



## An Island Crusader Takes On The Big Brands Behind Plastic Waste

By Christopher Joyce, NPR, January 15, 2019

Froilan Grate doesn't come across as a fire-breathing revolutionary. At 35 and just maybe 5 feet tall, with a wispy goatee, he has the kind of sincerity you might expect from someone who once wanted to be a priest. He carries a backpack and could pass for a college student.

He grew up in a village in the province of Iloilo in the Philippines — a self-described “island boy” who loved the feel of hot sand on his bare feet and swimming in the ocean. But the city beckoned. He was accepted by one of the country's best universities in the capital. He chose school instead of the priesthood. At age 18, he took a 19-hour boat trip to Manila.



Photo: Madeleine Cook/NPR

Grate remembers grabbing his suitcase and rushing up on deck as the captain announced their entry into Manila Bay. “It was just excitement,” he says. “And then slowly, as you come closer to the port ... I see ... garbage.”

He felt sick. “The contrast of where I grew up, beautiful white sand beaches, clear water, and arriving in Manila where it's black water with countless plastic,” he says, “that was shocking to me.”

His first thought at the time, he says, was that his own island would someday end up strewn with plastic as well. His next one was: What can I do to stop it?

### Saying no to plastic

At university, Grate did what he could as a citizen. He stopped using plastic bags, plastic straws, plastic anything, whenever he could. He studied sociology but found it boring — too theoretical. After college, he decided to become a community activist.

He got involved in teaching about environmentalism, what he called “giving tools to change-makers.” But he wanted faster change. “You don't actually save a marine turtle by speaking to 1,000 students at a time,” he says. He joined an environmental group, the Mother Earth Foundation, and worked with waste pickers to get them formally employed by communities and to improve their working conditions.

But it still wasn't enough. “You realize that despite everything that you do, you really aren't solving the problem,” he recalls.



### **A lesson from a letter**

After several years of community work, Grate says he changed. He realized that cleaning up plastic at the local level wasn't going to stop the tide. "It would take several lifetimes," he recalls thinking. "At some point you have to change the entire system."

One incident stands out in his memory. In 2006, he appealed to a big Western company for help. He and his colleagues at the Mother Earth Foundation and Greenpeace wrote to McDonald's to urge it not to use plastic foam packaging. He took the letter to the corporate offices in Manila. No one would come down to talk to him. Eventually a security guard agreed to take the letter.

"That very moment really crystallized for me the imbalance in the power dynamics," Grate says now. "We were not violent. We just wanted to give a letter requesting them to stop using Styrofoam in their stores." And they simply ignored him.

### **Blaming Southeast Asia**

In 2015, a paper in Science magazine shocked the world with extraordinary revelations about the extent of the plastic tide. Jenna Jambeck at the University of Georgia, an engineer and waste expert, calculated how much plastic waste was going into the ocean every year. She is the one who came up with the 8 million-ton figure.

The research also opened up a wound. It showed that the biggest sources of plastic waste washing into the oceans are in Southeast and South Asia.

Fingers were pointed. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., laid it out loud and clear in a Senate hearing: "Over 50 percent of the plastic waste in the oceans comes from just five countries: China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. Their upland waste management systems are a failure."

People in the Philippines were angry — among them, Grate. It was blaming the victim, not the manufacturers. "They know the problem, the s\*\*\* they've been giving to the country and oceans," he says. "They know this problem, but they can get away with it. We have to make sure that ends."

A group called Break Free from Plastic came together in 2016. Its global coordinator is a Filipino, Von Hernandez, formerly of Greenpeace. The plan was to challenge companies. Says Hernandez: "If we cannot recycle it or compost this material, then you should not be producing them in the first place."

But how to make that happen? The consumer brands were billion-dollar companies. And the companies that make the plastic for all that packaging were giants of the oil and gas industry.

In 2016, Grate and other local activists in the Philippines proposed a novel action, something no one had done before: brand audits.

