Milly Zantow
Recycling Revolutionary
When you are all done using something, do you throw it away or recycle it? How do you know if something can be recycled? What happens to something when you recycle it?

The answers to these questions were important to Milly Zantow (zun-toe). She was a revolutionary (rev-o-lu-shun-air-e) in the world of recycling. Her work to make recycling plastic possible changed her community, Wisconsin, and the world.

Photo courtesy of the Stevens and Zantow families.

Mildred “Milly” Zantow (1923-2014)
Mildred “Milly” Taylor was born in Hallett, Oklahoma, on February 13, 1923. She was one of seven children in her family. They depended on their farm and worked hard to care for the land and animals living on it. They saved, reused, and repurposed (re-pur-pussed) everything they could. The lessons Milly learned from her family stayed with her long after she left home.

Photo courtesy of the Stevens and Zantow families.

Here is Milly as a child on the farm, surrounded by her family. Milly is seated in the very front (1927).
Milly’s family valued education. She planned to go to college after high school, but her family needed her to care for a sister recovering (re-kov-er-ing) from surgery. Milly tried to continue her studies while caring for her sister and working. She married Wayne Stevens and they had two sons. After Wayne died, she moved to California and met Forrest “Woody” Zantow. They married and Milly and her sons moved to live with Woody in Wisconsin. Milly and Woody had a son together. Their family lived on the Baraboo Bluffs.
Milly was very active in her community. She volunteered at many places. One of these places was a conservation (kon-ser-vey-shun) organization (awr-guh-nuh-zey-shun) called the International Crane Foundation (ICF). At ICF she worked hard caring for cranes and helping to run the organization. In 1978 Milly went on a trip to Japan for ICF. While she was there something caught her attention. She noticed that Japanese people sorted their trash. Each day they put containers of just one kind of trash on the sidewalk to be collected and recycled.

Photo courtesy of the Stevens and Zantow families.

This is Milly in the 1970s. What do you see in the framed picture behind her?
After returning home to Sauk County, Milly learned that the landfill was filling too quickly and leaked toxic chemicals into the ground. It was closing before it was scheduled to, and another landfill might not be ready soon enough. That news upset Milly. She left her job at ICF to find a solution.

She went to the landfill and saw it was full of plastic waste. Plastic was used to make more and more products, especially packaging. People tossed it after just one use. That plastic waste was harmful to the environment.

Milly told the county board that they should recycle all that plastic. They told her that they didn’t know how, that nobody did. That didn’t stop Milly.
A Plan Takes Shape

What she had seen in Japan inspired Milly. She knew other things were already being recycled in her community and other places. She did research to find answers to her questions about recycling plastic.

She asked a milk company in Milwaukee what they did about defects in plastic milk jugs. Did they throw them away? No, they melted them down, and made new ones. When she heard that, she thought that recycling plastic had to be possible.

Milly went to area plastics companies to ask if they would use post-consumer plastic to make their products. Would they use it? Maybe, but it wasn’t so simple. Melting all the different types of plastic together to make something new wouldn’t work. Plastic items would have to be collected, sorted, cleaned, and ground up to be used. Who was willing to do all that? Milly was.

Photo credit: Wisconsin DNR.
At the University of Wisconsin-Baraboo/Sauk County, Milly learned how to do tests to identify different plastics such as scratch tests, water-weight tests, and burn tests.

She also decided that she needed a special plastic grinder to grind up plastic items, but those grinders were expensive! She told her friend Jenny Ehl (ail) and Jenny offered to help. They cashed in their life insurance (in-shur-anse) policies to get the money. It was risky, but Milly and Jenny knew it was important. They picked up the grinder in Chicago and hauled it back to Wisconsin in their truck.
THE BUSINESS OF RECYCLING PLASTIC

Milly and Jenny started E-Z Recycling in 1979. E-Z stood for Ehl-Zantow, the last names of its two founders, Jenny Ehl and Milly Zantow. From the beginning they were busy ... busy making a difference!

Milly and Jenny went to schools near their warehouse to ask students to collect plastic items for recycling. They spoke to people in their community and others about the importance of recycling. And they recruited (re-cru-ted) people from the area to help them collect, sort, clean, break down, and grind up recyclable materials.

Photo courtesy of the Stevens and Zantow families.

Plastic items to be recycled
After a few years of very hard labor, Milly and Jenny sold E-Z Recycling in 1982. Not too long after that it became Wisconsin Intercounty Nonprofit Recycling (also known as WINR). Milly helped oversee the new organization. She recognized that even though they were doing good work, there was still so much more to do. She wanted everyone, everywhere to recycle.

Milly at work recycling

Photo courtesy of the Stevens and Zantow families.
The problem was that the tests to tell the different types of plastic apart were dangerous. How could they make recycling safer and easier so everyone could do it? Milly, Jenny, and others had an idea: why not imprint a number inside a triangle into plastic products? The number was part of a system to identify different plastics. People could then sort and recycle without the tests.

Milly and others shared the idea and pushed to get the Society of the Plastics Industry to adopt the system. In 1988 the Resin Identification (eye-den-ti-fi-kay-shun) Code system came into use. The system helped launch recycling around the country and the world.

Photo credit: PBS Wisconsin Education.

Here you can see the recycling symbol (a triangle made of chasing arrows) that has a number one inside and the letters PETE below. This means the item is made of polyethylene terephthalate, which is recyclable.
Milly’s recycling work didn’t end with the system. She kept talking to people about recycling and helped write Wisconsin’s recycling law to keep recyclables out of landfills. The law passed in 1990.

On August 3, 2014 Milly died at the age of 91. But Milly’s recycling spirit lives on. Recycling has become part of everyday life. As recycling continues to change, more people like Milly will meet those future challenges. Who will be the next problem-solver to stand up and become a revolutionary for our environment?

Milly never stopped sharing about the importance of recycling.
**Glossary**

**conservation (n):** protecting and taking care of things in nature like animals, plants, air, and water

**environment (n):** the world of living and nonliving things

**landfill (n):** a place where waste is buried between layers of earth

**plastic (n):** human-made material easily molded into different shapes to make useful items

**post-consumer (adj):** something that has been used and thrown away

**recycle (v):** to save and break down items that may have gone into a landfill to make new items

**Resin Identification Code system (n):** a set of symbols stamped on plastic products that identify the type of plastic resin they are made of

**revolutionary (n):** someone who brings about a major change or changes in ways of thinking and acting

**toxic (adj):** something that may be harmful and can cause illness or even death