

Project: Trash Talk: Workers in Vermont's Changing Waste Management Industry
Narrator: Jeff Miller, Truck Driver for Grow Compost
Interviewer: Virginia Nickerson
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Place: Grow Compost Offices, Waterbury, VT
Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

00:00

Nickerson: You ready?

Miller: Yep.

Nickerson: All right. So this is Ginger Nickerson. And I am interviewing Jeff Miller at Grow Compost in the offices. And it is September 19, 2018. And we are in Waterbury, Vermont. Okay. So I just always start by asking people if they could tell me roughly where they were born and what year they were born in.

Miller: Well, I was born in West Canaan.

Nickerson: New Hampshire.

Miller: Yep. In 1960.

00:37

Nickerson: Okay. So what's your current job, and how long have you been doing this kind of work?

Miller: I go around picking up compost, the food waste. And in November, it will be two years.

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Nickerson: And what are some other kinds of jobs that you had before you were working for Grow Compost?

Miller: The one I had before this, I was running for North Country Medical. I'd run blood for Red Cross.

Nickerson: Uh huh. So you were driving.

Miller: Yeah. Yeah. Then the one before that, I was a maintenance guy at a motel. Then before that, I was a mechanic, mostly.

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Nickerson: So would you mind telling me again how you got into this job?

Miller: Scott [Baughman, one of the owners of Grow Compost] actually met my boy. He was working for a uniform company. And they got talking, and Scott met with me and had me go for a ride along and hired me.

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Nickerson: Yeah. So could you tell me what you do in this job?

Miller: Drive around, picking up totes. Tipping them.

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Nickerson: And what's in the totes?

Miller: Food waste.

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Nickerson: And so can you tell me what one of your runs is like? What one of your average days is like, from beginning, when you get up, to when you quit for the end of the day?

Miller: Well, the beginning of the day is a lot better, because I start at four in the morning. So there's not much traffic. But towards the end of the day, you've got to deal with all that traffic. But I come up because we load the truck with totes and bio blend the night before. And I get here at four in the morning. And I head out and just go from business to business, picking up compost.

0:02:52

Nickerson: And what's bio blend?

Miller: It's what you put on top of the food to help keep the critters down. (Nickerson laughs) And the smell. It's basically, I think they put in peat moss and wood chips.

0:03:04

Nickerson: Uh huh. And what kind of critters?

Miller: The maggots. Yeah.

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Nickerson: So how big are the totes? What are the totes like?

Miller: Some of them go up to about 300, 350 pounds. If they fill them with water, well, liquid, they get pretty heavy.

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Nickerson: And how do you get them into the truck?

Miller: On a lift gate. Yup. Then when we go tipping, we got a tipper that we use.

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Nickerson: Uh huh. So for someone who doesn't know what tipping is, what are you doing?

Miller: Emptying the totes.

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Nickerson: And you do that at a compost place?

Miller: Yeah. I actually do most of mine up to central Vermont.

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Nickerson: Vermont Compost [a compost operation in Montpelier].

Miller: Yeah. He's a big operation up there. So the big trucks like we got go up there. We'll put, I can put 44 totes on that truck.

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Nickerson: And then so, are you tipping them one by one?

Miller: Yup. Yup.

0:04:20

Nickerson: And what are your routes?

Miller: Monday I'm down southern New Hampshire. My first stop is actually in Rockingham. Then I go up to Ludlow and end up in Killington, then over to Bethel. And Tuesday it's basically a local run. I get Montpelier. And Wednesday it's Barre. Then my second run will be Williamstown, South Barre. Then Thursday is the southern route, too. Springfield, Woodstock and all them. Yup.

00:05:07

Nickerson: Wow. So today you told me you got up at two o'clock in the morning.

Miller: I get up at two o'clock every morning to get here and start at four. So right now I'm pushing close to 12 hours today. Not counting, that's just counting on the clock. My average day is about a 10 ½ to 11 ½ hour day, not counting the travel back and forth [from my home].

