

# THE PUREVANT LIVING PODCAST: THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

with STEPHANIE KRUBSACK

## EPISODE 4: GREG STROMBERG

Stephanie Krubsack 0:00

Hi everybody, this is Stephanie Krubsack with the Purevant Living podcast, Things You Should Know. With me today, I have Greg Stromberg, Founder and CEO of CannedWater4kids just outside of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Thanks so much for being here today.

Greg Stromberg 0:14

Stephanie, this is a real opportunity to share our work and thank you very much for your time today.

Stephanie 0:21

Definitely. Tell us a little bit more about your background running CannedWater4kids, and your interest in the environment and social responsibility.

Greg 0:30

Thank you. It begins probably 12-14 years ago, when I was still working. I'm now retired. I worked for a company called INX International Ink Co. I was director of marketing and sold ink to all the can makers in the world. I had a 47 successful career in the packaging industry and, at the time prior to my retirement, I was thinking about what I could do for my company, my industry, my family, my kids. What kind of legacy could I leave? I had great customers. So I had an idea and learned a little bit about the problems that the world has with water; every 15 seconds a child would die from a waterborne disease. Also I got exposed to a summit in Chicago back in 2007 where they had a gentleman from the United Nations, a consultant on packaging. It was a Canmaker Summit, I think in October that year, and he spoke to the CEOs of major can companies in the supply chain and I happened to be there as a supplier. He challenged all of us and said, "What are you doing to help people in developing countries because their food spoils and their water gets contaminated?" I looked around the room and everybody looked like a deer in headlights. No real answer to his question, but I took that question personally.

Greg 2:25

I had been thinking about it for a while and talking to the owner of The Canmaker magazine and told him that I wanted to do something around cans to give the can, which our ink went on, a higher purpose. That was to use it as a billboard for a cause to get clean water to people. To take Paul Newman's concept, which I always liked Newman's Own brands, and to sell that product in the marketplace and then take the proceeds and put them toward something good, a common good. So, the idea was born. I was able to get the CEO at Crown Cork & Seal to make up a pallet of cans for me and had the water filled in Cold Spring, Minnesota and went out and tried to start selling the water with the idea that I would give that money back to get children clean water.

Greg 3:31

I didn't know how I was going to do it, but started off with water. Then somebody heard about what I was doing and a young lady who worked at Engineers Without Borders at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee came to my office and said, "Hey, I understand you're selling water in cans for the purpose of getting clean water to children." She said, "I work on several projects. Would you like to take on a project with the university?" I said, "Sure, I'd love to." I haven't sold the can yet, but I said, "What do we need to do?" She says, "If you can write me out a check for \$10,000..." You can imagine it took my breath away. I haven't sold a can yet. Not even priced-out a can of water. I said, "Sure," and wrote her a check out of my personal checking. The nonprofit started with a deficit of \$10,000. The good news is that we were able to sell those cans and sell more cans. We were able to recover the money that we put in and we were able to help the engineers go down on their own time and money to the highlands of Guatemala; they work on water projects and that money went to several water projects that they were working on.

Greg 5:12

Twelve years later, the nonprofit has been able to sell over three-and-a-half-million cans of water. We've displaced that many plastic bottles. If people don't know, cans are infinitely recyclable; they become new cans in 60 days and they go right back into the packaging. Unlike other things like plastic and glass, it's not that easy to recycle. Plus there's not a demand for the container.

Stephanie 5:52

You might have answered this previously, but is there a specific experience that led you on the path that you're on today or was it that conference that made you shift gears?

Greg 6:02

Yeah, thank you. Early on, my dad would share with me my grandfather who I never got to meet. I think I was six months old when he passed away. My grandfather graduated from Northwestern back in 1915. He was a dentist and my dad used to tell me stories about how he would fix people's teeth in the Depression. People that had lots of pain and he wouldn't charge them. That always stayed in my craw and then I got exposed to people like Paul Newman and Newman's Own brands, Jimmy Carter and some of the work that he did. I was inspired, along with The Canmaker Summit gentlemen that spoke to us, that this is something that I needed to do. I was fortunate to have this 47-year successful career in the packaging industry, three healthy children, nine healthy grandchildren. Having all that success and being blessed with healthy children and knowing what was happening around the world, I felt I needed to do something. That was my inspiration.

Stephanie 7:21

That's really great. Your grandfather's story, building-off of his legacy, how he helped others. What do you want people to learn and take away from your efforts with CannedWater4kids?

