Episode 5: The Guilt Eraser

Trace Material Season 2: Stories from the Plastics Age

[Rainbow Road Beats]

Burgess Brown:

By the 1980s, America had become fully plasticized. Plastic was everywhere you could see, and so it had become almost invisible. It wasn't something new to advertise and talk about anymore. To most Americans, plastic was starting to feel like the most obvious option for any product.

Ava Robinson:

And the plastic industry wanted it to stay that way. From Parsons Healthy Materials Lab, this is Trace Material: Stories from the Plastics Age.

[Rainbow Road Crescendo]

Burgess:
In 1987, garbage had a moment in the spotlight. Well not all garbage, but one collection of it in particular was such a big deal in pop culture that there were t-shirts made about it, songs written about it, and it of course was mentioned on the Johnny Carson show.

Ava:
That March a barge full of garbage left Long Island, New York and went on a very long journey. It was refused entry at ports across the globe. No one would accept it. And the world sat riveted.

Burgess:
Finally, it returned home, dejected, to Long Island, with so much fanfare that people were buying things off of it for ten bucks a pop.

[Johnny Carson:
You know they're selling garbage from that garbage scowl that left Long Island and then went around for months and then ended up in Islip, New York? It's called gar-Barge, and it gives you on the back, the story of the barge, where it went. Is there really garbage in here?

Woman: That's what they say, it smells!

Audience laughs.]

Ava:
It was a giant, international joke, and Long Island was the butt of it.

Burgess:
But for one man in particular, that joke bothered him so much, that it changed the course of his life.

Ava:
Today, we'll be talking about how that barge brought a battle to Long Island, and to New York State, that's still being fought today.

Burgess:
To tell that story, we're going to dive into the nitty gritty of what we do with our trash, who's responsible for waste, and why there aren't any simple solutions.

Ava:
To help us, we'll be speaking with New York State Assembly Member Steve Englebright, and SIMS Recycling Education Coordinator Kara Napolitano. But first, here's Steve.

Steve:

My name is Steve Englebright E-N-G-L-E-B-R-I-G-H-T.

Ava:
Steve is currently the only natural scientist in the state assembly. Before he got into politics on the county level, he got a phD in geology.

Burgess:
Armed with all his scientific knowledge, Steve made a big splash in the Suffolk County legislature in 1988. He introduced the country's first plastic bag ban.

Steve:

Well, we were beginning to struggle with the question of where to put all of the garbage on Long Island. The garbage barge Mobro was its name, went on a sojourn to the Southern ocean, tried to have ports of entry to take our garbage in South America. Johnny Carson was mocking us on national television. I was aghast that Long Island should be humiliated like this. I never did find a place that would take all of the garbage on the garbage barge. It came back to Long Island and it was placed in a landfill.

Ava:
Suffolk County, Long Island didn't think it would be at the center of national conversation about American trash. Made up of a mix of suburban areas, farms, and beach towns, it certainly wasn't the kind of place that was usually made fun of on Johnny Carson.

Burgess:
So Steve, as a member of the County Legislature, didn't want anything like that to happen again. And as the only scientist on the County Legislature, he was in a unique position to do something about it.

Ava:
And he decided that the way to extend the life of landfills was to start composting. The waste that could decompose in a few weeks didn't need to be taking up valuable space in the almost-full landfills. But composting would only be easy for residents with one small change.

Steve:

I realized that the tool for composting at a municipal level was the paper grocery sack, because it's compostable and you could put your kitchen waste in it and sit it out and it could be composted. You can extend the useful life of the landfill by decades, but everybody was using plastic bags. And it was very easy to put your kitchen waste into a plastic bag and say, well, what do you do with that? You fill up your landfill. And get laughed at, on national television.

Burgess:
Without paper bags people wouldn't have anything to put their compost in, and Steve's compost plan would fail. So the plastic bag ban, in its very first iteration, was not actually an attack against single use plastic, instead it was just a way to get stores to buy paper bags that consumers could then use to compost.

Steve:

I introduced my legislation primarily focusing on the issue of trying to make sure that we had the tool available for every household to do source separation and put your biologically active waste into a biologically active container.

Ava:
So Steve crafted this plan, and again, it wasn't because he found the plastic bag itself particularly wasteful or problematic. He just knew that paper bags were necessary. And if his composting plan worked, he was sure his county wouldn't end up on Johnny Carson again.