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Nickerson: And then when do you get back at night?

Miller: Usually at eight.

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Nickerson: So that's a long day. So can you tell me what kinds of like, what's your favorite and best part about the job?

Miller: Actually helping the environment. That gives you a good feeling. It's hard to say, I don't really know, you can't really love this job, you know what I'm saying? It's just something that, most people can't do it.

0:06:27

Nickerson: Yeah. When you're driving the truck, how often are you stopping?

Miller: It all depends on the route. Like my Montpelier route, my first run in Montpelier, all my stops are within probably a mile of each other. So I'm stopping quite often. But like Monday's route, my first stop's down in Rockingham. So that's an hour away from Lebanon, pretty close. Then I go up to Ludlow, which is quite a ways away. So they're spaced out. It all depends on which route you go. My average is probably two to three hundred miles a day in that truck.

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Nickerson: Wow. Do you listen to music or anything?

Miller: Not often. No. If I'm on the interstate, I do. But not around town.

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Nickerson: And so what kinds of places are you going to pick up the compost?

Miller: We go to all kinds of places. We go to grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, anything that deals with food.

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Nickerson: So it's all businesses.

Miller: Yeah.

Nickerson: You're not getting it from people's homes.

Miller: No. They bring that to the transfer station and we pick it up there. They haven't got into the residential yet. But they're talking about it.

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Nickerson: Yeah. And what, do you ever see like strange stuff in the compost?

Miller: Oh, yeah. You always [do], garbage and the strangest thing I saw was a five-gallon bucket. They just set it right in there and buried it. But you do. You get silverware. You name it, it's in there.

0:08:24

Nickerson: Yeah. Things that people aren't supposed to be putting in that get in by accident.

Miller: Right. Yeah. Quite a bit of rubbish, yeah.

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Nickerson: And you know, the other day you and I were talking about weather and bad weather. And I'm just wondering, are there things that are dangerous or risky about doing this job?

Miller: Well, driving in the winter is pretty risky. And even when it's raining out. You always got a chance to slip or throw your back out pulling on these totes.

0:09:04

Nickerson: Yeah. Because do you lift them? Do you have to lift the totes up at all yourself? Is it all done by the—

Miller: No. I just pull them onto the lift gate. Yup.

0:09:19

Nickerson: So what's your least favorite part of the job? Or the hardest?

Miller: Traveling. I do a lot of traveling. From my house to here is 75 miles. So coming back, coming to work and going back home. And I've done 89, I worked for North Country three years. And my route was from Lebanon to Burlington, then from Burlington to Manchester, New Hampshire. So for the last five years, I've been traveling 89 every day. So.

0:09:51

Nickerson: Yeah. So you know that.

Miller: So that's pretty boring there. That's my least favorite of it right there.

Nickerson: Yeah. You know that road well.

Miller: Yeah.

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Nickerson: Is that also the hardest part?

Miller: Yeah. Because there's nothing really on 89. A lot of times I get in a trance. I'll get on the interstate and I'll remember going by [exit] 8. Next I know, I'm down by [exit] 1.

Nickerson: Yeah, yeah. That happens to me, too, when I do long distance [drives]--

Miller: You know, I say where did all the other exits go?

0:10:27

Nickerson: (laughs) Yeah, yeah. So if somebody was a young person and was thinking that they wanted to become a truck driver for a compost company, what kind of skills or knowledge would you recommend that they have?

Miller: Well, you've got to have good depth perception to drive a truck. You've got to have a real strong stomach for this job. Especially in the summertime. We get awful smells.

0:10:59

Nickerson: Yeah. What does it look like and smell like?

Miller: Well, it looks nasty and it smells nasty. A lot of it. It's great when you do the grocery stores, because they do a lot of vegetables they throw away. So they are nice. But then you get the ones like in this extreme heat, we've been having a lot of maggots. And they make this yellow, I don't know what it is, but we call it maggot juice. And that's probably the worst smell I ever smelled. So. Like I say, you've got to have a strong stomach.

