

Project: Trash Talk: Workers in Vermont's Changing Waste Management Industry
Narrator: Sean Fahey, De-manufacturer, Good Point Recycling
Interviewer: Virginia Nickerson
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Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

Nickerson: All right. So, this is Ginger Nickerson. And I am interviewing Sean Fahey,

Fahey: Yup.

Nickerson: At Good Point Recycling in Middlebury, Vermont, on October 23, 2018. So, Sean, I always start by asking people if they could tell me the town and the year that they were born in.

Fahey: I don't remember when I was born exactly, it was 1992, [REDACTED]. And I was probably born in Baltimore, Maryland [Fahey later corrected this – he was born in West Newbury, MA]. And spent probably till my teens and my first year of high school there. And then we moved up here in '07. And my sister went to college in Maine. I ended up graduating high school right here in Middlebury, which I am honestly not going to lie, the town's been a whole lot better than my old home town.

01:03

Nickerson: Okay. And can you tell me what your job is here at Good Point, and how long have you been working here?

Fahey: For how long I've been working here, somewhere between seven and eight years right now. And my job, I'm not sure if this is going to be much of an answer, it's mainly whatever the heck the boss has me doing. Which at the moment normally would be hard drives. But oftentimes he'll throw me at smoke detectors, he'll give me battery packs. And my golden rule that kind of helps me out a lot at work, if supervisor, job coach or the boss himself asks, "Hey, I need you to do this," I'm actually going to get it done. Versus if a coworker asks me to do it, forget it. I'm not going to do it for you.

01:49

Nickerson: Okay. And you do demanufacturing?

Fahey: Basically. I mean, if you've heard of reverse engineering, that's pretty much what this is.

01:57

Nickerson: So what does that mean?

Fahey: Basically, people send me certain things, like hard drives, for example. And what I'll do is I'll take that apart and basically sort it out so that people can pull the most valuable stuff later on. Like for example, the circuit boards, they've got some gold in there. And platters, they need to get busted up. Because otherwise, if I don't bust them up, someone's going to steal a whole bunch of data.

02:24

Nickerson: And how did you end up at Good Point?

Fahey: That's kind of an interesting story. I was volunteering at the Eddy Horse Farm out by Middlebury College. And probably in November, about seven years back, tops, I was working. And all of a sudden my phone rings. And I know I'm not supposed to answer my phone while working, but I was like "oh my God, is it my mom? Is it my dad? Is it my sister?" I look down, barely recognizing the number. Answered. And I hear the name Colin Davis. And when he told me that he was related to one of my teammates, Craig Davis, I knew who he was instantly. And he asked me, how would you like to get a job at Good Point and come in for a job interview? Next day I went in for a job interview and showed them what I could do exactly. After about the third round of the job trial, John [Fontinellis?], who's no longer working here, he told me, "Hey, guess what, you're hired." And now I come out of Good Point happy as heck and looking like a coal miner on the face.

03:44

Nickerson: (laughs) Why? Why were you looking like a coal miner?

Fahey: Have you ever seen how coal miners look when they come out of the mine? They have a whole bunch of black on their face. I pretty much had that look.

Nickerson: Had you been doing something that got black dust on your face?

Fahey: There's plenty of ways. I mean, originally I was taking apart the TVs before Robin [Ingenthron, owner of Good Point] put me on the hard drives. It took me a while to figure out hard drives and how to do them. Because some of it was tools I had never done or even used. Like I finally had to use a different type of drill bit from what I'm used to. Because normally I'm using Philips heads and flats. I'd say the most common ones I come across are ones that have like a torque bit screw. And that's the most common one you'll ever see me use is the torque bit. And trust me. When I get the torque bit, watch out. Because as I told you earlier when you saw me taking them apart, don't ever blink.

04:46

Nickerson: Because you work really fast.

Fahey: Yeah.

Nickerson: So the day that you had your interview, what did they have you doing as the trial?

Fahey: They had me taking apart TVs. Kind of like what you saw as we walked down here. They had big TVs, plasmas. And it would basically be take out the big centerpiece that has that stem in it. And as necessary, just break it or just bring it out in one piece and set it on a palette.

Nickerson: And did somebody show you what to do? Or did you just have to figure it out?

