



“It’s never too early or too late to make a difference.”

Ryan Hickman is 14 years old and already has a non-profit recycling business under his belt. He has also appeared on talk shows, met celebrities and travelled in a submarine in the Mediterranean Sea. But, as Ryan explains, nothing compares to the impact he has made from recycling, and helping others to recycle, millions of cans and bottles.

What ignited your passion for recycling?

When I was three years old, my dad and I took a few small bags to the local recycling centre. I just loved seeing all the cans and bottles being sorted and crushed up. As I got a bit older, I had an idea to ask all our neighbours to start recycling with me, too.

How does Ryan’s Recycling work?

Ryan’s Recycling started with people calling or emailing my dad and leaving their cans and bottles for me to collect, rather than throwing them away. We pick up the items on weekends, and then I sort them and take them to be recycled. Most people I recycle with have been my customers for a long time, so they’ve seen me grow up over the past 11 years. I collect every week and have hundreds of customers. The money I make from the recycling redemption fees goes towards my college fund.

Two years ago, we started a residential programme called Recycle From Home, a pilot programme launched with the State of California to get more people recycling. We have a fleet of vans and a team of drivers who collect cans and bottles from customers in select cities. We pay our customers for their cans and bottles.



Ryan on the Ellen DeGeneres Show in the US © Ryan Hickman

Collecting cans and bottles at five years old
© Ryan Hickman

What is Project3R?

So many people were asking me how they could help support my efforts, so my dad and I created Project3R. It's a non-profit organisation that leads community clean up events and classroom teaching sessions for elementary schools in my local area. We have an amazing team of people who help run Project3R.

When did you start public speaking?

My first public speaking event was at my school when I was in 1st grade. I spoke to all the kids about recycling. After that, I spoke at stadiums and arenas full of people, so I quickly got used to it.

Where do you get the confidence to talk in front of thousands of people?

I don't really get nervous in front of crowds, so I guess I'm lucky that way. I once spoke at an event in Vancouver, Canada, in front of 23,000 kids. I think that's the biggest event I've ever spoken at.

When you give presentations at schools, what is the most frequently asked question?

A lot of kids ask me how they can get started doing what I do. I tell them to start by recycling a little bit each day. Picking up a piece of trash from the ground might save an animal's life, and recycling what you can each day makes a difference. You don't have to be crazy about recycling like me because if everyone does a little bit, it adds up to a big difference.

I also get asked about some of the celebrities I've met, the television shows I've been on and places I've been to.

How did you manage to get invited to clean up rubbish from the riverbanks of the Rhine River in Mainz, Germany?

I went to Germany with my friends at GotBag. They make travel bags out of ocean-bound recycled plastic. There was a huge turnout of people to help clean up trash along the riverbanks.

One thing I noticed was that there weren't any plastic water bottle caps like we have in the US. There were a lot of metal water bottle caps, though. We picked up a lot of trash, but it was a great event.

I loved going to Mainz. Some people recognised me when I was walking around there, which was pretty cool! ➔



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Most people want to do the right thing and help the environment but aren't clear on how they can make a difference.
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At the recycling centre at the age of 10
© Ryan Hickman





Recycle From Home has a fleet of vans. Ryan stands next to one of these vans © Ryan Hickman



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Is this your most exciting experience so far?

It's definitely one of my favourites. I've been in a submarine with OceanX* in the Mediterranean Sea where I picked up a glass bottle from the bottom of the ocean and had it recycled. I've also been to Bogota, Colombia, speaking to thousands of kids. But it's also super exciting when hundreds of people show up to help me clean up a beach, wherever that may be.

You have recycled over 1,838,800 cans and bottles to date. How do you keep count?

We count everything we recycle, and we've done this since the very first time we went to the recycling centre. Everything is weighed so we're able to divide the total weight by the weight of an aluminium can or plastic bottle. I'm hoping to reach 2 million by the end of 2023.

How do you find the time to run a business, give presentations and go to school?

I'm pretty busy, but it's fun. My first priority is school, and my parents line up events for me and set my calendar. I usually recycle a little bit each night, and we do beach clean ups on Sunday nights. My dad helps me handle a lot of the business stuff, too.

Do you think anyone at any age can start a project like yours?

Definitely! I was only three years old when I started. It's never too early or too late to make a difference. I've had older people tell me that they recycle now that they've seen me do it, and I get fan mail from all over the world from people who have been inspired to recycle. I think that's super cool.

What are your hopes for the future?

I'm going to keep doing what I do and maybe, someday, I'll get to 10 million recycled items. I hope that our Recycle From Home business gets into hundreds or thousands of cities. I think if we make recycling easy to understand and accessible, more people will take part. Most people want to do the right thing and help the environment but aren't clear on how they can make a difference.

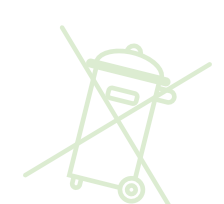
Connect with Ryan

Follow Ryan on social media and tell him how you're changing the world! "I love hearing from kids around the world," he says.

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Ryan started recycling when he was three years old © Ryan Hickman



* OceanX is a global community of explorers, scientists and storytellers dedicated to inspiring and educating people to protect the oceans.