Jon Paolone, who designed his own major at UAB in environmental studies, is now the director of the UAB Recycling Center.

Taking Out the Trash
Alumnus Helps UAB Go Green
By Grant Martin

Jon Paolone wants to know what's in your trash. Chances are, there is something in there that could be recycled.

“I've always appreciated nature and been passionate about the environment,” he says. It's a passion that he turned into a unique career path. Today, Paolone directs the UAB Recycling Center and coordinates a campuswide program to recycle paper, certain plastics, and aluminum cans.

As a UAB student, Paolone earned his bachelor's degree in environmental studies—a major that he designed himself.

“I joined the Air Force after high school, and part of my time there was spent as a bioenvironmental engineer,” Paolone says. “I was focused on protecting the health of Air Force and civilian workers in an industrial area, but it was really like combining occupational health and safety, radiation safety, and water protection in one job.”

After leaving the Air Force, Paolone studied at UAB, where his future path became clear. “My interest in biology, my love of animals, and my Air Force experience worked together to help give me a sense of direction,” he says. “I decided to design an environmental studies major, and a couple of advisors helped me pick the classes I would need to get a degree that I felt meant something and that would be useful to my future.”

Grassroots to Ground Floor
After graduating in 2004, Paolone worked several odd jobs, including some with “green” organizations such as the Alabama Environmental Council and the Alabama Department of Environmental Management. He also became acquainted with some members of the Green Initiative, a group made up mostly of UAB graduate students and some undergraduates who were pushing for a more environmentally friendly campus. “They were working from both a top-down and bottom-up approach,” Paolone
explains. “They were advocating for simple things, from encouraging people to turn computers and lights off at the end of the day to getting more fuel-efficient university vehicles and instituting a campuswide recycling program, which didn’t exist at that time.”

In fall of 2008, UAB’s recycling program was established, and Paolone was hired as its first coordinator. Since then, the program has grown quickly, servicing buildings across the 86-block campus.

Picking Up Possibilities
In a typical day, Paolone stays busy with the administrative tasks common to a director’s job—but he also travels around campus picking up bins or helping out at the recycling drop-off site as well. “I have three drivers who do the pickups, but they primarily work at night,” Paolone says. “If something needs to be picked up while one of them isn’t available, I will do it, so in that sense I stay involved with all of the functions of the recycling center.”

When he’s not picking up bins or filling out reports, Paolone says he often speaks to groups around campus, educating them on the recycling program’s mission and encouraging wider involvement.

“The biggest success so far has just been building up the program and getting it to the point where it’s more or less break-even,” says Paolone. “Early on, we concentrated on building campus awareness of both the pickup program and the drop-off center, and I think we’ve been successful. Now the challenge is to focus on smaller details and educate people about specific issues, such as rinsing plastic containers so that the liquid doesn’t attract pests or create odors.”

Paolone anticipates even more money-saving, earth-saving steps that the recycling program can take in the future. For example, he is currently exploring options for composting food waste from the campus dining hall. “I can’t say if that’s going to happen, but we’re exploring the possibility,” he says. “That’s one of the fun parts of this job—imagining the possibilities, and then seeing what can be done to make it work.”

UAB Recycling Center
620 11th Street South

By the Numbers
Total Pounds Recycled, October 2010 - September 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Pounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aluminum</td>
<td>4,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic Bottles</td>
<td>29,100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corrugated Cardboard</td>
<td>434,980</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sorted Office Paper</td>
<td>446,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grease (from UAB Dining)</td>
<td>3,214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-cycling (computers, printers, etc.)</td>
<td>102,735</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on paper totals for 2010-2011, the UAB Recycling Center saved:

7,492 trees

167,472 gallons of oil

1,762,860 kilowatts of energy

3,085,005 gallons of water

1,454 cubic yards of landfill space
When can I drop off recyclables? The Recycling Center offers a drive-through drop-off service on Mondays from 6:30-8:30 a.m. and 4:00-6:00 p.m. This free service is available to the entire UAB community for recycling materials from home.

What can I drop off at the center? All forms of paper and cardboard, #1 and #2 plastic bottles, glass, aluminum cans, steel food cans, and used cooking oil.