Steve:

Without the paper grocery sack, the possibility of doing municipal composting and source separation for the biodegradable, which is about 30% of the waste stream, meant that you couldn't do anything with that except landfill it, or try to send it to Venezuela. And so that was the context of, of my concern. I was really trying to keep the paper grocery sack from going extinct in the marketplace. And I was trying to educate the public regarding the need to begin to do source separation and move toward composting.

Burgess:
Seems like straightforward, local legislation, right? Steve at least thought so, and it was all going quite well, until some people started showing up at legislature meetings who were far from local.

Steve:

We'd never seen anything quite like this before. You know, high-powered lobbyists and some of them, I think charlatans and and others with peculiar credentials as well as television cameras and money flooding into the coffers of some of my colleagues.

Ava:
Okay let's step back and imagine that for a second. A county legislature on the tip of Long Island in 1987. Handling serious, but local business, with public hearings to listen to the community on the issues that were important to them. We read over a whole bunch of transcripts from these hearings that as Steve said, lasted two years. Generally, business would open, and the first topic might be something about like,

I don’t know, school bus routes. Parents would then speak about why or why not they supported a specific route and how it would affect their families. Although the transcripts don’t have timestamps, each member of the public that stepped up to the mic seemed to have a few sentences to say, which is probably equivalent to about a minute or two. Then they’d sit down, and someone else would come up.

Burgess:
But things worked differently when the plastic bag ban was being discussed—very differently. It was easy to imagine, reading decades old transcripts, how the air in the room would change. As soon as the public was able to address that particular bill, the lobbyists would stand up. I could almost see their slick city suits as I read their words. And they wouldn’t speak for a couple minutes, they would essentially filibuster the meeting. There is page after page about the benefits of plastic bags. If I was a local there to discuss something else, I certainly would have gotten up and left, knowing that it’d probably be hours until we moved on.

Steve:

It turned out to be something that attracted more attention than I thought. You know, I didn't expect to have our legislative chamber filled with lobbyists. We'd never seen anything like that before in the county legislature. One or two a year, we might have a lobbyist, but not dozens standing and waiting to speak at the, at the public portion of our meeting, every single opportunity.

Ava:
So, who exactly was hiring these lobbyists? Where were they coming from? And why did they care so much?

Steve:
I knew that this was an industry that was basically coming out of Big Oil. The likelihood was that there was going to be a lot of pushback to just do whatever they were already doing. Just keep that going. They were making a lot of money and they didn't want to have somebody say wait a minute, you have a durable material, use it for a long-term durability purposes. But don't translate that into every time somebody has a bite of lunch.

Burgess:
As we said in our episodes about PVC, the plastics industry is powerful and wealthy.

Ava:
One thing in particular they were trying to push at these meetings, was the idea of biodegradable plastic. In 1987.

Steve:

Well, I had some understanding of, of the objective here and when the plastic industry would send in somebody in place to try to reframe the issue before my colleagues, I pushed back. I took them on, and I made sure that it was understood that there was no such thing as biodegradable plastic. And of course I pushed back.

Burgess:
He really did push back. In those transcripts, whenever a lobbyist said something outlandish, Steve would cut in to say it wasn't scientifically accurate.

Ava:
And finally, after two years of this battle that was unlike anything Suffolk county had ever seen before, the ban was put to a vote.

Steve:

It was a two year conversation with our public. Much of our public was ready. And when we finally got to the vote out of the 18 members, I believe I, I had 16 votes to ban plastic grocery sacks and plastic utensils. Use wood, use paper, but don't go to the deli and come out with mixed waste.

Burgess:
But as you can probably guess, it didn't end there with that vote. An opportunity to run for State Legislature opened up, and now that Steve had passed the bill that he'd spent years working on, he thought he could move on, and maybe even take his plan to the state level.

Steve:

Unfortunately, the plastics industry, in terms of lobbyists, there is a lot of lobbyists in Albany, so it was very different from the almost completely new phenomenon of lobbyists that we saw in the county legislature. That was not the case in Albany. Albany is well lobbied.

Ava:
So Steve is up in Albany, trying and failing to make dents with very few allies in this incredibly complex political world. Remember, this is the early 90s, and no one is all that into the waste crisis. And then, the issue he thought he settled in his hometown gets dug up again.

