

NARRATOR: The question is, what happens to trash once it leaves your home?

MAN: Sits in the dump for about 20 years?

MAN 2: I'm guessing that the garbage that isn't sent for recycling is compacted, put under a landfill, covered up, and left there, maybe scavenged by birds?

WOMAN: I guess they just dump it, and plow it over, and that's it, I don't know.

WOMAN 2: It goes over to our nearby landfill, which is over in Milpitas.

NARRATOR: Well, it's true that your trash will eventually end up in a dump. But if you live in Mountain View, Palo Alto, or Sunnyvale, it makes a stop somewhere else first.

(SFX FADE IN)

The Sunnyvale Materials Recovery and Transfer station, called the SMaRT Station for short, is a 25 billion dollar, 10 acre facility built for the purpose of sorting through our garbage and sorting out the reusable materials that we throw away. It opened in 1993, as an effort between the three cities to reduce the amount of recyclable resources forever sent to a landfill. The SMaRT station has a recycling drop off center, a California Cash Refund center, Mulch and Compost Pick-up Site, and a hazardous materials recycling center (for materials like battery's, anti-freeze, and motor oil), and that's just on the outside! Inside the facility is where most of the action happens.

Trucks full of residential garbage and commercial and industrial garbage pull into the hangar and dump the trash onto the "tipping floor", which is where the garbage is first sorted manually by the employees. Those working the "tipping floor" pull the large, bulky items that won't fit on the conveyor belts off to the side to be taken care of. Tyler Scull, a senior at Los Altos High School, worked the tipping floor briefly over summer. Tyler was willing to describe his job to me, and I was all ears.

(SFX FADE OUT)

TYLER: Ok, so, a typical day would be like I'd wake up at, well I'd get there at I think 8. And we'd just jump in. I worked on what we called the dump floor which is where a big tractor pulls a big layer of construction debris out across the floor about a foot and a half two feet deep. And we'd go through and pick out all the scrap metal all the wood and all

the cardboard, and then they'd scrape it off to the side with the rest of the plastic and all that other crap that people throw out, and then we'd wait until the tractor spreads another layer of trash for us to sort through, and repeat as necessary until lunch. We'll actually there was a break at like 10:30ish, too. And then there was also lunch, and then I worked till 4:35. But some people got off earlier, cuz they started work earlier, they started at I think like 6, instead of 8, so they got at 3:45.

That was kind of a surprise, I didn't know that anyone had to pick through the garbage. That just kind of blew my mind. I always thought of the cartoons where it's just a big dump and the bulldozer kinda pushes it into an already huge pile, and that's the end of it and that just stays there, but its not like that at all...

(SFX FADE IN)

NARRATOR: From the "tipping floor" the smaller garbage is pushed by bulldozers onto a series of conveyor belts that run throughout the structure. The belts run through rooms down lines of workers, who pull out reclaimable materials as the trash speeds through. Further along the lines there are magnets used to pull out small metallic materials, and even further reverse magnets are used to launch aluminum cans off the belts into reclaimable materials. Elsewhere, there are gigantic "shakers", which are like the conveyor belts, but they violently shake back and forth to separate out the smallest bits of trash and split open sealed bags. Although it seems like most of the work is done mechanically, the job is still extremely physically demanding. It is definitely not an easy job.

(SFX FADE OUT)

TYLER:...when you first got there the smell was really like...Pheeeewww...not happening. But After the first twenty minutes you really just started to not notice it. And the first day was kinda like "Oh my gosh my back hurts, and my feet hurt" and I stepped on a nail in the first like twenty minutes of my job, but it didn't puncture my foot, and then they gave me the metal insoles, the metal insoles I had to put in my shoes and wear-that was comfortable...-I dunno, all my co-workers were really surprised that I came back after my first day. Cuz apparently a lot of people do the first day but then never, ever come back, they're like "Pfft, forget that!" so they kinda loosened up. The other thing I learned was that I just couldn't look at the clock every time I was like "I wonder

what time it is”, I’d get it so that I actually looked at the clock like every 5 or 6 times that I thought that, otherwise, time would just crawl by.

NARRATOR: The most shocking realization I made from visiting the SMaRT station was the amount of items thrown away that weren’t actually garbage. The corporate waste, it turned out, wasn’t really waste at all..

TYLER: It was just really surprising to see trucks come from Target or wal-mart and just dump otherwise good stuff and that just kinda blew my mind. My coworkers would dig out those sixpacks of Gatorade with like one that was busted, and they’d be like “Ok, cool”, or like new car seats, or like any number of so much random shit that just was returned and the box was a little bit battered, but other than that it was fine. It was just really, really weird to see that.

NARRATOR: So this begs the question. Why are these items being sent away to a dump, when people are still willing to use them? It doesn’t seem to make sense that these products are being sent away, never benefiting anyone, even when its obvious that people will accept them. That is just a blatant waste of materials and resources. How can this be allowed? Why is this waste permitted?

It really comes down to people’s attitudes towards trash. Depending on the majority’s opinion, this waste would be allowed or restricted. I found it hard to believe that people didn’t care about the extent of this waste, so I decided to see where people’s attitudes lay.

In doing so, I made an interesting discovery. I was correct in assuming that people cared about their waste. In fact, people seemed more concerned about their waste than I originally suspected. Their concern even stretched beyond garbage and included the broader category that is waste.

DEBBIE: It makes me sad that there are so many people that just don’t even really think about what they throw away, why they’re throwing something away, and its not even that they’re being intentionally negligent, they just don’t think about it.

Quite often when I’ve replaced something that hasn’t outlived its lifespan, it finds a new home somewhere in my home, it finds a new use, I don’t believe that I would be comfortable getting a new car every other year, although I like new cars, I like them a lot, but I don’t believe that I would be comfortable just replacing a car that was fully function

and not mechanically a problem for me or costing me extra money, just because I was tired of it, or something new and fancier or shinier came out on the market.

ELLEN: Computer equipment and such, is really in my opinion it's almost wasteful to continuously upgrade that because there's no way to really get rid of it, I think ecologically and the environment, so we kinda hang on to our electronic equipment as long as possible.

I will also take all the Styrofoam and whatnot that we get from products that are shipped to our house and I will make sure that those go into the right bins at the recycle center instead of just throwing them in the garbage.

NARRATOR: Granted, I only was able to interview two people for a prolonged period of time, so my conclusions cannot be taken as more than assumption. However, everyone on the street I interviewed was an avid recycler.

WOMAN 1: Yes I do recycle

MAN 2: Yes, I have a recycling garbage can, and I put as much as I can into it.

WOMAN 2: We recycle paper products, plastic bottles, and bags at the grocery store.

NARRATOR: So if people care about recycling and keeping their waste to a minimum, then why is there useful items being sent to the SMaRT Station?

It must be that people aren't aware of the waste corporations like Target and Wal-Mart produce. If enough people knew about this, then maybe action would be taken and the waste would be restricted, or even stopped. But even if this never happens, we can be thankful that facilities like the SMaRT station are around and help keep our waste minimized.