Greg 7:47

Like I've told Stephanie earlier in our conversation, I'm a student and a teacher, probably more a student than a teacher. I'm always like a little kid, curious, and I became very curious about water. I think I'm still in kindergarten when it comes to learning about how precious our water is, and how little we know about our water. The three questions that I give everybody is: 1. Do you know where the source of your water came from? Did it come from a river? Did it come from a lake, like Lake Michigan? Did it come from an aquifer? Did it come from the air? Where did it come from? I think it's important to know. The second question is, how did it get clean? Was it reverse osmosis? Did it just bubble up out of the ground and somebody put it in a container? Very important to know how your water is cleaned because some of the processes strip the minerals out of the water and then they add other minerals to give it taste. Not always the best in the world, when people talk about what is healthy drinking water.

The third question is, how did it get to you? You would think that would be a silly question to ask, right? Living in Milwaukee or maybe Flint, the water travels from a filtration plant through pipes which are 100-plus years old made from lead. They go to connectors, probably made from lead depending on what part of the city you live in. In 2000 cities, by the way, the infrastructures have lead and they contaminate the water along with the lead in the older homes, because back then lead was not considered to be poisonous or unhealthy. So that last question, How did the water get to you?, is very important. If it came in a container, a big plastic jug, you want to know that too because all of these questions have answers that tell you how healthy your water is.

Stephanie 10:22

We're fortunate today to have a lot of products that do test the water or filter even further. That's really something to think about how it gets to you and how it's transported too, even the bottled or canned water. Talking earlier about how your work with CannedWater4kids impacts the environment and society and mentioning 3.5 million cans, that's significant. That's that many less water bottles that are out in landfills right now or maybe processing plants, depending on how many actually end up there to be recycled. Looking at maybe how it impacts society, too.

Greg 11:04

We have too much abundance. We waste food, we waste resources. We're not good stewards of our air, our water. Plastic goes in landfills; I think 7% plastic water bottles get recycled by the Cokes and the Pepsis.

Stephanie 11:26

That's very low.

Greg 11:28

Yeah. That plastic breaks down. If it's in the ocean, it becomes soluble, and then it becomes part of the liquid that we all consume, that the animals consume. The water that's used in our food processing is mixed in there. The death rate in America, people were living longer and they're not living as long as they used to. Some people talk about the stress, but I think stress along with cancer-causing chemicals and other contaminants that get in our water that aren't controlled properly is a real problem. I think our leadership is asleep at the switch and the train wreck is... it's not a train wreck, it's the frog in the boiling water, the slowly boiling water. We're slowly cooking and poisoning ourselves to death.

Stephanie 11:30

It stems from manufacturers because, as consumers, we have what's available, right? If we're not living off the land, so to speak, we have to buy what we can to get by.

Greg 12:43

That's where education becomes important. We need to learn and understand answers to these three questions. I think you should demand from our elected officials answers and transparency about what is going on with our food. As you know, E. coli... I love fresh food and I get lettuce. We're always reading about whether it's the meat, the hamburger, killing people because of E. coli or listeria or whatever. We need to be more careful and regulate and set higher standards, whether it's water, air or food, you name it.

Stephanie 13:33

It's all connected. In addition to your message to listeners on how they can impact the environment and society, you mentioned to ask yourself these three questions about where your water is coming from, how it's being sourced. Is there anything else you'd like to add to that for listeners? What action they can take.

Greg 13:53

The important thing is you should have your water tested and there's several places you can do it. You can do it through your state. A lot of states, you can send them samples of your water. We will have shortly on our website where you can send your water to have it tested and that's [CannedWater4Kids.org](http://CannedWater4Kids.org). Whether you have a well or you're getting water through your municipality, it's important to know are there any contaminants in your water. Water does change from season to season.

Stephanie 14:48

That's interesting.

Greg 14:50

There are regulations for schools that they have to test the water every year. The government does post that. There is a website also where you can put in your zip code, it'll be on our website too, that will tell you what the recent analysis is that the EPA did on your water for where you live.

Stephanie 15:12

That sounds like a really helpful tool. I did not know of that one. We'll have a link to that for listeners, too. That'll be great. We talked earlier about all the different initiatives and projects you're working on, what are some of them that you'd like to share that are top-of-the-list right now?

Greg 15:31

The one thing that we think is important is to get children involved in learning about water. Water 101, we call it. We're working on some ideas of helping kids learn more about water. We're partnering with a couple of local city schools and Cardinal Stritch University. We may see Marquette University involved, but we'd like to get all the universities involved to help kids learn a little bit about what is water and possibly looking at the democratization of water. There'll be more to come about what we'll be doing with all the schools in the nation with children with our water to make sure that they can answer those three questions or know where they can get the information on those three questions. After all, they are our future and our future leadership. We need to do what's right for everybody.

