

## Jeri Rowe: Unifi spinning plastic bottles into economic gold

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Really, I just wanted to know.

It must've been a few weeks back when I looked up at the huge banners ringing the upper concourse of the Greensboro Coliseum and first spotted images many of us have seen in the Triad's biggest room.

The Who. Bruce Springsteen. James Brown. The ACC basketball tournament, both men's and women's. More than 50 images surrounded the concourse, almost all larger-than-life pictures of pop culture that happened off West Lee Street.

Like some tourist in a new city, I slow-walked around the upper floor. The banners had just gone up, and I wanted to see every image, thinking back to the shows I went to and events I'd seen.

That's when I saw it: Springsteen from 2009.

I took my 10-year-old son. It was his first big show, and he asked all sorts of questions. But once the show started, he stood mute and heard The Boss holler about the great audiences in Greensboro before bellowing, "We're in Steensboro now!"

And at least 30 feet above the coliseum concourse, there was that memory — Springsteen with the "Steensboro" sign.

That's how I found out. These huge banners started out as plastic bottles.

Huh?

So, I drove west and ended up outside Yadkinville. I wanted to see for myself, and there, in the rolling hills of North Carolina, I walked for hours beside the daughter of a tobacco farmer.

Kaye Flippin has spent 35 years with Unifi, the manufacturer who has spun plastic-bottle yarn into economic gold. She is now the spinning plant manager — and the 12th of 13 children from Danbury who learned about recycling and sustainability long before they became the buzz words of her industry.

She remembers her mother's garden and the sharing of clothes between her and her sisters. Today, in a plant with 918 employees, Flippin can sound like a teacher as she explains about how plastic-bottle chips, smaller than a cereal corn flake, can be turned into balls the size of a BB pellet and be melted and spun into yarn that feels like silk.

From start to finish, the process takes a week. Once done, the yarn is spun onto spools and stored along aisles as wide as two bowling alleys, nearly as long as two football fields. From there, the fabric is shipped to manufacturers worldwide and used to make everything from pants to upholstery.

And banners at the Greensboro Coliseum.

Repreve, it's called.

The yarn has helped resurrect Unifi, a Greensboro-based company hurt by a sluggish economy and cheap labor overseas — a situation that caused years of no profit, plant closings and layoffs in Yadkin to Rockingham counties.

Unifi worked to reinvent itself and find ways to cut costs. In 2007, Unifi's engineers turned its own yarn wastes into more yarn. It worked. But there wasn't much demand. A year later, one of Unifi's largest customers asked about needing a new fabric to make its jackets.

The new yarn took off — so much so Unifi needed more wastes to make more yarn. They chose plastic-bottle flakes, washed, chipped and shipped from recycling spots throughout the Southeast. And those bottles were once headed to landfills near and far.

"I thought it would not be as big as it is today because people don't like change," Flippin says. "But it's taken hold. People realized they have to do something with our landfills and keep the bottles out." Unifi once had 5,000 employees and \$3 billion in sales revenue.

Today, it has 2,000 employees and sales revenue of \$750 million. But with plants in Yadkinville, Reidsville and Madison, Unifi now makes money.

Last year, the company reported a profit of \$73 million. Repreve has definitely helped. Production rose from 5 million pounds in 2007 to 42 million pounds in 2011. After several plant expansions, Unifi will have the capacity to make more than 70 million pounds a year by the end of this year.

"I'm one of those 2,000 people," says Roger Berrier Jr., Unifi's chief operating officer and a Surry County native. "We all have a sense of pride of turning this thing around."

It's because of that thing we've all held in our hands: a plastic bottle. I've never thought much about it. But in that huge texturing and spinning plant in Yadkinville, I do.

I see the sign "Choose Repreve And Help Us Make A Better World." Then, I find Jeff Gage.

He's a resource technician, a married father of three who has worked for Unifi for 18 years. A quarter century ago, he moved his family from Texas to North Carolina because he remembered the state's spic-and-span majesty from a family trip when he was 4 or 5.

Gage is now 52. He lives in Pilot Mountain, and he's taught his children to camp and catch bass and catfish in his new home state. Like Flippin, he sees Unifi's plastic-bottle flakes in a different light.

"It's for my kids," he says. "I don't want them worrying about having a nice place to raise their kids. That's the biggest reason. We're taking something out of the landfill and turning it into clothing. I'm glad to be a part of that."

Days later, in a graphics company near the airport, I watched workers feed a roll of fabric from Yadkinville into a huge \$600,000 ink-jet printer. In a process that takes no more than an hour, this printer can embed 100 dots of ink per inch and recreate photos shot at the coliseum in the past 15 years.

The ink is made of vegetable oil, the fabric is made of plastic bottles and the photos are turned into banners, 10 feet high, 18 feet across, that now hang in the Greensboro Coliseum.

It's a manufacturing process that didn't even exist four years ago. The project took more than a year to come together, it needed to involve companies from North Carolina and it evolved into a trade that didn't cost local taxpayers any money.

That's you and me.

The banners created by at Graphic Visual Solutions are now meant to be memory markers, and I'm told they'll always keep their colors. Memories, too.

Take the "Steensboro" banner. I'll see that from now on in any future trip to the coliseum, and I'll always see my son.

In my mind, he'll be 10 forever.