Nickerson: Good depth perception. What else? What other?

Miller: And love the ride. A lot of patience. Because I've sat at, coming out of a road before, I sat there and sat there. It would be a red light, and they'd block me in there. So you just got to have a lot of patience.

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Nickerson: Yeah. Do you ever have to deal with the customers?

Miller: I talk with some of them. I don't deal directly [with them] for the business. But if they'll come out, we'll sit there and shoot the breeze. I've got two or three that will come out and say hi.

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Nickerson: Have you seen any changes in the two years that you've been doing this?

Miller: It's getting a lot busier. From when I first started, I was lucky to do six hours a day here. Now I'm doing 11, 10 to 11.

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Nickerson: Yeah, yeah. And is that five days a week?

Miller: No, I work four.

Nickerson: Four days a week.

Miller: Yeah. Then I work Fridays for my son. He just started a rubbish business in Canaan. So I guess I'm in waste management all the way around.

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Nickerson: (laughs) Yeah. How are you helping out your son?

Miller: I run the route for him on Fridays.

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Nickerson: And how is that? Are there ways that that's different from this?

Miller: Well, this is all just rubbish, so it goes to a landfill. But it's so similar, because you've got your maggots in the rubbish, too. And that stinks. The difference is, this is you're picking up, I think they're 32-gallon totes or 46-gallon totes that we use [at the compost business]. But there, I'm throwing bags into a truck.

00:13:40

Nickerson: Yeah So let's see. So what advice would you give to a young person who's thinking about maybe becoming either a rubbish truck driver or a compost truck driver?

Miller: You want to take a day and ride along with somebody, just to see if it's something you want to do. Like I said, this isn't for everybody. It takes a special fool to do this.

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Nickerson: (laughs) Well, someone who likes being on the road.

Miller: Yeah. So.

0:14:18

Nickerson: And if there is anything that we haven't talked about that you would want the general public to know about the kind of work that you do.

Miller: Basically we're saving the landfills right now without putting all this food in there. It's cutting down on all that. Because if you ever go over [to the landfill] in West Lebanon, especially in the summer, you'll smell that landfill bad. Well it is the food rotting underneath there and it makes gases. It's not as bad now, they're burning it off. Same as right down here [referring to the methane being burned off of a nearby capped landfill]. But this landfill's been out how many years?

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Nickerson: The Moretown one? Geez, I don't know.

Miller: And they're still burning that gas off from that. And this will save a lot of that [methane production]. Then like Scott [Baughman and Lisa Ransom, owners of Grow Compost], I don't know how they make the compost. I don't get into that part of it. But he'll make garden soil and all different kinds of soils. I don't know what they mix with it. I got some garden soil from him. And we did a field up on my boy's land that he bought up in Colebrook. And in a week, that whole field was two inches tall.

Nickerson: Wow.

Miller: So it's the compost. It's great for gardens. I know a lot of people that use it in their gardens. They get some really good vegetables. So you're not only saving the environment, but you're helping people to grow stuff, too. And a lot of people are getting more into gardens.

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Nickerson: Yeah. I use Grow Compost soil for my gardens. It works really well.

Miller: Yup.

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Nickerson: Anything else you want people to know about your job?

Miller: No. Basically it's an ordinary job. I don't know what to say on wanting them to know.

Nickerson: Well I'm very grateful that you're doing it. So all right, so I think that's all, then. So we'll let you get back on your long drive home.

Miller: It's going to be a long one. I take the truck home tonight because I work down south tomorrow.

Nickerson: Oh, okay. So you bring it home with you and then drive down south.

Miller: Yeah.

Nickerson: Yeah. All right. Great. Okay. Well, Mr. Miller thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Miller: Thank you.

17:14

[End Session.]