

Sandy Gunderson is going from county waste specialist to private consultant

“I had the best job in the county — talking to people about how they can improve the environment,” said Becker County Waste Educator Sandy Gunderson, who has retired but is now a consultant.

Sandy Gunderson is as fired up as ever about finding ways to reduce, reuse or recycle the aluminum cans, half-empty paint jugs, egg shells and used hardwood that flow through the Becker County waste stream.

Gunderson, 65, is the longtime regional household hazardous waste coordinator, recycling coordinator, and waste educator with the Environmental Services Department, and she just retired after nearly 34 years with Becker County. But she still catches herself talking like she works there.

“I love the topic of solid waste, and there are so many other people who have the same passion in the solid waste office,” she said.

While solid waste may seem hard to love, when viewed as a stream of garbage, trash and construction debris, Gunderson sees it differently — as a flow of commodities to be reused or recycled into new products.

“It’s not trash, it’s a resource,” she said. “It’s a paradigm shift, thinking about it in a new way — it’s a resource, not trash.”

The job was mostly about recycling when she first started out, and then about making the best use of household hazardous waste products. But in the last few years, the county has been doing a lot more salvaging and reselling of things that are really too good to be thrown out.

And another focus area to be worked on is “deconstruction,” in which all sorts of useful material is salvaged from houses before they are torn down.

“I really feel like I’m serving others,” she said. “I had the best job in the county — talking to people about how they can improve the environment. It was the best.”

Not that Gunderson is leaving her passion behind — she’s actually going into business as Gunde Environmental Consulting — showing, for example, how businesses can save money by reducing waste.

She has been passionate about the environment for a long time, influenced by musician John Denver and his Windstar Foundation. She visited his Snowmass Foundation for environmental events (and to hear speakers including Jimmy Carter and Al Gore) every year from 1989 through 1995.

“It was way before its time,” she said. That’s where I learned the most, and through his music ... I’m an old John Denver fan, and I got into it through that — love of nature, love of the Earth.”

Gunderson was born in Rhode Island and moved at age 3 with her parents and three older brothers to Detroit Lakes, where she grew up and graduated from high school in 1977.

Her dad was Detroit Lakes police officer LeRoy “Gundy” Gunderson and her mom, Shirley, was a nurse at what was then Emmanuel Nursing Home. Both loved what they did, but started their careers later in life, at about age 40. Until then her dad had been a delivery driver for Peter’s Meat in Detroit Lakes and her mom had been a bookkeeper and stay-at-home mom.

“I had a good childhood,” Gunderson said. “We played outside a lot. I’m so glad I was born when I was — we left in the morning and didn’t get home until after dark. Detroit Lakes was a good place to grow up.”

After high school, she studied to be a sign language interpreter in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, but gave it up due to carpal tunnel and arthritis in her hands. Instead, she earned a four-year degree from what was then Moorhead State University, and worked as a waitress until she joined Becker County in 1990 as a transfer station attendant. In 1997 she became the county’s household hazardous waste coordinator, recycling coordinator and waste educator.

Which means she wore a lot of hats and had a lot of responsibilities — including education in schools and the community, teaching classes on waste-related topics, public speaking, grant writing, working with other counties and state agencies, and all sorts of other things.

She dressed as a recycling clown at public events, the better to get kids’ attention, and brought in Clancey the mercury-sniffing dog to check for mercury in area schools. The red wigglers she uses for home composting were always a hit with the kids, as was an early-model electric dune buggy that she brought to all the schools.

“It was a privilege to work for Becker County,” Gunderson said.

Through it all, she never lost the belief that change would continue for the better.

She loves, and lives by, this Margaret Mead quote: “Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Gunderson serves on governing boards for the Boys & Girls Club of Detroit Lakes, the Boys & Girls Club Thrift Store, and the Becker County Food Pantry, and is active with the local Izaak Walton League.

Gunderson is excited about the future, and wants to keep educating the community through her consulting business (Sandymn412@Yahoo.com), which will have two areas of focus: professional and technical services such as hazardous waste, asbestos and lead inspections, and “working with businesses to pull reusable items out of the waste stream and upscale, reuse, resell, deconstruction,” she said in a business plan.

She hopes to serve local and regional businesses that have a large amount of waste of specific type, such as buckets, tile squares, carpet squares, storage tubes and similar things.

Gunderson is hoping to work with businesses such as grocery stores, retail stores, manufacturers, builders, contractors, realtors, local government and faith communities.

“Businesses are busy and don’t have time to evaluate hazards, special waste, recycling, reuse, demo, deconstruction, and waste diversion,” she said.

Among other goals, she said, is that she would like to “help people understand the impacts our social systems can have on our natural systems,” and help businesses and residents “see waste in a different way.”