

Speaker 1: As part of the University of Michigan's bicentennial celebration, the U of M Library brought StoryCorps to campus to capture personal stories of the people who make up this University's rich history.

One of the more memorable episodes of the '90s sitcom Seinfeld is the one where Kramer fills Newman's mail truck full of cans and bottles. Their destination? Michigan, of course. For these two yahoos looking to get rich quick, the ten cent bottle deposit had them both seeing green.

Today, Michigan still has the nation's highest bottle deposit rate. It turns out, if it weren't for a handful of U of M students in 1976, none of this would have been possible. Dave DeVarti was one of those students. His father owned Dominick's, the popular watering hole near the law and business schools. Growing up in Ann Arbor, and so close to campus, meant DeVarti had absorbed the University's cosmopolitan energy long before he ever enrolled as an undergraduate. For our latest StoryCorps installment, Dave sat down with his longtime friend Lisa Powers to reflect on how Ann Arbor and U of M shaped his life as an activist. He began by recounting the legendary campaign to change recycling habits in Michigan.

Dave DeVarti: After it was on the ballot, when we were starting to work on this in the fall of 1976, Tom Moran, who was a fellow student of mine at the School of Natural Resources came up with this idea, let's do a cross-state walk. It will take two weeks. We'll go through all these major communities, Benton Harbor, St. Joseph, Battle Creek, Albion, Jackson, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and we'll end up in Detroit. So we'll start with our feet in the lake, at Lake Michigan, and we'll end at the Detroit river, at Belle Isle.

Three of my friends, Jeff Ross, Tom Moran, and Tim Kunion, started the walk. Pretty quickly, it was clear that they were going to be just identified and written off as students. Russel McKee, who was the editor of the Department of Natural Resource Magazine, Michigan Natural Resources, took a leave from his job and the four of them just walked. Every day they had a daily goal, and we would do activities and rallies. At the halfway point, just outside of Jackson, we picked up a half a mile of road and had a huge mountain of bags of bottles that we picked up in a half mile.

Lisa Powers: I've seen the photos, they're really good.

Dave DeVarti: We did that, we had rallies at U of M and Eastern Michigan University in Ypsi. We did another big pick up at Belle Isle. The Detroit News, and the Detroit Free Press came out and it was even on the TV news for the Detroit stations. It was really our way to combat the... We didn't have the money to put forward on the campaign, but we wanted to make the case and do it in a way that would appeal to people. Because we were able to do this as a petition drive, and not through the legislature, we went for a ten cent deposit. It was the highest deposit in the country.

The only two other states that had it at the time, Oregon and Vermont, were nickel deposits, although Oregon just raised their deposit recently to ten cents. All the states subsequently that have come in are nickel deposits. People that watch, I know Jerry Seinfeld's show, got a lot of... And people still remember taking all the nickel deposits from New York and driving them in a mail truck to Michigan to get the ten-cent return fee.

Lisa Powers: [laughter]

Dave DeVarti: I'm really proud of that. The one thing we didn't foresee was the advent of bottled water. We thought water is free. It comes out of the tap. Who needs to buy, who's going to be drinking bottled water. Unfortunately, still water in bottles does not have a deposit, so that's something we could still improve in Michigan legislation.

Lisa Powers: Recycling's come along at least since then.

Dave DeVarti: That's true.

Lisa Powers: You are a community changer. You changed the landscape of Michigan with the bottle bill. It's a nice beautiful, clean landscape now. You are still focused on community activism. It's very appreciated.

Dave DeVarti: You'll never stop me from being what I call a citizen of the community, by being a community activist. Right now I'm on the Board of Trustees at the community college. It's really important to me that people coming from economically distressed communities have access to lower tuition post-secondary education, and the community colleges really do that, and do it successfully. I do that and many other things as well.

Lisa Powers: And you're taking care of your childhood friend who you employed. He worked at Dominick's, and a very loyal employee and friend. Now he's suffering from ALS.

Dave DeVarti: Correct. His brother and sister are in Florida. I'm here. His brother and I are co-guardians. To me, you're bringing a tear to my eye. That's not something you need to ask me to do. That's something I'll always do. I've known him all my life.

Lisa Powers: Well, you take care of people. The community is different because you've made it better. I've never made Dave cry before.

Dave DeVarti: I just want to say, growing up in Ann Arbor and being engaged with the university community, as well as the broader community, has from day one, when I was a kid in high school, our neighborhood was a mixture of students and families, and just engaging with the students in various ways. I started working at Dominick's on the weekends, busing tables when I was in junior high school, and sitting down with the college students and faculty members that

would engage my dad. People from all over the world would come to the U of M. We met people from Egypt, and Nigeria. They would come to the University and sit in the chairs at Dominick's. It gave me a cosmopolitan education about the world, which I cherish.

Lisa Powers: You never even got a degree from U of M.

Dave DeVarti: That's true. I was too... When it came time to decide between finishing classes that I ended up getting incompletes in, or finishing the political campaign, the political campaign always took precedence.

Lisa Powers: Not surprisingly. You're a good guy Dave DeVarti.

Dave DeVarti: As you are.

Lisa Powers: I'm not a guy.

Dave DeVarti: You're such an important part of the community as well, and I know that.

Speaker 1: That was Dave DeVarti speaking with longtime friend Lisa Powers about the climate of activism in Ann Arbor and at the University of Michigan. These interviews were recorded by StoryCorps, www.storycorps.org. For more from this series, visit arts.umich.edu/storycorps.