Steve:
We went into a court. The plastic industry sued us and stretched it out as the implementation of the ban. In that regard I left this in the hands of my colleagues and the industry said to my colleagues, "Trust us, we understand. We will recycle the plastics. Just don't impose this on us as a mandate. Trust us to do the right thing by making this little modification to the plastics law, which made it voluntary. While I was in Albany, and my colleagues at the County level said, well, we'll give them a chance. We'll have a voluntary recycling of all of these fast food and lunch, plastics of momentary convenience. And of course it was a feign. It was a fraud. And without me there to argue the case. As a group, they were beguiled into giving industry a chance. Of course industry did not live up to its promises at all. Plastic waste continues to be mixed in because nobody's holding the industry as, as my original bill did, hold them responsible.

Burgess:
And just like that, the ban was lifted. Trust and responsibility was given back to industry. And although Long Island didn't suffer another public humiliation like it did with the garbage barge, garbage still continued to pile up. Landfills were filled to the brim. And all the while, these long past thirty years, Steve has been toiling away in Albany trying to pass the plastics ban again, but this time on the state level.

Ava:
But finally, in 2020, thirty-two years after Steve first introduced it, the plastic bag ban went into effect in New York State. Not without a lawsuit from industry postponing it of course, but still it happened.

Burgess:
But Steve isn't done. The waste stream is still overflowing, and there's a lot more he thinks he can do.

Steve:

It's not just Long Island that's running out of landfill space. By the way–it's in crisis at this point, the largest landfill on Long Island is in my township, the town of Brookhaven. It's scheduled to close in between two and five years. They're running out of space and they have no alternative, what are we going to do? Put everything in railroad cars and ship it to Ohio? That's not a good answer. I think we're going to be focused on the plastic packaging and the recycling. Standardization of the different types of plastics.

Ava:
Producer responsibility is key to Steve. He saw first hand that industry can't be trusted to reduce waste on their own. After all, they're trying to make money, and the more products they make and sell, the more money they make. So the government and we the people, should be wary when they say they're going to go against their own interests.

Burgess:
And government isn't always interested in supporting people over profit. Occasionally, though, as Steve says, things just work out.

Steve:
So every once in a while the planets and outer asteroids align. And you toil and wait. And we're there now. I hope. I believe.

[Music]

Ava:
While Steve was toiling away in Albany for the past thirty years trying to get environmental issues on the agenda, the plastic industry was also hard at work. Trying to make sure no one ever got an idea like this again.

Burgess:
We've mentioned it in an earlier episode, but it bears repeating. Susan Freinkel's book "Plastic: A Toxic Love Story" has been hugely helpful to our research. In it, she has a whole chapter on the plastic bag, and various attempted bans. And as part of her research, she was able to speak with one of the very lobbyists that battled with Steve in the halls of the Suffolk County Legislature.

Ava:
When I first read the transcripts his name kept coming up, and it felt vaguely familiar. Roger Bernstein. But it wasn't until I reread Susan's book that it clicked. Roger Bernstein was with the Society of the Plastics Industry in 1988, and it was in that capacity that he went to Suffolk County as a lobbyist to try and convince the county legislature that all their concern about solid waste was for naught. After all, plastic was recyclable.

[Music]

Burgess:
And since it was recyclable, it was absolutely nothing to worry about. Here's a quote from Roger Bernstein in one of those meetings back in 1988, responding to Steve's reasoning for proposing the bill.

Ava:
Okay so, I'll be reading as Roger: "Plastics, by the way, are recyclable. We think that we must recycle more as an industry to allow localities to come to grips with their solid waste crisis. We're spending millions in research and in technology for recycling. We for example are aggressively seeing the advance of plastic recycling of PET beverage containers. Milk jugs are being turned into, believe it or not, boat docks, piers, plastic lumber. We're spending millions on mixed plastic recycling so that you don't have to segregate the material but can actually mix it up and make a useful product out of it".

Burgess:
That was the crux of the argument. It's not wasteful if you can recycle it. It's not single-use if you can recycle it. It's going to the landfill if you can recycle it. And most importantly, you don't need to ban it if you can recycle it. But were they recycling it?

Ava:
That's the million dollar question.

Burgess:
And at the time, the answer was no, not really. And the industry knew that they wouldn't be recycling it anytime soon. As early as the 1970s, officials warned that effective recycling of plastic just wasn't feasible. One of them said in a 1974 speech that "there is serious doubt that [recycling plastic] can ever be made viable on an economic basis." And yet, the plastics industry forged ahead with it's recycling messaging. Plastic enemy number one was the guilt people felt about the wastefulness of single use products. So even if they weren't actually recycling or protecting the environment, they needed consumers to think that they were. Roger Bernstein called recycling the great "guilt-eraser."

Ava:
Okay wait. Let's pause for a moment. Guilt eraser?

