals we dump into our dishwashers and washing machines that feminize male fish and make the air inside our homes more toxic than outside.

"I used to love the smell of the dishwasher when it was drying the dishes. It smelled like home," says Nisker, who has since converted to all-natural cleaners. "When I started connecting the dots, it was shocking to me."

As part of the dot-connecting process, Nisker visited both the Michigan landfill, where 130 trucks carting Toronto's garbage rumble every day, and a mine in West Virginia, where much of the coal stoking the fires – and electricity – inside our Nanticoke generating station comes from.

There, he finds entire forested mountaintops denuded, children whose classroom sits next to the coal-processing plant complaining of headaches, locals coughing up dust and being intimidated from protesting by the mine workers and owners.

"I hear dynamiting 10 to 12 times a day – dynamiting so large and so big, they explode debris on my land as big as cars," said Larry Gibson, a holdout who says he has been shot at, had a cabin burned down, and is now seeing the land beneath his family's home crack in deep chasms because of the neighbouring mine. "Think about that when you flip that switch on your wall."

Nisker's hope is to start a conservation revolution in our homes.

And, as part of a new trend in independent films with an activist bent, he's releasing the documentary online. Already, he's booked 30 screening-parties in people's homes and schools from Israel to South Africa. You can get the film at: www.garbagerevolution.com. A single DVD sells for \$19.99.

"If we have to wait for politicians and corporations to make the change, it will be a long time coming," says Nisker, 38, who is officially releasing the film tonight.

Since the three-month garbage experiment, the McDonalds have turned over a new, greener leaf.

They've exchanged their two SUVs for less polluting vehicles, replaced all five water-guzzling toilets in their north Toronto home with low-flush models, converted to reusable cloth shopping bags, and given up buying bottled water.

When they finally lugged their garbage out to a truck to haul it away, they had accumulated double what they'd predicted: 83 bags. Plus 145 kilograms of compost which they weighed and disposed of each week. They then hosed their garage down.

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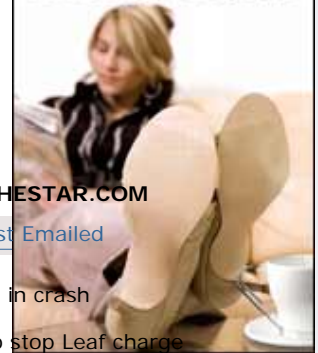
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