

RiverBender Blog: I Joined the Chain Gang

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
December 15 2023 9:09 AM



Standing on the side of the road, cars speeding by with drivers craning their necks to get a good look at the writing on the back of my jacket — “Chain Gang” — I pick up another liquor bottle and drop it into the day’s third bag of trash.

Rusty Wheat is beside me, telling me about letters to the Madison County Board that he wrote most recently. Rusty is a [one-man “chain gang”](#) who picks up trash along Illinois Route 143 and Kendall Hill every week. When he emailed me asking if I wanted to join him one day, I was game.

You can only complain so much before you decide to do something about the issues that upset you. How many times had I tutted at the amount of trash along the side of the road? Rusty knows firsthand how good it feels to actually act, and he was offering me a chance to join him. Of course, I said yes.

We start at the top of Kendall Hill. A sign that Rusty had hand-painted was already placed on the side of the road, warning “Chain Gang Ahead.” Rusty explained that the sign catches attention and makes people slow down, because who doesn’t want a good schadenfreude look at a chain gang?

There are two kinds of trash along this one-mile stretch of road. Since it’s close to the interstate and the on-ramp, there are plenty of empty fast food bags, soda bottles and other things that people throw out their car windows.

But for Rusty, the real annoyance is the trash that flies out of Mr. Bults, Inc. (MBI) trucks on their way to the landfill. These trucks have nets on top of them that are supposed to keep the trash inside, but Rusty says they’re often overflowing and trash spills out anyway.

It was this litter that most bothered him, prompting him to call MBI and ask them about cleaning up after their trucks. The guy on the other line said it wasn’t his problem. So Rusty decided he’d do something about it himself.

But while the decision might have started with a frustrating phone call, the story has more layers than that. At one point, we stop, and Rusty points across the highway.

“That’s where my brother died,” he says. “My brother and best friend were killed by a drunk driver. They laid their bodies out on the hill.”

That was 45 years ago. Rusty had been picking up trash for a while before he realized why it bothered him so much. He says the litter “desecrates” the spot. He recently adopted the stretch of road. One day he was walking along it when he looked up and read a new sign: “In memory of David Wheat.”

This was a big win in a series of victories and disappointments. Rusty often writes to the city council, Madison County officials and other organizations about litter pickup and

enforcing a law that says anyone who litters will be prosecuted. In the meantime, he'll do what he can to keep the road clean.

I have fun, but it's not necessarily a fun gig. We see some of the worst parts of humanity, because it turns out people are disgusting. I find used baby wipes, mysterious bottles of liquid, endless cigarette butts. It's unglamorous.

But for Rusty, it's a normal Thursday morning. He usually blares rock music, but today we walk in comfortable quiet as the cars rush past. He tells me about his life and family and the ten-mile walks he takes every morning with his dog.

We pause as he ties off one trash bag and pulls out another to fill, and, surprising myself, I realize I'm getting frustrated. We had spent an hour out here, we had filled three bags, but there was still so much more trash to pick up. It was impossible to get it all, and anyway, there was sure to be plenty more litter by this time tomorrow. I was irritated already. How does this not drive Rusty up a wall?

"It bothers you sometimes," he admits when I finally ask him. There's a pause. Seemingly out of nowhere, he tells me about the time he got so sick he almost died. "I was in a coma for 28 days. When I woke up, it was like everything had changed."

For one, he had enjoyed hunting, but Rusty knew he would never hunt again. He didn't have the stomach for killing anymore. It wasn't just that he didn't want to do harm; he wanted to actively do good. He started looking for ways to make a difference.

And so here we were. When I leave, Rusty is still going at it, a one-man chain gang once again.

It would be easy for me to say I'm done; I got my experience picking up trash; I had my fun. But I don't think it's that easy. I see trash everywhere now, for one, so that will probably bother me forever.

But I can also see these opportunities all over the place: chances to do something good. I can't not see them now. They're everywhere if you start to look.



