

The Leith Collective is “changing the face of retail”

Sara Thomson founded the Leith Collective as a place for artisan makers to sell their work while also supporting the local community. The buzz word is sustainability as the Collective have banned the use of single use plastic in the store. There is instead a policy of reusing, recycling and restoring as many things as possible.

The makers use recycled items and convert unwanted items heading for landfill to unique one-off pieces.

Just before The Edinburgh Reporter visited, the cycle shop downstairs in Ocean Terminal had delivered two big bags of inner tubes to be reused as jewellery. Yes really, the inner tubes can be fashioned into necklaces and earrings.

It is this promotion of sustainability which has earned Thomson some recognition as a green warrior, and recently she was appointed one of the first 13 ambassadors in the 100 days leading up to the UN Climate Change conference, COP26. She couldn't believe that she had been chosen. She says the most important part is being recognised for making a small change

which could have such a big impact. She hopes that by talking about the work of the collective she will introduce a new way of thinking to others in the retail sector.

As an ambassador Sara will give talks to businesses on reusing and recycling, showing them how they could do that in their businesses. She will start with Glasgow City Chamber of Commerce and the tenants in the St Enoch Centre, where a scheme will be introduced to offer anything that is being thrown out to go to landfill to other tenants first with the hope that they can use them.

Listen to our chat with Sara here:



Sara Thomson is founder of Leith Collective where thousands of crafts are sold on behalf of makers from all over Scotland. PHOTO ©2021 The Edinburgh Reporter

At COP26 Sara hopes she might be able to go along with the other ambassadors to meet some of the delegates who include world leaders including Joe Biden and Boris Johnson. Meantime she would like to urge people to nominate someone as an ambassador.

The UK Government has now begun a search for 13 more ambassadors, asking for people to nominate someone who is doing their bit for the environment. The small green steps are recognised as making a large cumulative impact.

The Leith Collective is situated on the upper level in Ocean Terminal next to Zizzi Restaurant. Sara explained it all started off very small. She said: "Only a few makers were involved at the beginning, and it grew very quickly, and the need for something more sustainable in retail became more obvious as it did. It has now grown arms and legs and we have over 155 makers and two shops – one in Edinburgh which is our

flagship store, and one in Glasgow called The Clydeside Collective. We have developed something which has changed retail. People who come in love the idea that they are getting something nice which is ethically and morally nice too – so it makes them feel good. There is so much waste in retail, for example with the cardboard packaging that is used. We fold all cardboard down and try to reuse the boxes when selling items in the shop.”

Everything in the shop is made by a craft person, with upcycling front and centre.



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Sara showed me a 1950s dressing table which had been refurbished and up-cycled ready to take pride of place in someone’s bedroom and also an old 1960s television which had been turned into an illuminated drinks cabinet. She said: “We have a policy that we have no single use plastic whatsoever, and every single maker and artist, as well as staff in the shop has had to learn to package things differently. We have looked at bar coding, stickers, sellotape, packaging and bags, bubble wrap and if there is any plastic in the shop then it is being reused for another purpose. A lot of the items in the shop would have gone to landfill and are now changed into something that you can use every day.”

Sat from [@LeithCollective](#) explains they really can reuse it up cycle almost anything... pic.twitter.com/R75EKN2QKm

– Edinburgh Reporter (@EdinReporter) [August 9, 2021](#)

As a creative person herself, (Sara is a photographer) she realised that sustainability was key but it was difficult to achieve and have enough money to stay in the creative sector

at the same time. She said: "It evolved organically, not from a plan. Basically there is a need for sustainable shopping – the climate needs this."

The photography side of her career has not been completely forgotten. Her first love is documentary photography but now she takes shots of the stock in the shop for their website and also takes environmental portraits.

The makers come from all over Scotland, and either deliver their own stock or post it to the shop for sale. In the shop each day visitors are likely to meet one of the makers as the Leith Collective has a scheme which allows the artists to work in the shop – and pay back a percentage of their commission for the privilege. Makers have the opportunity to meet their customers and get immediate feedback on their work.

The Collective is self-funding and Sara is very proud of the fact that the social enterprise has not relied on grants and handouts, except for a small amount of funding during the pandemic. Sara said: "The reason we are still here is because we have amazing customers here who come in and buy things from our seriously talented up cyclers. I think that one thing everyone can do is to be more mindful when they go shopping. Think about whether you really need to buy something, does it need to be in packaging, do I need that bag, can I use a cardboard box. These things are really simple and easily changed."

The Leith Collective has won many awards, including the Surfers Against Sewage Plastic Free Award in January 2021. Run as a social enterprise the organisation mentors individuals and helps businesses to grow, and also supports those who need help with their mental health. Support of any kind is offered and placements found for those who need experience in the workplace. The community interest company spends all of the profits it makes on supporting its own members. There are workshops for the local community encouraging suitability in

the arts from crochet to furniture upcycling and these will begin again owing to the relaxation of Covid restrictions.



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PHOTO ©2021 The Edinburgh Reporter

Sara said: “I couldn’t be more delighted to be named a One Step Greener Ambassador ahead of COP26. This is a great opportunity to tell us about what you, or someone you know, is doing to be one step greener. It could end up with you joining us to help tackle climate change at COP26.”

World leaders will meet in Glasgow with the aim of agreeing urgent action on the best way to tackle the threat of global climate change. The UK is working to prevent global temperatures rising above 1.5C and to protect the planet and people from the intensifying impacts of climate change, which unchecked will lead to further catastrophic flooding, bush fires, extreme weather, and the mass extinction of species. The UK was the first country to commit to reduce carbon emissions by 78% by 2035 and claims to be on course to be the fastest G7 country to decarbonise cars and vans by 2030.

The Leith Collective is open at Ocean Terminal seven days a week.

<https://www.theleithcollective.co.uk/our-story>



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