

Austin Energy's Sarah Talkington

- Charlie: [00:58](#) We're about to have a conversation with Sarah coming to us from Austin, Texas and she's a recently minted LEED Fellow which they just announced at the Greenville Conference in Atlanta in 2019. You're going to really enjoy her story. I just talked about some origins, growing up on farming and Florida to make your way to Austin, Texas, UT Austin, and the time she spent at Austin Energy on the commercial green building side and just some of the really neat things the city of Austin has going. So enjoy this conversation. We're going to dive right in with Sarah talking. Sarah, tell us some more about growing up in Florida and then eventually going to college in Texas. So tell us about growing up in Florida.
- Sarah: [01:43](#) I'm a Florida native, which is somewhat rare, and even rarer my grandparents and parents were all in Florida and all my brothers are still there. We grew up raising and working in the farm industry there, so all about oranges and grapefruits specifically in Indian River County, which is widely regarded to having some of the best [inaudible]. So shoutouts Indian River County. I grew up really a water baby, so of course I loved the ocean, but also really, I love the mysterious inlets, the rivers and the mangroves and that sort of thing. And there's also all sorts of really bizarre and amazing swamps and tar pits, all sorts of really magical water bodies that I got to grow up around.
- Charlie: [02:33](#) Sounds like a really fun place to grow up and learn all that. And then you've been in Texas since you went to college there, right? So tell us about UT Austin.
- Sarah: [02:42](#) I went to UT Austin, started in the early nineties and got a degree in architectural engineering, which is a somewhat unique degree. It's civil engineering degree that's focused on buildings specifically. So people do different things with it. There's a track that's all about structural engineering, but the one I chose is specifically about indoor environmental engineering. So looking at things like lighting, noise, vibration control, and the way that they impact human health and wellbeing. Also did a focus on renewable energy way in which renewables interact with buildings.
- Charlie: [03:19](#) That's fantastic. I'm here in Georgia and the power costs a little bit less. And there in Texas, I think it costs a little less than let's say Southern California or in New York city, but in the 90s when you were doing those studies, was it a big deal to get out in front of the renewables that was pretty easy to get the information at the time?

- Sarah: [03:35](#) Interestingly UT was doing a lot of work, so I now work at the electric utility for the city of Austin and its municipal electric utility. So even then back at UT, there was all sorts of interesting partnerships happening between the municipal electric utility and the University of Texas at Austin. So my final project, we were actually studying the solar production of the solar panels that were installed rather on top of the Austin Energy [inaudible park]. So all along I had some insight into the opportunities that were afforded through a municipal [inaudible election].
- Charlie: [04:12](#) That makes sense now. I know it's out in front with some of the programs there we'll talk about in a minute. I always like to ask, Sarah, was there an aha moment along the way? When did you know you wanted to do more in the field of sustainability?
- Sarah: [04:25](#) That's a good question. I think for me it's just kind of a series of unfolding aha moments or being constantly reminded that you're on the right path and the right opportunities are presenting themselves. I just have always loved buildings. That's kind of one of the reasons why I gravitated towards them instead of all of the other types of engineering I could have done. And then, working as an engineer, young engineering field and in the field of acoustics, I was immediately immersed into some of the very first projects seeking green building certification. And it became apparent very quickly that there was dramatic difference between the outcomes and projects that were pursuing green building versus the ones that weren't. And I just knew that I wanted to be working on more green buildings and less traditional buildings for the status quo. And then of course, you see people moving into one of your first green building projects and how it impacts their life. And for me it was the Dell Children's Hospital just experiencing how different that building felt inside and understanding the implications of that for all of the patients in that hospital. There just was really no turning back for me it was [inaudible] from there on out
- Charlie: [05:45](#) It's a famous project and it gets very rewarding there. And then you're just, I got to have more of that. That's great. A series of aha moments. I like how you worded that. Sarah I like to talk on here on podcast about mentors and maybe some or someone you followed that was an influencer but you didn't know or others might be some that opened some doors and maybe they helped you along the way. So have you had any mentors along the way?

