

No Matter What the Activity, Leave No Trash Behind

By Leslie Raynor

As I glanced out the front window of my house yesterday, what I saw seemed unusual. Several cars were lined up across the street, most with drivers in them, but one whose driver was standing in the street with a mask on, carefully socially distancing while he chatted with a woman who sat in her car. These days a car hardly goes down my street, so it was a surprise to see several of them at once, and why were they sitting still?

A few minutes later, I looked out again to find even more cars, and then saw that they were moving. Suddenly I realized that I was witnessing a “birthday drive-by.” A black SUV passed by with a sign on it saying, “Happy 5th Birthday!” Just the night before, I’d seen posts in a local Facebook group suggesting that members share the birthdates of their children so that drive-by celebrations could be organized during our current required stay-at-home situation. I was empathetic, but what I saw next made me cringe: helium-filled balloons on ribbons streaming up from an open car window. How long would it be before they were blown off the ribbons?

Coincidentally, earlier in the day I’d heard that a colleague had recently found several instances of discarded or escaped balloons near the shore. I’d also recently seen a news story of a celebration at Winthrop Hospital of the 750th recovered COVID-19 patient, complete with balloons. When I thought about these celebrations, not to mention common spring events such as first communions, weddings, and graduations, it came to me that this might be a time for us all to be reminded about the dangers of balloons. Whether Mylar or latex (which does not biodegrade despite claims to the contrary), balloons that are released purposely or that escape by accident are dangerous.

Balloons kill wildlife. Released balloons can travel miles, but all eventually return to the earth as litter. Latex balloons are the type most commonly found in the stomachs of dead birds or other animals. The ingested balloon often blocks the digestive tract, and the poor creature starves to death. Turtles who find balloons in the water often mistake them for jellyfish. Or, animals can get tangled in the ribbons, and as a result are left unable to move or eat. Balloons of any type take many years to degrade, and really are just litter (*for more information, go to www.balloonsblow.org*).

We all want to be able to celebrate happy events, especially now. So what are some other options? Brightly-colored flags that can be waived, “ribbon dancers” (wide ribbon or fabric streamers on a stick), pinwheels, tissue paper pom-poms, and large bubble-blowing wands are all options, depending on the situation. Explore options on Pinterest and get creative! And yet, keep in mind the environmental impact of the choices you make.

We are living in a challenging time. We’ve seen how the earth has benefited from the decrease in industrial production and fossil fuel use as a result of the recent restrictions on activity. Let’s not cause harm in other ways. Some of us are uncomfortable about taking our reusable bags to the grocery store, despite reassurances that it is safe. That’s an individual choice, but so is the decision about whether to safely dispose of one’s gloves and mask when leaving the store or whether to drop them on the ground. As we prepare to celebrate the happy milestones that we all are eagerly anticipating, we need to think ahead to the consequences of our actions. This is not the time to take a step backward. Now more than ever, we need to be mindful and respectful of our environment and of our role in protecting it for all.

