Did you know there are 26,000 AHSS alumni? Find out what your former classmates are up to. Contact us if you’d like to nominate yourself or a fellow Pioneer to be profiled in our alumni spotlight.

ALUM IS INNOVATOR IN SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES AND COMMERCE

Stephen A. Katz (BA ‘80, philosophy and history) came to the Rocky Mountain West for the skiing, stayed for the education he received at DU and left as a passionate advocate for sustainability. As a student, he was a member of the Denver University Environmental Awareness Group (DUEAG, now called the University of Denver Environmental Team), and participated in Earthday X: A Colloquium of Scholars, a gathering of international environmental thinkers at DU.

Katz cites these activities as pivotal to his decision to pursue an environmental career. His passion for sustainability led him to practice environmental law and later to launch his company, Unwrapped, Inc., which is one of the first companies to bring reusable packaging into everyday commerce (the act of making a package well once and using it repeatedly).

From its 1994 founding in Katz’s Concord, MA, home to the five story industrial building it now occupies (see photo), UnWrapped currently earns revenues of $7-10 million annually and employs more than 175 people. UnWrapped creates reusable bags for prominent companies, is the largest producer of combat gloves for the U.S. Army, and makes mattress covers and other sewn industrial products. “We manufacture gloves, sewn medical products, bedding, industrial items and reusable bags galore,” he explained.

As a member of DUEAG, Katz participated in DU’s recycling program in the late 1970s. “There were some very committed people there. I learned my environmental ethic from them,” said Katz. DUEAG supplied the labor for DU’s recycling program, while the University supplied the trucks and drivers. “We’d pick up paper from the dorms and buildings, ride in the back of the pickup to the recycling center and got to keep the revenue.”

Upon graduating from DU, Katz earned his law degree and had a successful career as an environmental lawyer before leaving the practice of law to join a recycling company, New England CRR Inc. He credits this career shift decision to his DU environmental experience.

After working in recycling for 5 years, Katz yearned to go deeper into sustainable production, so he started UnWrapped to bring reusable packaging into mainstream commerce. Its first product was a mesh reusable produce bag. It caught on as a functional rather than environmental product, and Katz followed that trend into building...
one of the best sewing factories in America.

The highlight for Katz of running Unwrapped is “unleashing the power of our people, our workers. Lowell, MA, where we’re now based, has a rich textile and immigration history. In the late 1970s, Lowell was a designated refugee resettlement area for Southeast Asians. Lowell now has a sizable Cambodian community. Helping people live the American dream—hard work, advancement, raising good families, becoming citizens, building a solid business—is thrilling for me,” he explained.

In fact, Katz connects his professional philosophy to his education at DU. He was originally drawn to studying philosophy and history at DU because of the educators in those departments. "Each department had phenomenal professors," he said. "I remember American history professor Theodore Crane mentioning the book *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People*. I found this one day at a book giveaway and it is now in our company’s entrance area,” he said.

“I learned a whole lot at the University—in my majors, of course, but also from unexpected places like nutrition and energy classes I took to fulfill science requirements. I also learned from my classmates’ diverse interests and backgrounds. It was preparation for life, not just a career,” said Katz.

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