

Project: Trash Talk: Workers in Vermont's Changing Waste Management Industry
Narrator: Crystal Johnston, Truck Driver / Client Service representative and eBay Seller, Good Point Recycling
Interviewer: Virginia Nickerson
Date: October 23, 2018
Place: Offices of Good Point Recycling, Middlebury VT
Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

Nickerson: Okay. So this is Ginger Nickerson. And I am interviewing Crystal Johnston at Good Point Recycling Facility in Middlebury, Vermont on October 23, 2018. So Crystal, could you tell me the town and the year in which you were born?

Johnston: I was born in Rutland, Vermont in 1972.

00:31

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

Johnston: My current job is, I am a truck driver/client service/eBay seller (laughs). And I have been working here, this November will be ten years.

00:58

Nickerson: Okay. And what did you do before you came to Good Point? How did you end up working here?

Johnston: Well, before I worked here, I worked at a plywood company for about ten years. And then after that I worked for a mailing company, producing mail, for ten years. And then I, through word of mouth, I heard that Good Point Recycling was hiring. And put in an application, and that's how I ended up here. I started out as eBay manager. And didn't do so well there. (laughs) So Robin came to me with the idea of, okay, let's try you in driving instead of eBay manager. And I didn't want to turn it down. And I absolutely loved it. (laughs) So I drive a box truck now. I go to all the clients and collect the electronics and bring them back here. I unload my truck and bring it into sorting. And at the end of the day, if there's time, I will pick out an item that is eBayable, and put it on eBay. So I love the diversity of my job. I love the—can you stop it for a second?

Nickerson: Yeah.

02:50

[End Track 1. Begin Track 2.]

00:00

Nickerson: Yeah. So you were telling me you like the client relationships.

Johnston: Yes. That is one of my favorite things about my job is you show up and they're happy to see you. And they're like, "Hey, Crystal, how are you doing?" And just the relationship with all the places. We have over 90 places that we stop at, that we collect from, all over Vermont.

Nickerson: So you yourself are going to 90 different places?

Johnston: I've been to, yes. Throughout the year. We have about 90 clients. Some of them we go to every other week. Some are every week. Some are every other month. It depends on how large they are. But yes, there's at least 90 different sites that we go to throughout Vermont.

01:07

Nickerson: I just have so many questions for you. I'm trying to figure out what order to ask them in. So what kinds of places are you stopping to get the materials?

Johnston: Transfer stations. The electronics- they're usually already in the Gaylord. So I get--

Nickerson: The Gaylord is the [large] cardboard box?

Johnston: Correct. On the palette. So when we get there with my lift gate, I take them with a palette jack and load them up onto my truck. It fits 12 full Gaylords in the back. When we first started doing this, the state contract wasn't involved. So when I first started doing this, I would get to the sites and they wouldn't always be neat and tidy, ready to go. So I would have to put the TVs onto palettes myself. I would fill the Gaylords myself. But now that the Vermont state has gotten involved, they're more regulated. So it's actually made my job easier, because it has to already be prepared, so that I can just go in and collect it. Which has made my life easier.

(laughs)

02:43

Nickerson: So how do you get the Gaylord of televisions or whatever it has in it, from where it's stored at the transfer station, into your truck? Because I would imagine those are really heavy.

Johnston: They are. They weigh about 500 pounds, estimated. A little more or a little less. But with the palette jack and the lift gate. Some of them are out of [rolloff or shipping?] containers. You lean the lift gate on the container to roll them onto your lift gate and bring it up into the truck. And you roll it into the truck. But the other ones, it's like a lean-to. It has to be covered

with a roof. So you just land the lift gate onto the cement, and you can roll them on. Those are our easier sites. (laughs)

03:40

Nickerson: And how big is the truck that you're driving?

Johnston: Twenty-six foot box truck.

Nickerson: So about how many Gaylords can you fit in there?

Johnston: Twelve total. Palette with Gaylord. It's pretty good-sized. And sometimes if we go to, like not a transfer station, usually, where they won't load you with a forklift, we can sometimes take two high. One Gaylord and palette on top of the other. And in that case, I can fit 24. I just have to be careful not to go over the 10,000-pound [limit], I have to keep track of the weight. But if possible, we can load them up high.

04:35

Nickerson: Yeah. And what are some of the other places you go to that are not transfer stations?

Johnston: We go to Goodwill. We have banks that we collect from, schools that we collect from. Sometimes colleges and even dorms. We also do events. We actually have one coming up this weekend that I'm going to over in Massachusetts. And we will set up. And it gives everyone a chance to drop off their electronics. And we do like a real setup, a truck in the parking lot and the cars will come in through and we take a collection. And we have oftentimes filled a whole trailer truck within a couple of hours. We call them events, and they are a couple of hours long. And within a couple of hours, we can fill a trailer truck.

Nickerson: With people's electronics?