Fahey: Yes. One thing I was always good at it, ask Steve, ask anybody who's worked with me in the past, they'll tell you. I'm usually pretty good at asking for help. It's one of the things that gets me through, and really pushed me through high school.

05:36

Nickerson: So do you remember your first day of work here?

Fahey: It was after I came back from Thanksgiving break. I was, still doing TVs. And then I got moved down to the hard drives. And hard drives, I'm not going to lie, at first the place I worked, which now belongs to Connor Homes [a business that shared the same building with Good Point], it was pretty quiet and somewhat lonely. But then I realized, you know what? There's an advantage to this. No one's around to bug me. No one can really mess with me. It's me, my tunes, what I've got to do to work, and that's all I really needed. Well, and someone there just in case I needed help.

06:15

Nickerson: So how did you learn what to do? I wouldn't have known how to take apart a hard drive.

Fahey: If I had questions, I would find someone who had done it in the past, or who worked there. And John was usually the first person I would ask. And then my original job coach, Kevin [Cornet?], I would ask him. And now I feel like with Steve here, I've got someone I really know I can count on for certain help when I need it. Because Steve kind of reminded me of my old high school one-on-one, Ted Otis. I mean, he's got a mechanic's background and a few other things. So I'd say between me and him, it's a pretty lean team that really knows how to work together. Especially when we're not arguing with each other. It's why I call him the professor.

07:02

Nickerson: (laughs) So can you kind of describe, since this is on audio and I'm only taking a few pictures, people might not be able to be inside Good Point. Could you describe what this place is like?

Fahey: Basically it's concrete, steel. It's a warehouse. And it's multiple sections. What we just walked past on the way down here was the current area of what we have left after Connor Homes

moved in. Which you're talking the loading docks, and the place where everything's sorted, ripped apart, and/or wiped clean and then shipped out. And also received from other job sites. And out there used to be just chock full of Gaylords [large cardboard cartons that fit on pallets], we're talking about something the size of a really big moving box. Probably about the size of this cabinet right here (pointing to a cabinet about 4' x 4'). I mean, it used to be pretty big. Before Connor Homes moved in, we had the whole warehouse to ourselves. It was basically wherever you could find space for stuff, stack it there, and that was it.

08:14

Nickerson: So can you walk me through a typical day, like from when you arrive here to when you go home? What you're doing?

Fahey: For me, it's three hours here. Come in, swipe my work card, grab my drill. Make sure I've got all my work stuff on, including my steel-toe boots and my work vest, of course. And then come in. Safety glasses, of course. Safety glasses, gloves. And gloves are, again, one of the many essentials, as much as the safety glasses. Because you never know. You could get something with a really sharp edge on it. And there have been a few people that sliced their finger pretty bad. And at that point, it's put safety gear on, grab my drill, go to my work space, open my tool box, plug my phone in and crank my tunes up as loud as I need to cut out the distractions, with the exception of Steve over here. And then from there, basically just grab all the tools out of my tool box I need. Grab the hard drives or whatever the boss has me doing. And just proceed to tear the place apart until whenever work time's over. Which Tuesday/Thursday is about ten minutes before three o'clock. And then Monday/Wednesday/Friday is about ten minutes before twelve.

09:47

Nickerson: So when you take a hard drive out of the box, what are you doing? Could you walk me through that?

Fahey: First off, it depends on the drive I'm doing. With a laptop, pretty straightforward. Pry the circuit board off. Slap it with a hammer. Versus a regular size, which you're talking about that big [indicates the size]. And for that, it's unscrew everything, depending on the condition it's in. I mean, if it comes in with the circuit board attached and just smashed beyond all reason, get what you can off that. If you can't remove the screws on the lid, well, you got the circuit board off, you got the prime piece off. Because the circuit board is one of their big sellers.

10:34

Nickerson: Because that has gold on it.

Fahey: Gold in the pins, yeah. So if I can just get the circuit board off, but I can't get the lid off, no damage done. I mean, damage is done. But at that point, basically take the circuit board, put it

in the circuit board bin. Take the hard drive husk and put it in the husk bin. And then for what I like to call extra hardware, which is anything that has extra frame around it, take that off first, then get all the normal components off.

