

How cleanups along Miami's waterways have led to a team effort, environmental changes

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A decade ago, Dave Doebler and Dara Schoenwald began bringing people together to remove trash along Miami's waterways.

The Miami Beach couple, who are married and refer to themselves as "partners in all things," have since made their website and nonprofit, [VolunteerCleanup.org](https://www.volunteercleanup.org), into a place where volunteers can search for or organize cleanups that lead to changes in government and corporations.

"We believe that in order to solve this problem it takes action from individuals, businesses, and government," said Doebler, 51, a former sales director for a cyber security firm.

Through participating in their cleanups, influential decision-makers have adopted new policies against [single-use plastics](#).

Litter laws after cleanups

Six years ago, Dan Gelber, who would become the mayor of Miami Beach, participated in a [cleanup](#) with Doebler, Schoenwald, 47, and other volunteers on the MacArthur Causeway. They removed 1,300 pounds of trash.

"During [election season](#), we invite candidates on cleanups so that they can see the problem firsthand, Doebler said.

"We also help them lead their own cleanups so that they are engaging with the [local community](#) and to show that they are problem solvers," he said.

From this experience, Gelber and the Miami Beach City Commission started the Plastic Free Miami Beach business incentive campaign, banned plastic straws and Styrofoam in the city of Miami Beach, and led a vendor change from Coca-Cola to Pepsi so that 100% plastic-free bottles are sold on city property.

"That all stemmed from a cleanup," Doebler said.

The Miami Beach City Commission also banned smoking on beaches in Miami Beach.

Cigarette butts account for nearly 20% of all litter and remain the most

common littered item, according to a study by Keep America Beautiful.

The report estimates that each year, 9.7 billion cigarette butts are littered in the United States, with four billion of that being in waterways.

"People from around the world come to enjoy Miami Beach, and our beaches are the crown jewel," Mayor Gelber said in a statement to the Ocean Conservancy. "We are standing up to protect our most valuable and beloved gem for generations to come."

Irela Bague, chief bay officer for Miami-Dade County, has also worked with Doebler and Schoenwald on cleanups.

"It has been a blessing to work with community leaders such as Dave Doebler and Dara Schoenwald," Bague said. "Not only do they coordinate and support weekly cleanups all over the county, but their advocacy efforts on behalf of the Biscayne Bay Marine Health Coalition have led to policy changes to improve the health of Biscayne Bay."

Said Doebler: "Everybody has a role to play. We're really proud of the community and the ability to provide a steppingstone into environmentalism."

After team members of the Knight Foundation did a paddle cleanup with Doebler and Schoenwald, they phased out bottled water from their offices, from seeing the devastating toll of plastic waste in the waterways.

Remembering their roots

In 2013, while kayaking in Biscayne Bay, Doebler picked up whatever trash he could. He and Schoenwald soon realized that it would take a team effort to tackle the large amount of marine debris.

"The kayak was full of trash," said Schoenwald, "and I had this 'Aha!' moment of we're going to get you a bigger boat or we're going to get people to help."

The following year, in 2014, Doebler and Schoenwald created VolunteerCleanup.org and started organizing cleanups in Miami.

"One of the first things we realized when we started the organization," said Schoenwald, "was that we are just two people, and we can only be in one place at a time. That was going to handicap us and constrain the scale and the impact that we could have."

It was then that their idea was born: Get like-minded people to host cleanups in their neighborhoods.

During cleanups, volunteers would often ask the pair when the next cleanup would be and would comment that they knew other people who were also organizing cleanups.

"That's when we realized that there were pockets of people doing it and lots of interest but there was no way to connect it," Schoenwald said.

In the summer 2015, they registered their website as a nonprofit and Schoenwald left her corporate job in customer research to run their organization full time. That year, in collaboration with the Ocean Conservancy, the duo hosted the first county-wide International Coastal Cleanup (ICC) event.

Thousands of pounds of trash were removed from waterways and shorelines at 40 sites in Miami-Dade County.

The Ocean Conservancy has hosted International Cleanup Day for 39 years, with cleanups happening all around the world.

Doebler says VolunteerCleanup inherited that event and became the new county organizers for the International Cleanup Day in Miami-Dade.