Stephanie 16:51

That sounds really great. I know that you can't share all the details yet. That'll be coming soon. Very excited to learn more about that.

Greg 16:59

Thank you.

Stephanie 17:00

You mentioned working with a local university, Cardinal Stritch, with some of their classes. Do you want to talk more about that?

Greg 17:08

We participated in a Mission Fuel project which was, I guess you could say, an entrepreneurial course for nonprofits. Nonprofits operate just like regular businesses; they have the same challenges. They have customers, they have cash flow, they have to think about sustainability. They need to hold on and retain their best customers. They need to create new value and innovation and look for new markets, so they can sustain themselves. They need to hire and find good people that share their vision, their purpose and their core values.

Stephanie 18:02

That's really great. We talked earlier too about your project in Kenya with CannedWater4kids.

Greg 18:07

This is an interesting project. We work with a company called Stonehouse Water Technologies in Milwaukee, part of The Water Council, a startup company that they helped to move forward. We were one of the first to purchase, what they call, a pod system. It is a new way of cleaning water, unlike RO (reverse osmosis), that pushes the water through filters and, in order to make one good gallon of water, you waste about four gallons of water to have one clean. You're literally stripping all the minerals out of the water and taking out all the other bad things, E. coli and whatnot. But their system... and oh, I should say RO uses a lot of energy; it's energy intensive and it wastes water. Their system does not waste water. You don't take the minerals out, it takes out all the other bad things, lead and viral, like E. coli and whatnot, and gives you water with less energy use that is as good as when it started. They literally have taken water out of the Milwaukee River, put it through their system and it was better than probably the water in the middle of Lake Michigan.

Stephanie 19:44

Oh, wow!

Greg 19:45

We purchased one of those pods for a hospital and school and in Kenya, Africa. We hope to generate some more funds for that project because, not only are they helping the school and the hospital, but they have a whole village of people that need clean water. Right now, they're taking it out of the lake. We were told a very sad story that these poor kids that go down to get the water many times get eaten by the crocodiles. Not only is the water killing them, but the animals are looking at them as prey.

Stephanie 20:29

That's a very sad story. That's great that you have one of the pods there. I think I was at an event at The Water Council where they did have that on display, that company. It's really interesting. I think a lot of people probably don't know this about reverse osmosis. A lot of people seem to be in favor of, but if it strips all the good minerals out and it takes so much to process it, then it's actually not as great as we think it is. I know a lot of people can get that installed right to their water system in their home, to their faucet so that's really good information to know.

Greg 21:03

Yes, and it was born right here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Thanks to all the universities. I think Wisconsin has a freshwater school and Marquette has it, along with UWM and then Madison and MSOE. I think everybody is contributing and this is the water hub for the world.

Stephanie 21:36

We have some of the biggest fresh bodies of water right here, so what a better place to have it, right here in the Midwest. I know you mentioned earlier too your work with Engineers Without Borders. Do you want to talk about the project in Guatemala?

Greg 21:50

What we do is we give the students money that we've been able to generate through the sale of our product. I would also like to clarify that we don't ship water overseas. We have when the Red Cross or Second Harvest Japan came for the tsunami or Portal Light for Haiti after the earthquake, we did ship water. But our water all stays in North America, and we sell the water and then take all the proceeds, 95 cents of every dollar goes for a water project. We give this money through the sale of our cans to the students. Not for the travel, they go on their own time and money to travel there, but for the supplies.



They build purification modules because the water comes from the mountain streams and it's all very polluted. But they've been able to take that water, make it clean, put in piping for the villages and then the people actually have running water. Now the other thing that we believe in is sustainability. We don't think you should just give anybody money. You want to teach them how to fish, right? You want them to sustain that clean water. So the Engineers Without Borders teach a villager, who becomes the water manager for that village. The people work on the project, so they know how the pipes work and how they go together. So the engineers are very good at doing that.

Stephanie 23:29

That's really great. It's amazing how you're partnering with all these different organizations and universities in the area for any freshwater project. That's very amazing that you give 95% of proceeds, that's huge. I feel like a lot of organizations maybe give 50-60%, but that's a very significant percentage. I want to applaud you for that, too.

Greg 23:50

Thank you.

Stephanie 23:52

What does social responsibility mean to you? Kind of a vague question, but...

Greg 23:59

Not everybody is fortunate to have abundance, like myself or other people. There are people, as you learned, with the water problems that don't have access to technology or resources. They're not only drinking bad water, they're becoming unhealthy and not living like we live. So, to be understanding and serving those who are in most need is what I would say in answer to your question. That's what I believe is what needs to be done.