But Steve will probably tell you, and I'll tell you, I mentioned a drive that I like to call once in a blue moon, which those I know as special projects. Which you're talking you do not see it that often. I showed you a couple of magnets I pulled out of one of those. And you're talking something about the size of—there's actually a pretty funny joke the first time I found one of those. My old job coach, Kevin [Cornet?], when I showed it to him, he was like, "Wait, are we collecting auto parts now?" It's like, yeah. You're talking something the size of a transmission.

11:46

Nickerson: (laughs) Because those were really big magnets.

Fahey: Well, not just the magnet. The hard drive itself. You're talking really big cast aluminum shell, six platters, four platters, maybe, that if they were reinforced with serrated teeth would have made sawblades. And at least four of the magnets, if I had separated them, could have been used for brake pads on a car. They were that big.

12:17

Nickerson: And you also take copper out of the hard drives, too, right?

Fahey: If possible. I mean, if I can get the copper out without a whole lot of controversy. And it's more of like bonus points if I can get the whole arm out, not just the copper wire. If I can take the whole platter arm out that reads the platters, that's bonus points. I mean, the copper, great. The whole thing, icing on the cake.

0:12:46

Nickerson: And then what happens with the platters?

Fahey: The platters, I basically grab a really sharp tool, like a screwdriver or a hammer handle, like what you saw me using. And I just basically scratch that out to the point where it can't be read. Unless it's a ceramic. Then, everyone cover your eyes, unless you want a piece of shrapnel to the face.

Nickerson: Because you're smashing that up.

Fahey: Yeah.

The only time you don't have to worry about covering your eyes is when it's a covered laptop drive, because the whole shell basically maintains or keeps the ceramic from breaking out and

hitting everybody. Versus a regular size ceramic [platter], which at that point, no arguments. You need to have your safety glasses on or turn away. Because otherwise, there will be a piece of shrapnel will go into somebody.

0:13:40

Nickerson: And are there ever strange things that you find, or odd things that you have to work on?

Fahey: On that, there are way too many stories I could spill about that, including one time I took apart a CPU and as weird as this sounds, well, CPUs being the really big things that the hard drives come out of. One time I took one apart and found two dead rodents. And then the number of bullet shells at my house basically testify to how many hard drives I've had come in with bullet fragments in them, whether it be the shell, the head. Pick your poison. And I've even found a wrench. I mean, it's a pretty extensive list.

0:14:23

Nickerson: And why would there be bullets in the hard drives?

Fahey: Some people get a little paranoid about their data before it's sent in. They don't know who's handling their [computers]. So they figure the easiest way to get rid of them, grab your gun, grab your bullets, strap your hard drive to a stand, and just go. I mean, I've met a guy at one of the tool stores, I think it was Sanel Auto or something like that. And I told him about what I do when I was trying to get a pry bar. And he told me, "Oh, what I do? That's pretty easy. Take my hard drive. Strap some explosives to it. And then there's nothing left."

0:15:03

Nickerson: (laughs) And Steve was showing me that you also sometimes take apart batteries.

Fahey: Right.

Nickerson: Can you tell me about that?

Fahey: Honestly, that's probably the most semi-nerve wracking experience for me.

Nickerson: Because these are like big booster batteries in a car.

Fahey: And some of them I've had moments where I've tried to just cut a wire, and it just arcs like crazy. "Arc" meaning it will spark like absolute crazy. And it sometimes scares me when they do that. But you know what, someone's got to do it and when the person who's normally doing it isn't here, I'm more than happy to step up to the plate and do it. And I can usually get through those pretty quick. I mean, if I can get this down to the screws with a screwdriver or a drill, great. If not, I will basically beat on that thing with a hammer until it gives up.

0:15:59

Nickerson: So what are you getting out of the battery?

Fahey: Primarily the battery itself, which is either going to be lead acid or something like that. And then you've got the wires. That's a whole bunch more copper. That's another big money maker. Because you take off all the cover for the wire, and you're left with nothing but bare copper. And then you've got the gator clips that normally attach to the battery. There's more copper right there. I mean, if you can just extract as much copper out of that, plus the battery, you're basically extracting big parts. And then, I'm not going to lie, as I said, the job's therapeutic. If I have an issue at home, if I have an issue with anybody, or if I just had a really rough week, I'll just come in, tear something apart, and feel like all my problems are out.

0:16:58

Nickerson: (laughs) You talked about the batteries sometimes arcing. What are the different kinds of risks to doing this job? And how do you protect yourself?