Johnston: Electronics. It's amazing. And we do these events mostly throughout the summer. It's very cold in winter to stand out there collecting electronics. So it's more of a summer thing. But we do collect a lot that way, too.

06:12

Nickerson: So do you remember your first day on the job when you were driving the truck?

Johnston: I do. I was terrified. (laughter) But I had a very good teacher, Pete Funk. And he basically told me it's very similar to driving a car. Just you have more to look out for. But I did get used to the size of the truck. And I love it now. Now I can back up easily to my destination. Line up. I like it.

07:07

Nickerson: Can you walk me through what a typical day is like for you? Like from when you arrive here in the morning to when you check out and go home at the end of the day?

Johnston: Sure. The first thing I do is check the schedule to see where I'm going. Like I said, we have over 90 sites that we collect from. But I've been there before, at least twice, three times, to almost every site that we have that we go to. So a lot of times I don't need to look up the directions. I can look at it and know where that place is. So when I first come in, I have to look at the schedule, because it always changes and I don't want to be going to the wrong place. So I double check, even if I knew where I was going the night before. I check in the morning to see if it changed. I will go out, I get the key for my truck, do my pre-trip on my truck, which you walk around the truck, you make sure everything is in working order. You check your oil, all your fluids, make sure your lift gate is working. You don't want to be broke down on the side of the road. (laughs) And make sure you have fuel. Back up to the loading dock. And I will get on the forklift and unload my own truck. And I will unload it into, we have a sorting area. So I drive my truck onto it and unload from the day before, unload into the sorting area where they sort the material. And the material gets sent on its way to its destination. And I will prepare my truck with 12 Gaylords, 12 palettes, empty ones for my run. And I will go do my run, with the paperwork. And then when I come back, if I have time, I will unload at the end of the day. But many times I will unload the next day when I come in.

09:32

Nickerson: And what are the hours that you work? Like what time do you arrive? And what time do you go home?

Johnston: Eight in the morning to four. But Robin is very flexible. Like if people want to come in like six to three or 8:30 to 4:30, especially with school kids. A lot of us have kids. And getting them off to school, if you need to come in later after they're off to school and then come in, which was the case with me several years ago when my kids were smaller, they work with you with that. Which is another key thing I really enjoyed about working for Good Point.

10:24

Nickerson: And you said that often people will ask you if they're giving you a TV or a computer or something, what happens to it next.

Johnston: Where does it go, yes.

Nickerson: So what do you tell people?

Johnston: Well, when they come up and ask me, I will explain to them that it comes back to us in Middlebury. First they're like, "Well, where are you from?" Because like I said, I go all over.

And so some people are surprised I came so far to get their electronics. But I tell them how it comes back to here and we have a de-man, it's called de-man, de-manufacture, where we take the items apart and salvage what we can. And there's plastics that we make into plastic bales. Everything gets a destination and gets reused. It does not go into the landfill.

Nickerson: Wow. That's amazing.

Johnston: When I first started working for Good Point, it was before the state made it mandatory that it could not go into the landfill. And it's mind blowing how much was going into the landfill that we now recycle and keep out of the landfill. And that is gratifying. I feel like I'm doing a good thing in keeping this e-waste out of the landfills.

12:00

Nickerson: Yeah. Yeah. So you said you've been here for ten years?

Johnston: This November, yes. (laughs)

Nickerson: Congratulations.

Johnston: Thank you.

Nickerson: So are there other changes that you've seen in those ten years?

Johnston: Many, yes. I've seen this place transform dramatically. And it was amazing to be part of that. To watch it grow. And to be part of it growing. It was really, I loved it.

When I first came here we didn't have as much as—can we stop again? (pause recording)

12:45

[End Track 2. Begin Track 3.]

00:00

Johnston: Okay. So when I first started working here, we didn't have as much electronics coming in because it was going to the landfill. Or people would throw them in the woods (laughs) So we weren't getting as much volume. So now that we have almost 100 percent of volume now coming through, we have more that we process and send down the line.

00:43

Nickerson: Yeah, yeah. Are there, is there anything that you wish that you had known more about before you got into this line of work?

Johnston: Not really. I've learned a lot being here. And I'm still learning more. It's been a very good experience to have the job diversity. Like I was telling you, just in one day I can start out, I

do my truck run, I come back. I list on eBay and make phone calls to different clients to see if there's anything else that they need. And it all ties together.

01:41

Nickerson: What are some of the types of things that you're selling on eBay?

Johnston: Vintage is the department that I help in. And I specialize. Myself, I prefer the vintage stereos. Anything that looks neat. Oh, I also love items from the colleges, the science department. Those kind of things are really neat. We have like the oscilloscopes and just all the different [equipment], it's fun to try things. You plug it in to see if it works and see what it does. Even if you don't know what it is, let's see what this does. (laughs) It's fun. I enjoy it.