Burgess:
Yeah, Guilt Eraser. And then he continues to say, “as soon as they recycle your product, they feel better about it.”

Ava:
And that was what he was trying to convince the county legislature of. That there was a way to **feel** better, not that there was a way to **do** better.

Burgess:
Throughout the 90s, as environmental pushback mounted, the plastics industry fought back. And recycling was their most important message, so they spread it far and wide.

Ava:
Now Burgess and I both grew up in the 90s, and we can tell you, recycling was all the rage back then. It was going to save the world, after all! Just take it from Recycling Rex:

[Music and Recycling Rex singing: “Recycle, reduce, reuse. Close the loop, we can close the loop…”]

Ava:
Okay so that song is sung by a dancing blue t-rex in a backward baseball hat. He was super cool back in the day.

Burgess:
The industry spent over $250 million on public campaigns about the usefulness of plastic. They wanted people to feel safe and comfortable with their products.

Ava:
But they did also invest in recycling efforts. Roger Bernstein wasn’t lying when he said the industry was spending millions of dollars on these programs. They spent approximately $40 million developing plastics recycling technology.

Burgess:
But there’s this former president of the Society of the Plastics Industry named Larry Thomas who says this investment was hollow. That industry saw recycled plastics as competition for their cash cow: virgin plastic. Here’s a quote from Thomas, he says: "Nobody that is producing a virgin product wants something to come along that is going to replace it. Produce more virgin material — that's their business."

Ava:
So basically plastics recycling was being developed as a guilt-eraser before the concept of recycling was really fleshed out. What that meant in 1988 was that very few things were getting recycled, and industry didn’t keep its promise to Suffolk County. But it has gotten better.

Burgess:
But it's still not something that people really understand. Are milk jugs really being turned into docks? Can it all just be melted and remolded? Does that happen down at the dump? The answer to all those questions is "No." But to help us understand a little bit better, we're going to talk to someone whose job it is to explain what happens when we throw things away.

Kara Napolanto:

I am Kara Napolanto. I am the education and outreach coordinator for Sims Municipal Recycling.

Ava:
So let's dig into why exactly recycling plastic is harder than Roger made it sound.

Kara:
So Sims Municipal Recycling is our company name, but the type of facility we are is a material recovery facility, also known as a 'MRF,' [pronounced "murph"] um, which is an acronym I personally love to say. MRF MRF MRF. But a MRF is actually a very common type of facility. It is a sorting facility for recyclables. You know, think about how we recycle in this country. We mix different types of materials into one bin. So the job of the MRF is then to sort those materials out into their respective categories, so they can be sold to the appropriate reprocessor and used to make new products.

Ava:
We know that right? In order to try to get more people to recycle, we're not required to sort our #1 plastics from our #3 plastics from our glass. Can you even imagine doing that? That would require much more work and extra space that I for one don't have in my small house in Brooklyn.

Kara:

So Sims Municipal Recycling is located right on the waterfront in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, on an 11 acre pier. It's a very big facility. We're surrounded by water on three sides. We actually have terrific views of Staten Island and Jersey and downtown Manhattan, downtown Brooklyn. When recyclables arrive at our facility, they're going to come on either department of sanitation trucks, which are the white trucks that you've probably seen driving around the city. You know, they collect trash and recyclables. The trucks of recyclables will come to us. Uh, however, much of the recycling that we receive actually comes on barges.

Burgess:
Ah! Barges! But don't worry, these aren't going on a long trip across the world and back. They're just coming from other areas of the city like Manhattan and the Bronx. Here in New York, it's often faster to the waterways rather than the roadways.

Kara:
The trucks and the barges are being unloaded in this giant room called our tipping floor. And this is one of the things that visitors, you know, when, when we do reopen one day, this is one of the things that visitors can view from a viewing platform, you know, about 50 feet above the ground is the tipping floor.

And it is this mountain of mixed materials. Literally just a mountain of mostly recyclables. Some of it's going to be trash, but mostly recyclable materials being unloaded from trucks, being scooped out of barges with giant cranes and tossed onto the piles. A very loud room. You have to scream if you want anyone to hear you.

Ava:
Okay, so Kara, educator extraordinaire that she is, did an amazing job taking us through how the sorter works, and if you want to hear those details head over to our website, it's there as bonus content. And trust me, it was one of the best zoom tours I've ever been on.

Burgess:
But to recap for those of you who aren't pressing pause and rushing over to our website, a giant machine sorts our recyclable waste and then it's baled up and sold to other companies that will reprocess it into other objects. And that sounds great, right? Sounds like a system that works. So what's the problem?