Fahey: Your safety glasses and your gloves are going to be like your best friends when you do this. Because if you try [unclear] a battery, and it's got a little bit of the lead acid point showing, it can, the worst thing that could happen, especially when it's kind of liquid like, lead acid battery, is if that battery goes boom and your safety glasses aren't on. Because it burns pretty bad. I mean, it would take nothing more than friction just to set it off, or something remotely close. So if you remember how to disengage a battery from the past, it shouldn't be rocket science.

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Nickerson: What would you say are the knowledge and skills required by this job?

Fahey: It depends on where the boss is looking to put you. If he's looking to put you on sorting, you don't really need much there except to know okay, this goes here. So as you saw, there's multiple bins down there containing multiple items. For me, it's like you've got to be able to tell okay, here's the tool I need for this. So like my prime tool of choice right now is my drill. I mean, in the past, I burned out about two, maybe three drill motors, what I was putting them through. But like I said, the drill's the prime tool of choice. It really lets me get right down and cook right through those hard drives. My screwdrivers are also pretty good to me. I usually have one big one and one small one that I need to use, depending on the space because of the hard drive lid and the husk itself. And then also my hammer's pretty good to me. My hammer, my hammer handle, which Steve was nice enough to set so I could use it when I needed it. Yeah, those are my prime materials of choice, along with all my drill bits.

0:19:21

Nickerson: And what's your favorite part of the job? Or the best part of the job for you?

Fahey: There's a lot of good parts to that. One is, again, it's very therapeutic to me. And the other is, you never stop learning. It's like here I am back in kindergarten or in high school again. Because even if you go to a job site, you could go to a job site, whether it be a warehouse, a kitchen, auto shop. Pick your poison, basically. I'll say this right now to anyone, including you, who's thinking for ten seconds, yeah, I know everything. Let me tell you right now. You don't. The school year's never over. You've got a fly on your shirt there.

20:12

Nickerson: Thank you! What's your least favorite, or the most challenging part of the job?

Fahey: I'd say, probably from past experiences, it's when I'm not notified about something. Like for example, that the workspace is going to be messed up for about three plus weeks. And I can tell you right now from past experience, I'm the last person you want to be within ten feet of when that's the case. Because last week I had known they were going to move the space around. I didn't know when, exactly, even though I'd asked them. And I came in the next day and my whole workspace was just a disaster. I was just like, "What the heck?" I just wanted to get right back in my truck and go home. Like, you guys messed with my workspace. You didn't tell me about this. You guys, until you get this sorted out, I'm not going to be there until then. But Steve reeled me back in and got me back on the rails. And I think if he hadn't been there, it would have been a whole different story.

21:17

Nickerson: Yeah, yeah. So you've been doing this job for about seven years. Has it changed much in the time you've been here?

Fahey: Even with Connor Homes here, I would say not really. I've just been doing the same three things I've done for the past few years. Hard drives at the front of it, batteries and smoke detectors on the side. And I'm more than happy. Because like I said, all these other job sites that I tried to get in with, I gave them a fair chance. They didn't take. Good Point reeled me in. They gave me a test drive. And I showed them exactly what I could do. So to all the work sites out there, this is probably the better way of getting your hands on someone who you think might be a potential ace. Don't just wait, because you never know if you might be throwing away someone who might really pull you through the roof. In a good manner.

22:13

Nickerson: Yeah. Is there any advice that you would give to somebody starting out in your job?

Fahey: Don't ever think you're going to be able to just go right to the job you want in that job site. I mean, I started out in a kosher kitchen at the college as a janitor. Which I was already not happy about. Now, even though I don't exactly have the dream job I was looking for, I don't care. It involves my hands. It involves tools. It's therapeutic. And it's semi-educational. So as long as it's a job you enjoy, have fun with it until that jobsite lets you roll. Lets you go, that is. And just be grateful you have a job and can put money in the bank and a paycheck on the table with food.

23:13

Nickerson: Yeah. So Sean, this is my last question. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would want people to know about your job in e-waste?

Fahey: Not that really comes to mind at the moment. Steve, anything?

Nickerson: Okay, great. Well Sean, thank you so much!

Fahey: My pleasure.

Nickerson: I really appreciated your taking the time to tell me about what you do. This is great. Thank you.

23:44

[End Interview.]