

The Repair Fair: Rhymes with Share and Care

By Susan Crosby

It almost hurts to throw away broken appliances, clothing, and other things we need and are often fond of. There's the cost of replacing them, the time and trouble needed to find substitutes, the regret about wasted resources – the raw materials, energy, and transportation that went into making them – and our growing awareness that landfills are filling up.

Enter the Reuse Alliance, a nonprofit whose lively band of volunteers fixes stuff for free. Based in Sonoma County, they recently showed up in force at Napa's public library on a Saturday afternoon.

Walking into the library and finding the "Repair Fair" in full swing felt like the circus had come to town. More than twenty skilled volunteers joked around, traded tools and advice, and got things done. Along one wall, a phalanx of volunteers with sewing machines mended clothes. Around the room, toasters and electric fans were being restored. Outside on the terrace, a crew was repairing bicycles. When a repair was successfully completed, we rang a red bell and the room filled with cheers.

Three organizations worked to bring the Repair Fair to town: the Napa County public library, the Napa Resource Conservation District (RCD), and the Reuse Alliance. Library staff provided the community room, chairs and tables, and a warm welcome. Monique Byro from Napa RCD initiated the contact with the Reuse Alliance as the culmination of the City of Napa's *Rooted in Action Week—Semana de Raíces en Acción*, which also included:

- Food waste reduction workshops at Fuller Park, supported by CalFresh and Innovative Health Solutions
- Container gardening in small spaces, presented by the Master Gardeners
- Cleanup of the Napa River, accomplished in kayaks, organized by the LGBTQ+ community.
- The Repair Fair, with the Reuse Alliance providing the expertise and tools.

Byro describes herself as "just a gal, 27 years old, with many an item in need of repair," inspired by the Right to Repair movement and the question posed by Peter Mui of Fixit Clinic: "At one point we've all had a broken toaster. What would it look like if they were in a pile?"

"The Reuse Alliance has the talent to match the need," Byro said.

There were 81 attendees and 41 items repaired that afternoon. As people entered, a volunteer directed them to put their broken items on a scale. The tally for the day was a hefty 497 pounds of waste saved from the dump.

Phoebe Schenker, Reuse Alliance's executive director, said the day at the library was their first event in Napa, but she hopes it won't be the last. The group hosts Repair Fairs around Sonoma and Marin Counties, and recently rented a storefront at the Petaluma Outlet Mall where they will offer free repair workshops, including how to mend clothes. That old favorite sweater...

Help, in short, is at hand. But how in the world did we arrive at this time of great squandering?

To our regret and at our expense, many manufacturers engineer things to wear out, even to the point of deliberately making them difficult or impossible to repair. The practice began in 1924 with the innocent lightbulb. Early 20th century technology had the capacity to produce a lightbulb with a lifespan of 2,500 hours. In what might fairly be called “a deal with the devil,” manufacturers met and agreed to produce lightbulbs with an expected lifespan of just 1,000 hours in order to guarantee future sales. This “planned obsolescence” remains at the heart of much manufacturing. We consumers pay the price in time, money, and plain old annoyance. Worse by far is the growing, catastrophic toll on our planet’s resources.

Actions you can take:

- Visit NapaRCD.org and sign up to receive their newsletter, which lists events like the fabulous Repair Fair.
- Check out the Reuse Alliance’s online Reuse News, which lists upcoming in-person workshops at their new Reuse Hub in Petaluma and future events in the Napa Valley. www.reusealliance.org

Susan Crosby is a volunteer with Napa Climate NOW!, and owner of two perfectly functioning old electric fans.

Photo Credit: Susan Crosby

Photo Caption: A fan gets fixed at the Repair Fair.