Stephanie 24:57

Touching upon what you mentioned earlier, when you think of freshwater projects you might think of third world countries, but it's also an issue here in Milwaukee, in Flint, Michigan where some individuals that live in older homes, with older piping and lead. It's right here in our backyard happening, so it's everywhere.

Greg 25:18

We've poisoned a lot of children in Flint, in Milwaukee, and in 2000 other cities. That's why we need the answers to the three questions. We need to hold the people that are responsible accountable for our well-being and safety. After all, the leadership... and I think the word leadership with moral courage is used today. It is extremely expensive to replace an infrastructure. Flint, Michigan is still not fixed. People still don't have access. The kids, I'm sure, are still drinking bad water. I'm sure that holds true for Milwaukee. Special zip codes still have issues, older homes. The moral courage is in doing the right thing and spending the money. People are too worried about their money. We spend the money on the wrong things. If it was my child and I found out that they were drinking that bad water, it would be beyond emotional. I think it's not right and we need to change it.

Stephanie 26:40

And bringing awareness which you mentioned earlier. You're going to have resources on your website where you can enter your zip code if you might be in an area that you should really get your water tested. But everybody really should whether you have your own well or if you are consuming city water. You can buy water filters for \$20. ZeroWater is one I'm using where it has a little testing thing where I actually tested my tap water. It had 165 parts per million of these other particles, which is a lot. My old filter took out 10; that's it, 155. Then I tested it with this new filter, zero. It's very interesting. There's very small steps you can take that can help, but definitely get your water tested.

Greg 27:22

Be aware and, as we've all found out with the coronavirus, not all testing kits are the same. We need standardization, we need regulation, we need testing on the regulation by a third independent party, of course. And then we need transparency.

Stephanie 27:52

Yeah, definitely. Together we can take the steps. Again, we'll post the resources so everybody can access that. So back to some of the initiatives you're working on, is there anything else you want to share? Did we cover most of the current projects?

Greg 28:06

One of the things we're working on is everything drinking water. We'd like to be a resource to the world on education and problem-solving and shared learning. Today's technology allows us to do that. The world is flat and, with open source problem-solving, anybody can help contribute. Just like the Linux software where they write code, right? Most of our computers run on the code written freely by computer people for bragging rights. Our vision is, and as part of our charter as a nonprofit, to continue to educate, especially children, about what is clean, safe, healthy drinking water. So they'll be smarter and maybe help solve those problems for the future.

Stephanie 29:07

Definitely, then they can go home and share with their families and be that voice of reason from a small individual to teach them young. So, kind of a fun question here. What is your personal mantra or theme song that gets you back to a good state of mind or redirects your mindset to a good place?

Greg 29:26

I'm not really a music person, but I think that one of my friends taught me value given for value received, but it's really about giving more value than you receive, and being service to those in most need. To me, I define success by making sure all those children in the world will have access to clean, safe drinking water and no kid will ever die because of a waterborne disease. If I have to sum it up, it's service to others, especially those in most need.

Stephanie 30:12

I really like that... service to others.

Greg 30:14

Thank you.

Stephanie 30:16

Are there any books you'd like to share? I know we talked about a couple earlier. You had some good ones. I like to share with listeners.

Greg 30:21

Yeah, probably.

Stephanie 30:24

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, I think was one of them.

Greg 30:30

One that I think could be used everywhere is Rewards and Punishments by Alfie Kohn. When you look at what drives processes and systems, whether it's political, business, nonprofits, whatever, the book he wrote talks about how manipulative money can be when it's used as a reward system. It's short-lived and people wind up working for the money, not for the purpose. I think the takeaway there is that we want to create environments where people can be intrinsically motivated. That's where I think you get more value and more passion and more potential from your teams and your employees.

Stephanie 31:36

I definitely agree with that.

Greg 31:38

Thank you.

Stephanie 31:39

How can listeners reach you?

Greg 31:40

The best way is through our website, [CannedWater4kids.org](http://CannedWater4kids.org). You can call me, if you'd like. I'm always hesitant to give out my phone number, especially today with all the robocalls and the threats that I get from the IRS.

Stephanie 32:00

We'll leave it to your email maybe.

Greg 32:02

You can reach me at [greg@CannedWater4kids.org](mailto:greg@CannedWater4kids.org). It's spelled c-a-n-n-e-d-w-a-t-e-r, the numeral four, and then k-i-d-s dot org.

Stephanie 32:19

Perfect. Thank you so much for your time today sharing all about your initiatives, CannedWater4kids. Thank you again so much for sharing and have a great day, everybody.

Greg 32:29

Thank you, Stephanie. Thank you for what you do.