

What's Up, College Station? Transcript

Season 4, Episode 41

Grace Hollowell: What would happen if someone decided to dispose of hazardous waste with their regular trash?

Caroline Ask: When we pick up your garbage cart and you have filled a trash bag with chemicals, I'm picking up your house, my house, 1,500 other people's houses all in the same garbage truck. It gets compacted in the back of that truck. Bags can split, and then it'll start reacting with whatever else is in that truck. You could potentially create some sort of noxious gas, have a fire, or cause a truck fire where we then have to expel all the waste out of the back so the truck doesn't go up in flames.

Grace Hollowell: And that has happened here before.

Caroline Ask: Yes, and I have lots of pictures if anyone is interested in seeing what it looks like.

Grace Hollowell: What's up, College Station? I'm Grace Hollowell, and today I'm joined by Caroline Ask, our Solid Waste Division manager. Hi, Caroline.

Caroline Ask: Hey, Grace. How's it going?

Grace Hollowell: It is going well. Welcome back. We are here once again to talk some trash—or this time, some potentially hazardous waste. The household hazardous waste collection event is coming up soon, so we're going to talk about that and how to safely dispose and store these materials, because they can pose serious threats in our homes.

Caroline Ask: Yes, they can.

Grace Hollowell: So to kick things off, tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do.

Caroline Ask: I am the Solid Waste Division manager. We are housed in the Public Works department. My team takes care of all solid waste collections in the city, whether it's residential garbage carts, bulk brush, or commercial accounts. We also handle the recycling contract with Brazos Valley Recycling, environmental compliance, and emergency management for debris-generating events.

Grace Hollowell: No two days are the same. What is your favorite part about what you get to do?

Caroline Ask: My favorite part is actually the people I work with. Our team goes above and beyond and they really care about what they do.

Grace Hallowell: How does what you do impact our community on a larger scale than just picking up trash?

Caroline Ask: Garbage collections and recycling are removing potential contaminants from your home, ensuring public health for the community, and making sure there aren't any adverse effects for us, our homes, our pets, and our environment.

Grace Hallowell: What changes for you and your job going into the winter time?

Caroline Ask: Generation shifts from our bulk and brush team over to our commercial team because we're in football season. It's also still hurricane season through November, so you may see crews out and about trying to remove debris from roadways.

Grace Hallowell: For residents who may not be familiar with household hazardous waste, what does that term mean, and what are some common examples?

Caroline Ask: Household hazardous waste is items or materials that are unused or that you want to discard without utilizing them, and they are usually toxic, corrosive, or reactive. Common examples include household cleaners, herbicides, pesticides, paint, and automotive fluids.

Grace Hallowell: How can someone determine if a product they are throwing away is a hazardous waste material?

Caroline Ask: You can look at the container labeling and chemical contents on the back. There are warning words like danger, poison, or toxic, along with a diamond-shaped pictogram with a red frame featuring a flame, exclamation point, or skull and crossbones.

Grace Hallowell: How can improper disposal of these products affect our sanitation workers and the environment?

Caroline Ask: It can cause chemical reactions in the back of vehicles resulting in truck fires, putting our crew members in danger. Also, our bulk and brush team are inherently exposed to whatever you put out if they don't know what is in the bags.

Grace Hallowell: Are there certain household products that are especially dangerous when mixed together?

Caroline Ask: If you use bleach and an acidic cleaner like a toilet bowl cleaner at the same time, chlorine and an acid create chlorine gas. It irritates your respiratory system, causing your eyes to water and your throat to burn. Do not mix cleaners unless specified as safe.

Grace Hallowell: What should residents do when they find old paint, cleaning products, or automotive fluids they no longer need?

Caroline Ask: You have options. You can bring them to the HHW event hosted by the Brazos Valley Solid Waste Management Agency (BVSWMA) in October and April. For paint, you can also take the lid off and let it aerate and harden, or mix it with sand or kitty litter to harden quicker before placing it in your garbage cart.

Grace Hallowell: What is the safest way to store them while waiting for disposal?

Caroline Ask: Keep them in their original leak-proof containers and do not remove the labels. Read the labels for storage instructions and temperature requirements.

Grace Hallowell: When is this year's HHW event and how does it work?

Caroline Ask: The event is on October 24th from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the University Services building. Enter on the Harvey Road side and exit on University Drive. It is a free, drive-thru event for Brazos Valley residents where staff will unload materials directly from your vehicle.

Grace Hallowell: Are there items that residents should leave at home because they won't be accepted?

Caroline Ask: Yes, they will not accept household garbage, ammunition, 55-gallon drums, medications, sharps, Freon units, or tires.

Grace Hallowell: How should people organize and transport their items?

Caroline Ask: Put liquids up front last, and put batteries, electronics, and other items where they can be accessed first, as electronics and batteries are the first stop in the drive-thru, followed by liquids at the end.

Grace Hallowell: Where should people look for more information or a list of accepted items?

Caroline Ask: Visit the Twin Oaks Landfill web page for a massive list, hotlines, and customer service emails.

Grace Hallowell: What happens to the materials after they are dropped off?

Caroline Ask: Liquids are separated into categories by collection staff and handled by a hazardous waste vendor and chemists for final disposal in compliance with the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. Electronics are wiped of personal information and recycled.

Grace Hallowell: If residents do just one thing this week to prepare, what would you recommend?

Caroline Ask: Go through your cabinets, sinks, and garage to take inventory of what you want to get rid of, keep them in leak-proof containers with labels, and put the event on your calendar.

Grace Hollowell: Is there anything else residents should know before cleaning out their garages?

Caroline Ask: Read labels, do not consolidate chemicals, and never pour them down your sink, storm drains, or bury them on your property, as it causes severe plumbing corrosion, environmental contamination, and property devaluation.

Grace Hollowell: What is one item every resident should check their garage for before the event?

Caroline Ask: Lithium-ion batteries from electronic or battery-operated lawn equipment. They can spontaneously combust and cannot be put in garbage trucks or recycling facilities; please take them to HHW events or retail drop-off kiosks.

Grace Hollowell: What is your best tip for keeping hazardous waste safely stored at home?

Caroline Ask: It's not waste if you use it. I would rather you buy only what you need and use what you buy, because then you're not producing waste and inadvertently creating risks or effects you forget about when you don't read the label. And we talk about that internally with our departments and divisions, to only buy what you need. Do not create waste if you don't have to.

Grace Hollowell: You're getting more for your money that way, too.

Grace Hollowell: Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Caroline.

Caroline Ask: Well, thanks, Grace, I appreciate it.

Grace Hollowell: And that's what's up.