

Walnut Creek man's desire to be green evolves into international business

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Mike Biddle, Founder and President of MBA Polymers, Inc. is photographed at the company's facility in Richmond, Calif. Monday, Nov. 15, 2010. Biddle, a Walnut Creek resident, recently received the Economist Innovation Award for Energy and the Environment for his work in recycling plastics. (Kristopher Skinner/Staff)

Mike Biddle talks a lot of trash.

But he's not just mouthing off: The 54-year-old scientist is trying to save the planet one piece of plastic at a time.

In his Pittsburg garage in 1992, Biddle developed a process to separate and recycle plastics from complex mixtures.

"My neighbors must have thought I was a mad scientist, with all my shredded computers," he said.

Nearly two decades later, his business -- MBA Polymers of Richmond -- has gone global, with recycling plants in China, Austria and the United Kingdom.

Biddle was in London to accept his latest accolade, "The Economist's Innovation Award Winner 2010 -- Energy and the Environment."

"This meant a great deal to me for several reasons, besides being in such prestigious company," said Biddle, who in October accepted the award, which Apple co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs has won in the Consumer Electronics category. "It means a lot to me that such a well-respected organization recognizes recycling as important to the world economy and important in innovation."

For Biddle, now a Walnut Creek resident, an interest in all things green started long before "green" was the environmentally friendly adjective of the moment.

"I always had to turn off the lights behind my parents; it drove them nuts," he said. "I can't stand waste. And I do that (turning off lights) with my family today, too."



Biddle said the world consumes nearly 500 billion pounds of plastics each year -- 12 billion pounds of that in the United States alone.

The Economist's judges said Biddle won this year's award because MBA's recycled plastic pellets, used as raw material by plastics manufacturers, use 10 to 20 percent less energy than is used to make "virgin" plastic. MBA's sorting technology was also touted for helping recycle more material, which means less goes to landfills.

Materials the company handles include junk computers, fax machines, printers, cell phones, refrigerators, TVs and vacuum cleaners -- "anything with a cord or battery, even toys," Biddle said.

The recycling process is difficult, Biddle said, comparing it to separating shards of such metals as brass, aluminum and copper from one another. Plastics are so close in their chemical makeup it's tough to separate them easily, he said.

The company then sells that recycled plastic to large corporations that want to go green, to help the environment and appeal to consumers. Though cheaper to produce than "virgin" plastic, the recycled product is of high enough quality to often replace "virgin" plastic directly.

"Basically, these global companies can get green and be competitive both economically and environmentally knowing we are a more sustainable business. Our feed stock is not dependent on oil, we're all mechanical, not chemical, and the future is growing much more sustainable," Biddle said.

Sustainable Contra Costa is an organization founded in 2007 to provide education and inspiration for communities, businesses and government to create and maintain sustainable communities. Co-founder and Executive Director Tina King Neuhausel said Biddle is a role model.

"Mike's work is a wonderful example of how people can take advantage of this ripe opportunity to turn a traditional business model into a 'sustainable' business model, making the future brighter for all of us," Neuhausel said. "It's wonderful to see these things happening in Contra Costa County."

Biddle wishes more of it happened locally, and not overseas. He said that for bigger plants to be workable, a better waste stream must be present. That won't happen until more goods, notably electric appliances, are gathered much more effectively for recycling, he said.

"It drives me nuts not having more plants in the U.S.," he said. "I think we're going to get there, but it's a slow process."

Biddle said he wants to "walk the talk" when it comes to sustainability and the environment. He rides his bike with his daughter Jessie, 9, and son Nicky, 5, to school most mornings. He rides onto BART and then to Richmond, too.

"I think it's just the right thing to do," said Biddle, quoting something he heard in the past that resonated with him. "Instead of thinking about inheriting the earth from past generations, we should look at it as borrowing it from our children. So, I hope to leave it a little bit better a place than I received it, which is hard to do in the modern world."

Mike BIDDLE

Profession: President and Founder, MBA Polymers, Richmond

Age: 54

Residence: Walnut Creek

Family: Wife Lissa, daughter Jessie and son Nicky

Education: Bachelor's degree in chemical engineering, University of Louisville; Ph.D. in polymer science and engineering, Case Western Reserve University