Ava:
Well, for one, here in New York, and all across the United States, we still throw away a lot of items that could end up being recycled.

Kara:

In New York City, about 14% of our waste stream is plastic. So about 14% of, of the stuff we throw away is plastic. And about half of that is recyclable is, is rigid plastic. So roughly 7% of what we throw away is, it's recyclable plastic. Now the capture rate, meaning the amount of a material that people are actually putting in the recycling bin, I should say the amount of a recyclable material that people are actually putting into the recycling bin.

Kara:

It's about half when it comes to plastics. It's about half when, when it comes to, to our recyclables really in general, in New York City. We New Yorkers are recycling 50% of what we could be recycling. The other 50% is getting put in the trash. So what is that? That's something like three and a half percent of, of our waste is plastic. That, that is actually ending up in the recycling bin.

Burgess:
Okay, so even though we don't have to sort it ourselves, people are still throwing away a lot of trash and some of that may be recyclable.

Ava:
And then, the flip side of that is, we're recycling things we shouldn't be. Those plastic bags—which are not in any way recyclable plastic— that have haunted Steve for years, cause problems for SIMS as well. Hopefully, the new ban will lessen those issues.

Kara:

So the plastic bag ban, you know, ideally that that could be a big help for us. We receive so many plastic bags that we should never see. We expect the plastic recycling bags. We're prepared to deal with that,

but it was estimated that New Yorkers put about 30 tons of plastic bags in their recycling bin every day. That's just too much. Back in 2013 or something that that was the estimation that, that we got. Hopefully the bag ban will lessen that. I don't know that we've really seen those results yet. It's still pretty early in the bag ban. I think stores are figuring out it out. Consumers are figuring it out.

Burgess:
You might still be thinking well there are some issues we need to clear up, but that recycling is a usable program. That disposable plastics, or at least some of them, can be made into other things. And that's true sometimes, but it's not always the be-all end-all answer it's often advertised as.

Ava:
As Kara pointed out on our call with her, those 3 R's we're all familiar with are in order of how we should prioritize them. Despite Recycling Rex trying to convince us that Recycle is actually first on that list, we all know it goes, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.

Kara:

I try to end each of my tours with this fact, you know, because my job is to teach people about recycling. But I have to bring attention to the fact that recycling is only halfway up that waste hierarchy of, you know, preferred methods for managing our waste. Recycling is not number one. Recycling will not save us. Recycling alone will not save us. So at the very top of that waste hierarchy, the most preferred thing to do to manage your waste is to not create any waste in the first place, just reduce the amount of waste you produce. And there won't be a problem at all. You know, there won't be a waste problem. There won't be waste to manage. And one way to reduce is to reuse that's number two on the, on the hierarchy, you know, and yeah, get a reusable shopping bag, get a reusable coffee mug and then water bottle, cool.

Kara:

Get those reusable items and then really commit to reusing them. Don't get 10 reusable water bottles and start chucking them. No, you have to get the bottle and then actually commit to reusing it. But in the bigger picture of reuse, it's also buying things that will last. Buying things you can repair, refurbish, replace parts, don't buy the thing that's going to break and become waste next week or next year.

Burgess:
Kara said it: Recycling will not save us. Better sorting will not save us.

Ava:
But this system was never really built to save us. It was conceived of and promoted as a "guilt-eraser," so that the plastics industry could keep making more plastic.

Burgess:

Now we should be clear: recycle your plastics. It's certainly better than sending them to the landfill. But when you can, move up that hierarchy of R's. Reuse, and if possible, reduce.

Ava:
Okay, next time we're going to dip our toes into the next generation's thoughts of the future. What does Gen Z think will save us? Or do they think we're beyond saving?

Burgess:
Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time on Trace Material.

[Credits]

Leila Behjat:
Hi, this is Leila Behjat from the HML Team, thanks for listening! Trace Material is a project of Parsons Healthy Materials Lab at the New School. It is produced by Ava Robinson and Burgess Brown. Our project director is Alison Mears and our research assistant is Olivia Hamilton.

If you've been enjoying this season, please take a moment to rate and review on Apple Podcasts, it really makes a difference.

Thank you to Steve Englebright and Kara Napalitano for lending their voices, experiences and expertise to this episode. If you want to see some recycling action up close, the SIMS Recycling center in Sunset Park will be offering Covid safe tours this fall. Head to simsmunicipal.com for more information.

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