



INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE, BULGARIA

Choose the Reusable Cup

In Bulgarian public kindergartens, children between 3–7 years of age drink water almost exclusively from disposable plastic cups. As a result, the annual plastic waste equals 250 million cups, weighs 550 tons, and would cover half of the Earth’s Equator, if wasted cups were arranged in a line. This is an extreme case of throw-away culture that is being imprinted into children’s perceptions as a norm. From an economic standpoint, the produced waste costs Bulgarian citizens between 3–3.5 million Euros per year.

The “Choose the Reusable Cup” project started as a local community initiative in a state kindergarten in the town of Varna, Bulgaria. Sabina Maksimova, a mother of two, proposed a solution: A reusable metal cup engraved with a unique symbol for each child. Later, this community initiative received the support of a local ecology organization – The Public Environmental Center for Sustainable Development. Currently, the project has the ambitious task to reach parent communities across the whole country.

The mission of the “Choose the Reusable Cup” project is to change perceptions and consumption norms so that caring about the environment and healthy living will be more valued than the few-seconds-convenience of the disposable container.

GOLD AWARD WINNER
Sabina Maksimova, Ilian Iliev, Evgenia Tasheva



Coffee Talk with Sabina

Please could you tell us about yourself, Sabina! I'm a 39-year-old mother of two young daughters. Professionally, I'm a marketing manager. In terms of my personal convictions, I am a confessed ecology fan. I am very much concerned about the future of the planet. In Bulgaria there is a saying when something bad happens, "Don't worry, it's not the end of the world!". Now being a grown-up, I see that there are things that are changing our world forever and I really want to turn the tide on all these negative changes and do something good about the environment, for my children and everybody else ... and for future generations.

How did you get into eco-responsible activities? I have always been interested in this. When I was a child, I used to clean up the local gardens, when I saw garbage on the ground. But motherhood was the turning point for me when I decided to do something very special about my green life and the environment. When I became a mom I was surprised to see that my child suffered from allergies. So I started researching about the causes of allergies and I found out that the cause lies to a great extent in the polluted environment. I learned that in the human body, including in breast milk, there are many artificial substances coming from artificial compounds used in plastic. That was a turning point in my decision to engage in a long-lasting project about plastic prevention. When my first child got into kindergarten we were asked to bring a huge amount of single-use plastic cups. I asked why, and they said, there are very strict hygiene requirements and this is why we need single-use plastic cups. I think the view that throw-away plastic is highly hygienic is a misconception. It's actually bad propaganda among the population fueled by the industry. There is a huge financial interest in convincing people to buy new single-use things, throw them

away and buy new ones. This is a nightmare. I believe in three components of hygiene and keeping things clean: soap, water, and heat. Besides the plastic pollution problem, I think plastic is unhealthy because of the many artificial substances included which can cause allergies and other health issues.

Was it hard to convince the other parents in the kindergarten? When this project started, I managed to convince the parents in my Kindergarten group. But it took time and hot debate because we had to change 'the norm': in Bulgaria, almost all kindergartens use these single-use plastic cups, which amount to 250 million cups per year. After the successful implementation of reusable cups in our group I said, okay, more and more parents should know that there is a viable alternative to the single-use plastic cups. We managed to convince over 4,500 children from 20 different towns in Bulgaria to join the program. And, we have done this alone with no financial support from anywhere. The fuel of this project is this incentive, this motivation, this love for children, the love for nature, and that there is such an easy solution to problems like plastic pollution.

And what's been the children's response to using the cups? We involve three-year-old children who are switching from a bottle to a cup for the first time. We really want their first switch to be to a reusable cup and not to a single-use plastic one so they do learn to reuse the things around them. These are the basic years when people learn their habits and form their views. They're very sweet and cute in their reaction. They love their cups. They surprise their teachers because they get used to their own cups with their unique pictures from the very start.