02:33

Nickerson: Yeah. And you said that you also call up customers or clients to see if there are things that they need. What kinds of things are they looking for? Or what kinds of businesses are you calling?

Johnston: Well, I try to keep the client relationship that I pick up from. So, "are we supplying enough palettes that you need, Gaylords that you need? Is there anything we could do better?" You know, "do you need us to come out later in the day or earlier to work around what is going on with your schedule?"

03:19

Nickerson: Yeah, yeah. So it's that relationship.

Johnston: The relationship. Exactly. Yes.

03:23

Nickerson: So what's your favorite, or the best part of the job for you?

Johnston: Honestly, my favorite part is driving the truck in the fall time, up over the mountains. The view is absolutely gorgeous. Just the people, the client relationship, is another favorite aspect. The people you meet. You have one bad day. You know the next day you're going to have a different day. Every day is different.

04:03

Nickerson: And what is your least favorite, or the most challenging part of the job for you?

Johnston: Three hundred-pound Sony TVs. (laughter) We still get the dinosaurs out of people's basements that just show up that we are amazed that we still get them. We still have a lot of the

old TVs. The Sony, the 300-pound ones. And even when we get to the transfer stations, they're like. "We can't believe people are still having them come out of the woodwork here." (laughs)

04:52

Nickerson: And along those lines, what are the physical risks to you? Like what do you have to think about in terms of safety for this job? Do you feel like it's dangerous?

Johnston: It can be. It's more dangerous for me when they have it [the item or Gaylord] more up on a shelf. Because I can't lift it off the shelf down onto the palette. Where if it's on the floor, I will set a palette beside it and kind of roll it onto a palette. But I can't do that if it's up high. I usually, what I do is leave it and either let them know that they will need to put it on a palette so I can get it. Or, if it's not a situation where they can do it, I may need to bring a helper for that project.

05:53

Nickerson: Yeah. Yeah. And what are you the most proud of?

Johnston: The most proud of is that I made it ten years. (laughter) And I'm proud of the company, of how far we came since I started here. I've seen our company struggle and I've seen us do very well. And I've watched it grow bigger and better. It was a great experience for me.

06:38

Nickerson: Do you feel like being a woman has presented any challenges? Or is it at all different for you being a woman in waste management?

Johnston: It is, because there was more than once where I have gone to a job site and I normally don't need help. And when I get there, I've been laughed at before. Well, this is when I first started doing this. They would try to come over and help me. But I would be like, "Can you please step aside because you're in my way." And they actually got, they gave me a new respect because they knew "oh, she's here, we're getting out of her way." (laughs) Because you know, with a palette jack, you jack up your load and you roll it and you need to be able to swing it around. So I really didn't need the help. And I like the physical work to it, too. It helps keep me in shape. And some of my sites that I go to are a long drive. And it is good to get out and move and work my muscles a little bit. I like it. So to answer your question, yes, it did affect my job in the beginning. But I think I've put myself in a position where we also have a good relationship and they respect that I can do my job.

08:40

Nickerson: And what are some of the skills that you need to do this job?

Johnston: Good driving skills. You have to be able to estimate how much weight you're putting onto the truck so you don't overweight, like with the server racks. Servers can be very heavy. So if you have a lot of those in Gaylords, I may not be able to take the full twelve Gaylords, so that I won't be overweight.

Nickerson: Those are computer servers?

Johnston: Yes. I have to be cautious of the weight. The height of the truck, I have to be aware of lines and bridges, low bridges. I have had to go the long way around and come in from a back side to avoid a low bridge. (laughs) As you can imagine.

09:42

Nickerson: And if there was somebody who wanted to get into this line of work and become a truck driver for Good Point, what kind of advice would you give them?

Johnston: Go for it. (laughs) It's a good job. It's rewarding. And why not?

10:10

Nickerson: Okay. So I think that those are most of my questions. But is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like people to know about either the job that you do or about the work that folks do here at Good Point? Or just thinking about being in e-waste in general.

Johnston: I can't really think of anything more to add, other than our different categories that we have, the comradeship that we have here. We're like a tight-knit family. You know, our eBay section and our sorting section. And we all integrate and work together. And the sorting, they have kind of an eye on "oh, this will work for eBay." We also have an eBay Gaylord where they will pull, they get the eye for what we may be able to put on eBay. Yeah, we're all like family here, and it's good. It's not a, "oh, I've got to come to work again." [job] People are, every time when someone comes in and the guys are like, "Hey, how are you?" And they're all like that with each other. And it makes you want to come to work.

Nickerson: Yeah. That makes all the difference.

Johnston: It does. I think it's important to like where you work. And if they're happy you came to work, that's always a good thing. (laughs)

Nickerson: Yeah. Great. Well, Crystal, thank you so much for telling me about your experience working here. I really appreciate it.

Johnston: Thank you for this opportunity. It's great. Thank you.

Nickerson: Okay.

12:19

[End Track 3. End Interview.]

Total time = 29 minutes