

# Siblings bring Styrofoam-free Fridays to View and Valley schools

by Alana Garrigues | Posted: Sunday, December 16, 2012 6:00 am

Reece and Max Riley may be small, but they are mighty.

The second- and fourth-grade sister-brother environmentalist team is working together to rid Hermosa Beach school lunches of Styrofoam plates every Friday, which began with the first Foam Free Friday on Dec. 7.

The Rileys first began their green campaign against foam during the city's polystyrene debates last spring when the city council considered a ban on Styrofoam. Both Reece and Max stood up in front of city council members and told them that Styrofoam had no place in the city, close to the beaches or near wildlife that were suffering from litter. The ban eventually passed with a vote of 3-2, effectively adding Hermosa Beach to a list of California cities that forbid the product.

"The foam is bad for the fish, and bad for the earth and bad for us. You throw your Jamba Juice on the ground, and the cup rolls into the ocean, the fish eat it, and you end up eating that trash that you threw on the ground a week ago. Or maybe a dolphin will eat it. The only Styrofoam I want to see in the ocean is my boogie board," said Max, who goes to Valley.

Their mother, Elizabeth Riley, said the two were disappointed to learn that the Styrofoam ban exempted the school district — it applies only to containers used for immediate consumption or take-out purposes from restaurants and grocery stores. So this year, when they joined the Grades of Green Youth Advisory Board, which includes meeting with the nonprofit Grades of Green four times a year and completing a service project within their school, the Rileys decided to tackle Styrofoam in the schools.

Their reason is simple.

"Paper trays are better for the earth because you can compost it if it has leftover food or vegetables and you can recycle the trays," said Reece, who attends View.

While their ultimate goal is to rid the district of Styrofoam every day of the week, they realize paradigm shifts take time. In order to switch from non-recyclable Styrofoam that may leach unwanted chemicals into the children's food to recyclable, compostable paper, students and families need to grow accustomed to the change, and they have to find a way to support it financially.

Paper plates cost about twice as much as Styrofoam, at a per unit cost of six cents as opposed to three cents. On Fridays, the most popular day for students to buy lunch (pizza day), that amounts to

approximately 600 to 650 plates, or more than \$20.

The Rileys and Grades of Green estimate it would cost the district between \$2,500 to 3,000 to make the switch for an entire school year. In tough economic times with uncertain state funding, that money can be difficult to budget, so Reece and Max will be putting their heads together with Hermosa Beach families and Grades of Green to brainstorm long-term funding solutions. The students realized starting small would be better than not starting at all.

To get the ball rolling, Max and Reece composed an email to View and Valley families asking them to sponsor Foam Free Fridays. They needed 20 families to sponsor each of the 20 weeks with a \$20 donation. Within two hours, they had their sponsors, and Elizabeth said they even needed to turn some offers away since all the slots were full.

Reece and Max then approached their respective principals with their request and economic solution and were given the green light to move forward. Elizabeth worked with the Torrance school district, the lunch providers for Hermosa schools, to ensure they could order paper plates just one day of every week, and the program was started. Each week, the Foam Free Fridays banner highlights the sponsoring family with a photo, and after school Max, Reece and their mom clean off the plates to prep them for composting or recycling. The children select paper plates made from 100 percent recycled material, so no new trees are harmed for their lunch, and decided on pizza day not only because it was the most popular, but also the least messy lunch.

Max said he was a little nervous at first about how the students would take the change, but he said feedback was extremely positive.

"The kids really liked the paper. We didn't get any kids saying that they didn't like it in any way. There's only one complaint that we got from four people, and that was that we weren't having them every day," he said.

Reece heard similar feedback from her fellow View students.

"They liked the paper trays a lot better because they're sturdy and they don't break as easily," she said.

The experience has been positive for both children, and taught them valuable lessons about leadership and civic duty.

"I learned that people usually don't say yes the first time that you ask them, and also that you get interviewed by a lot of newspapers. I can count six newspapers that I've been interviewed by," Max said, counting the Washington Post and Seattle Times as among the newspapers to feature the young Hermosan.

Kim Martin, co-founder of Grades of Green, said she is very proud of the Rileys, and all of the children on their Youth Advisory Board. This year, 29 children from around the world are taking action to make their schools a healthier place. Some introduce Grades of Green toolbox initiatives

such as Trash Free Tuesdays or Walk to School Wednesdays to their school, while others like Reece and Max come up with their own ideas. Grades of Green supports the children's projects from start to finish with ideas and mentorship.

"What Max and Reece did is brilliant, in that they are first rolling it out on Fridays so they can get sponsors and there's no extra cost to the district and they're able to raise awareness and see how it goes ... it's fantastic," Martin said.

She has been impressed by all the hard work, innovation and creativity demonstrated by the students she works with.

"These kids (Grades of Green Youth Advisors) are creating a whole green corps of students across the world who are one little step at a time empowering and inspiring whole communities to make changes to protect the environment," said Martin.