Making every day Cleanup Day

From VolunteerCleanup.org's inception until now, there have been nearly 3,500 cleanups, averaging 250 to 300 per year; nearly 33,000 registered volunteers completing nearly 300,000 volunteer hours; and over 700,000 pounds of trash collected.

"We are a technology provider that supports the nonprofits, groups and individuals who are leading cleanups," says Doebler of how VolunteerCleanup.org has become a platform for creating a grassroots movement around marine debris.

"The best way to think of our website is Eventbrite, but just for shoreline cleanups," Schoenwald said.

There are 6 to 10 cleanups every weekend throughout Miami and Broward counties that are posted on VolunteerCleanup.org.

"Anybody who's organizing a cleanup can post it to the website and any volunteer who wants to find a cleanup can find it," Schoenwald said.

Before VolunteerCleanup.org, Baynanza: Biscayne Bay Clean Up Day and International Coastal Cleanup Day were the two main days where people could participate in a wide-scale beach or shoreline cleanup.

"We didn't want people to have to wait months before there would be a cleanup for them to attend," Doebler said. "We wanted to make every day a cleanup day."

Doebler and Schoenwald were recently awarded a grant by the Miami

Foundation to hire a person to help manage their website so they could expand their platform to lead cleanups all over Florida.

"We can help anybody organize their own cleanup and ultimately they have access to our database of volunteers," Doebler said. "You can find new friends, meet new people and it's a great opportunity to get involved in the local community."

The fight against single-use plastics

Schoenwald says that during cleanups, aside from [cigarette butts](#), most of the trash found in the ocean is food and beverage items like to-go containers, plastic bags, plastic utensils, bottles and bottle caps, cups and lids.

She says that beach and shoreline cleanups will keep happening as the tide brings in more trash.

"Those are band-aid solutions to the bigger problem, which is single use plastics," she said.

She says the long-term solution is to use less single use plastics.

According to the World Wildlife Fund, [plastic bags](#) take 20 years to break down, [plastic straws](#) take 200 years, plastic bottles and plastic cups take 450 years, and coffee pods take 500 years.

"It doesn't actually break down, it breaks up," Doebler said.

"Plastic is not biocompatible. Small pieces are often eaten by marine life, which then gets into their bloodstream," he said. "Then we eat the fish."

Some of the more surprising finds during cleanups that volunteers have found include Santeria offerings, a printer, a TI-81 calculator, a kiddie pool, a shopping cart, a message in a bottle and a bag of human ashes.

A networking platform for cleanups

Daniela Vecchione, founder of another cleanup nonprofit, A Cleaner Planet Operation Corp., regularly posts cleanups on VolunteerCleanup.org, knowing that it will generate good turnouts.

"My cleanup events really changed in such a positive way after connecting with Dara and Dave," she said. "Their platform is amazing and makes the whole planning process so much easier and also it helps reach so many people."

Vecchione says that the duo and their website have helped her organization grow. She usually has 30 to 100 people at her cleanups.

Schoenwald says volunteering for a cleanup is also great for high school students who need service hours.

"It's something that everybody can do," she said.

"They have simplified the process of finding local cleanups, connecting people with a shared passion for environmental care." said Sophie Ringel, founder of CleanMiamiBeach.org. "It brings neighbors together, making it easier for everyone to contribute to a cleaner, greener Miami."

Training the next generation of influencers

Most of the events Doeblner and Schoenwald manage these days are corporate cleanups that focus on teambuilding as well as facilitating

cleanup volunteer days for companies.

Schoenwald says their approach is about training other groups and the next generation of leaders.

St. Dalfour, a French fruit spread company, hired Doebler and Schoenwald to lead a teambuilding event.

After two teambuilding cleanups, the company made product changes that have a big environmental impact.

"We've removed the plastic tamper-proof seal in 60% of our production, resulting in 23 tons of reduced plastic waste," said the company's marketing manager, Sarah Nickell, in an email to Doebler and Schoenwald.

"That's one of the reasons why we do the corporate cleanups," Doebler said. "Not only because they're revenue generating but because you're reaching an audience of people who are maybe in a position to really move the needle."

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