



# Pocket-Sized Environmentalism

Local company raises environmental awareness one bag at a time *By Aric Sleeper*

With a flushed face and eyes darting back and forth, the shopper at the head of the line realizes that they have forgotten one of the most important components of their trip to the grocery store. The cashier sighs and offers paper bags at an additional charge, but everyone involved, even those waiting in line, are noticeably disappointed. In the grocery stores of Santa Cruz County, there is no

greater faux pas than leaving a reusable shopping bag at home.

"As a guy, I don't carry a purse, and I don't really carry a backpack," says Mitch Barlas, founder of Bagito, which sells versatile reusable shopping bags. "A Bagito slides right into my front pocket, no problem, and it's designed to hang on a key ring. That's the idea—when you go into a store you'll at least have one bag with you."

Created by Barlas, a former teacher and principal in the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, the nonprofit Bagito is actually an arm of a larger nonprofit organization called Bagspeak, which seeks to educate K-12 students about environmental literacy through the utilization of an integrated curriculum.

"Around 2008, myself and a small group of teachers began to notice that there was very little environmental education happening in schools," says Barlas. "Kids were not learning anything about environmental studies and we felt that this was a crisis waiting to happen."

The Bagspeak program that resulted incorporates environmental literacy lessons into math, English language arts, social studies, and science using grade-level Common Core standards and real-life environmental examples.



"That's the crux of this," says Barlas. "Kids relate to what's going on in the world around them."

After realizing that grant money for nonprofits is sparse, Barlas put his mind to work devising a way to fund his program. Since each student that participates in the Bagspeak program already received a customizable, reusable shopping bag, the former educator sat down at his sewing machine and came up with the prototype for Bagito.

"It ties in with our mission and our passion," says Barlas.

With a current ban on plastic bags and an extra fee for paper bags throughout most of Santa Cruz County, the Bagito bags were a no-brainer for Barlas.

All of the profits from each Bagito sold go directly back to the Bagspeak program's environmental stewardship and sustainability education. The bags themselves are composed of 100 percent rPet, a recycled material, and are double-stitched, gusseted, and bacteria resistant.

"You can pack it full with two six packs or put rocks in it and it will stand up," says Barlas.

In the future, Barlas hopes to extend his product line beyond shopping bags to reusable packaging of all shapes and sizes, and is already experimenting with reusable garbage and garment bags. Despite his excitement for new sustainable products, Barlas' primary goal has not changed since he started Bagspeak as an educator.

"My hope is that more teachers will find out about this free program and take advantage of it and utilize it, so that kids get the environmental literacy that they deserve," says Barlas. "That's my dream."

*Learn more at [bagito.co](http://bagito.co).*

