Leggo for social entrepreneurs: An ode to the shipping container
by Craig and Marc Kielburger

As Hurricane Harvey loomed on the horizon, Andrew Abendshein filled the water tanks and “battened down the hatches” on his small farm in Houston, Texas. All he could do was hope.

In Harvey’s aftermath, it was three days before Abendshein could get back to his farm.

Despite the storm’s massive disruption of local agriculture, he found his crops intact: the lettuce was hearty and the kale was hale, not a leaf out of place. The greens were safe in their sturdy hydroponically enabled shipping containers. Thanks to the repurposed metal crates, Abendshein’s Acre in a Box business was soon making deliveries to local restaurants, providing the only fresh veggies on the menu following the storm.

Abendshein is an oil industry worker turned urban farmer, thanks to Freight Farms. This Boston-based business takes old shipping containers, retrofits them with hydroponic equipment and turns them into portable gardens. Using 90 percent less water than traditional farming, shipping crate farmers like Abendshein can produce as much food as a football stadium-sized field in an area smaller than the end zone.

Freight Farms offers a creative new lease on life for these ubiquitous giants that would otherwise have gone to waste.

There are more than 17 million shipping containers around the world, bringing us bananas from the Dominican Republic and smartphones from China. Unfortunately, these prodigal crates rarely return home. It’s cheaper for manufacturers to build new containers for their goods than to send back old ones. Megatons of metal wind up rusting in dockyards. But savvy entrepreneurs are using shipping containers like huge Lego blocks—they can become anything.

Retired from the sea, these crates have found new life as libraries and computer labs in developing communities, and classrooms in refugee camps.

Container homes have been a fad for years now, and not just for eccentric hipsters. American Family Housing, a California non-profit, has made shipping containers into housing for homeless veterans.

Clinic in a Can, in Wichita, Kansas, turns old containers into mobile doctors’ offices, medical labs and even fully equipped surgical units. The pods can be quickly deployed to natural disaster zones. Stick a bunch together and you have an instant hospital.

In Toronto, a community center has built a pop-up market out of 15 shipping containers. Local entrepreneurs can rent vending space for far less than a brick-and-mortar store, creating economic opportunity and a thriving neighborhood hub.

Now, aspiring container entrepreneurs beware: it’s not as easy as buying one and moving in.

Many containers have been treated with lead paint or harmful chemicals and must be cleaned. You’ll need doors, windows, insulation and special equipment for uses like hydroponic farming. Upcycling a crate to use for housing or a storefront can cost upward of $20,000. A hydroponic-enabled container from Freight Farms costs around $80,000.

But it’s worth the investment.

Abendshein estimates his two farm containers will pay for themselves within four years. And he’s producing environmentally sustainable fresh veggies in a city notorious for its extensive “food deserts.”

Mountains of old, rusted shipping containers are a monument to our insatiable desire for consumer goods and foods from abroad. Reincarnation means these metal boxes don’t go to waste.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are the co-founders of the WE movement, which includes WE Charity, ME to WE Social Enterprise and WE Day. For more dispatches from WE, check out WE Stories.