

Chico, California

Green at Heart

by Connie Naylor

Chico, California, a college town 177 miles northeast of San Francisco, exerts a strange hold on people. Wide skies and open farmlands, foothills, creeks and 11-mile Bidwell city park inspires an allegiance that makes this small Sacramento Valley city a bastion of grass-roots ecology. Businesses pursue environmentally sound efficiencies without prodding. Individuals seek to reduce waste voluntarily. Companies are created to help preserve the earth. The local university, Chico State, strives to promote sustainability at every level and offers a degree in environmental economics.



Walf Mullens painting Foothills Sunset depicts upper Bidwell Park.

A love of Chico's landscape is a common bond. Consider the case of entrepreneur Andy Keller. He came to town to attend Chico State where he was able to combine studies with plenty of recreation. "The outdoors is a big focus in Chico. Camping, hiking, that's the big lure," he said. After a stint in L.A., he managed to snag a job working for a San Mateo software company that allowed him to telecommute from home. He moved back to Chico. Soon thereafter, a British company bought his employer. He had the option of moving to San Francisco or being unemployed.

"I didn't want to leave Chico. So I took the risk and said goodbye to the job. I was trying to decide what to do next when one afternoon I finished some yard work and took a load of clippings to the local landfill. It was late in the day and what I saw was just visually disgusting. Plastic bags everywhere. I made a pledge, on the spot, to stop using disposable bags. Then I started thinking, 'I wonder if I could come up with a reusable bag that I wouldn't forget to take with me, something that would help me kick my habit and give me a job.'"

Keller bought a thrift store sewing machine and went to work. Less than a year later, on Earth Day 2005, ChicoBag was born. Today the

company distributes reusable shopping bags to more than 3,000 American retailers. Keller emphasized that his company practices their pro-environmental philosophy in every aspect of the business. "We have a zero waste policy." All factory scraps are stored for use in products currently in the design phase. "At the end of a bag's life we encourage our customers to send them back to us. If it's in reasonable shape it's donated to a food bank. If truly worn out we give them to a women's shelter that shreds them and weaves them into doormats and rugs. Also, we realized that much of our waste had to do with employees eating lunch. So we give everyone a Klean Kanteen and a reusable takeout container in exchange for a pledge to support lunch establishments that are friendly towards our re-use practices."



Andy Keller created the first ChicoBag on a thrift store sewing machine five years ago.

Klean Kanteen is another green Chico business with a long reach. The producer of stainless beverage bottles is owned by Chico natives, siblings Jeff Cresswell and Michelle Kalberer. Their Kanteen, a toxin-free, non-leaching replacement for plastic water bottles, was invented by another Chicoan, Robert Seals.

Klean Kanteen and ChicoBag work together to promote their products and sustainability. "Chico is very much a small world. There's a lot going on that gives you opportunity to run into people you know," Keller explained. "Bidwell Park is a crown jewel, a great place to go mountain biking or hiking. You always see someone you know. The business community is also very friendly. We do a lot with Klean Kanteen. Professionally, we do some trade shows together. Regarding sustainability, we both try to encourage restaurants to support our practices."

Helping restaurants and institutions make good use of leftover cooking oil served as impetus for another Chico upstart business Springboard Biodiesel. Like Keller, Chico State grad Galen Bowen had an acute interest in a green, renewable lifestyle. After graduation, he put his mechanical engineering degree to use working for a solar equipment company. After attending a workshop on homemade biodiesel fuels, he enlisted his brother Daniel, a Chico State physics graduate, and together they created a personal-scale biodiesel processor built to industrial quality standards. Compact and multi-functional, it's about the size of a refrigerator. In addition to converting restaurant and food service waste into fuel, the processors are also popular with farmers who plant specific crops for immediate transformation into diesel fuel to run their equipment.

The units are currently sold throughout the nation and around the world. "Our primary market is still the United States, but we've sold in every continent except Antarctica," Bowen said. "As far as I am aware, we have the only high-quality product for consumers." The brothers and their cousin Aaron Arnold, who was also involved in the product's development, are still in their 20s. In 2008, they sold the company to Mark Roberts, an investment banker. "That was a great move for us," Bowen said. "Now we can focus on design and engineering. We have a lot of R and D going on, developing equipment for larger scale production as well as uncovering ways to make fuels from lower quality oils. If you're