

Capping Plastic Pollution

Plastic bags and recycled fabric scraps—that's what [Coastal Caps](#) are made of.

At Bennington College, Grace Kenney '22 has explored a wide range of public action, environmental science, humanities, and visual arts. She is particularly interested in courses led by CAPA Senior Fellow [Judith Enck](#), founder of the [Beyond Plastics](#) project.

"I take a lot of Judith's classes," she laughed.

Ella Simon '22 discovered a love for ceramics at Bennington, where she has also been influenced by CAPA courses in food studies, community engagement, and environmental policy.

"I enjoy being able to study art while also taking other classes that influence what you're making," said Simon. "Judith's classes make me think about the sustainability aspect of my artwork; I'm more conscious of what I do."

Together, Kenney and Simon have become the driving forces behind Coastal Caps. With a mission to "help put a lid on plastic pollution," these one-of-a-kind hats made of repurposed materials reflect their designers' love for art, fashion, and environmental sustainability.

"Ella made the first cap for a friend, and I thought it was amazing," said Kenney, who lives on Martha's Vineyard in the town of West Tisbury, MA. "I thought we should sell them in Martha's Vineyard because it's a hub and incubator for entrepreneurs and handmade goods. Sustainable wear is a big thing now, so I thought this could be a nice passion project."

Kenney and Simon—who hails from Camden, ME—settled on the name Coastal Caps as a nod to their respective oceanside hometowns.

The two took up shop in Simon's room, where they crafted the hats with the aid of a borrowed sewing machine. When the school year ended, they each returned home to sell their caps at local stores and markets.

Over the summer, Kenney also worked as a ["bikini intern"](#) for Liane Roy Fitzgerald, owner of [roySWIM](#), who makes and sells handmade, reversible swimwear on Martha's Vineyard. The mentorship Kenney received from Roy Fitzgerald, printmaker Althea Freeman Miller of [Althea Designs](#), and other small-business owners in town and at Chilmark Flea Market was invaluable.

"Liane is lovely. She was a great mentor for Coastal Caps and gave us a ton of scraps we used to make swimwear hats," said Kenney. "It was great to integrate into this community of entrepreneurs. Learning from them gave me so many tools. I feel like I can tackle much more now; they empowered me to feel like this is possible."

Kenney and Simon have designed Coastal Caps to grow and develop in response to community interest and environmental needs. The designs vary based on materials available, incorporating

repurposed clothing, quilt scraps, plastic bags, and other donations, like the fabric pieces Simon received from her former high school home economics teacher.

“As the seasons change, we also want to develop new lines, so we can offer things you’d want to wear in the winter, not just summery caps,” said Simon.

Along with their product offerings, the business itself is expanding and now includes a [website](#) and growing [Instagram](#) presence.

This year, in addition to selling at pop-up shops on Bennington College’s campus, they hope to take their caps to local farmers’ markets, where they can include Beyond Plastics information with their setup.

While Kenney and Simon also hope to soon start selling the hats online, they remain most passionate about the in-person discussions Coastal Caps spurs.

“The interactions we have with people are important,” said Kenney. “When selling the caps, it’s so easy to talk about them because we care about reusing materials and increasing the lifespan of clothing. As people find this connection, they also start to fall in love with the product and want to talk about it.”

This fall, Kenney and Simon are both taking Enck’s course [Addressing a Growing Environmental Problem: Plastic Pollution](#) and will be attending the 2019 [Students for Zero Waste Conference](#) from October 11 - 13 in Philadelphia, PA.

“We’re hoping to bring our caps to this event to see if we can get advice or traction,” said Simon.

“We also want to think about how to work with Beyond Plastics, to help get our name out there,” said Kenney.

For both Kenney and Simon, their diverse educational paths and joint entrepreneurial venture have expanded the way they are considering their futures beyond Bennington.

“I spend my summers teaching sailing in Maine, and I realized I’d love to make that a sustainable career,” said Simon. “I’d love to be able to work on the water while making a positive change, whether that’s teaching people about the environment or doing research from the boat. There are so many ways to approach education from the water.”

“My all-time goal is to develop a farm that includes affordable housing, so people can live and work on the farm, creating a sustainable food system that also gives back,” said Kenney. “I want to do something in the community for environmental action. Coastal Caps will be the start.”

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