These environmental groups did regular beach cleanups, which helped bring attention to the problem even if the beaches were covered with trash again a few months later. But now they wanted to compile



a list of the brand logos emblazoned on the plastic trash and publicize them for all to see.

“They feel there is value in brand,” Grate says of the companies. Consumers trust brands. “We wanted to use it against them.”

The activists targeted Freedom Island in Manila Bay, probably the most notorious pit of plastic in the country, for a brand audit. Plastic not only surrounds the shore but piles up knee-deep on beaches. Plastic bags hang from trees like some kind of surreal Dalí painting. The activists collected trash for days and published online the brand logos printed on each package.

And they waited to see what would happen.

### **Is anyone watching?**

Not much did, actually. Word spread among conservation groups that this “brand audit” was a new strategy. It was naming and shaming. But was anyone else paying attention?

Grate and his team didn’t know, but they kept at it. Along with GAIA and Break Free from Plastic, they’ve now done more than 20 brand audits in the Philippines and several in other Southeast Asian countries.

Last September, I saw one in a village called Navotas, a poor neighborhood of cinder block dormitory-style buildings on Manila Bay that floods twice a day, carrying plastic back and forth like some sort of oceanic seesaw. For the audit, volunteers sift through piles of trash, in this case collected from homes. The idea is to see not just what floats onto shorelines but what’s coming from onshore.

It’s dirty work — eight days of community trash spread in piles on the concrete floor of a fenced-in outdoor basketball court. It stinks; workers wear masks and gloves.

Grate dives in, sorting trash into different types of plastic and reading off labels while a colleague takes notes. “Colgate toothpaste sachet,” he says. “Colgate-Palmolive Philippines.” And another: “Sunsilk shampoo sachet, Unilever.” It will take all day to go through all of it.

He says the companies should be part of the solution. “So who are the companies?” he asks. “That is why we do brand audits.”

Lao, with the Philippine industry group, says the brand audits are a distraction. “There’s a lot of very loud noises out there” about corporate responsibility, he points out. “Does it affect brand image at this point? No,” he says of the audits, adding, “It has not affected actual performance of these brands in the market.”

He says the major consumer brands are already committed to reducing plastic waste. He notes the well-publicized pledge by the brands that by 2025 they’ll use only plastic packaging that can be re-used, recycled or composted. In fact, Unilever has a new chemical process to recycle sachets and a



pilot plant in Indonesia to test it. Other companies have committed millions of dollars in research funds to find recyclable alternatives.

In the Philippines, Lao's industry group is planning a research and development effort there to make more plastic recyclable. "The idea right now is that how can we now together, with the global partners, redesign the product so it becomes more recyclable, [and] look at recycling the existing products that are there?" he asks, "because [they're] not going to disappear overnight."

Activists are skeptical.

### **A surprise invitation**

But Grate's name-and-shame approach appears to have had some effect. Late last year, he got a call out of the blue. A mediation group, the Meridian Institute in Washington, D.C., invited him to come talk to people in the U.S. who were concerned about plastic waste. It was a surprise to him. He didn't know how far news of his audits had traveled. And even more surprising: The people in Washington wanted him to talk with corporate executives from some of the very companies he had been targeting.

I met Grate in Washington, D.C., on a cold sidewalk in December. "I love this weather," he said. "It's like free air conditioning." He said he felt he had to come to the meeting because there was only one other Asian invited. When he got there, he found himself sitting across from senior executives from the oil industry, the chemicals industry and the consumer goods industry. Not just any companies — some of the world's biggest. He was asked not to name them; one attendee told NPR that anonymity was guaranteed so everyone could speak freely.

I asked Grate if the brand audits made the meeting happen? "They weren't happy about it," he said of the audits. "And they have questions," he added, about how his group does them. "But I would say this: The brand audits contributed to the pace of the discussion that's happening right now."

I asked how he felt about that. "It's great," he said, beaming. "I was made to feel that I have a voice, and people would want to listen to what I have to say. People were actually interested."

After 18 years, says the island boy from Iloilo, things are looking up.