- Sarah: [06:10](#) I have been so fortunate and had so many mentors. First and foremost, I'd say as my cousin, my Miles, he is a carpenter and he was a carpenter on some of the first demonstration green building projects here in Austin. So just following his work and his patience for sure he's been a huge part of my life. And then he exposed me to the world of the Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems, with Gail Vittori and Pliny Fisk and founders in this green building movement. And I did an internship with them and that was also really important in terms of my personal growth and career development. And then I landed here at Austin Energy Green Building. I have just been so fortunate with really amazing mentors here, shout outs to some of the most brilliant women engineers I've been so fortunate to be able I've been so work with a lot of women engineers here. So Maureen Scanlon was my first boss and she was one of the first people designing commercial green building rating. So just really on the forefront of things and she's amazing. Leona [inaudible] she's the person who's also a LEED Fellow and she's the person who nominated me. So super in debt to her and all that she has done for my career and all of the ways in which she believed in me, probably more than I believed in myself.
- Sarah: [07:36](#) Yes, I've just been so fortunate.
- Charlie: [07:38](#) That's a great club to hang out with. Sounds like all of you ladies are really accomplishing a lot and encouraging each other and that's good segue. When you mentioned LEED Fellow at the recent Greenbuild Conference you were announced as a 2019 LEED Fellow, so just huge congratulations by the way. I mean that's just so validating for the work you've done and the work you continue to do. So congrats on your LEED Fellow.
- Sarah: [08:00](#) Thank you. I really admire the people who have earned the accreditation and frankly I was applying for it for the first time in order to get some pointers on where I needed to go, but just really delighted to be welcomed to that.
- Charlie: [08:15](#) What else is on the highlight reel? I'm a fan of looking back on the highlight reel, what other accomplishments stand out along the way?
- Sarah: [08:24](#) I suppose one of the things I'm most proud of is my husband and I owned and operated for about eight years a zero-waste local restaurant and it was a pizzeria and so we bought a dilapidated Kentucky Fried Chicken building that had been abandoned for several years and renovated it to, of course, our

Austin Energy Green Building project operated it as all sorts of important things we did there. But I guess we were a platinum green business leader here in Austin, and zero-waste operations and that was really exciting and fun. And when it stopped being fun, that was okay too. I guess learning how to say, let go of something when it stops being fun is an important life lesson. And then there's a thermostat program here in Austin I helped start, I think it is really fun. So I'll talk about that a little bit too.

Sarah: [09:29](#) It's called the Power Partner Thermostat Program and it was one of the very first bring your own thermostat programs. Prior to that utility demand response thermostat programs have always been this model where utility gave you a thermostat and typically the thermostat had the utilities logo on it, and we controlled that thermostat via radio. And we rethought that business model and went a different direction where we basically worked with all sorts of wifi thermostat companies that are making all sorts of really innovative progress in the industry and we made it so that a customer could enroll their own thermostats. So if they'd bought an Ecobee thermostat or a Nest thermostat or several different brands, I think there's now upwards of 20 models of thermostats on a program. So basically a customer can just say I'll make my thermostat available to your demand response program so that I can keep utility rates low for everybody in the service territory in exchange for about a hundred dollars. That sounds good to me. So that program is a really fun and new way to think energy management and tight energy market during the Texas summers.

Charlie: [10:46](#) Yes, I can tell you're very excited about that program and making change there. Let's fast forward to today. So Austin Energy, been there about maybe 13 years it looks like and so tell us about some of the things that are keeping you busy day to day now, Sarah.

Sarah: [11:01](#) There's no shortage of work. I think as with most city employees we're a bit overwhelmed with how important our roles are, particularly when we can no longer count on the federal government for direction during these times as it relates to environmental policy. So we're working on updates to the climate protection plan. We do that every five years. This is one of those times looking to make some really specific targets about building performance on a timeline. So really counting on our codes to do some heavy lifting there. Looking forward to doing a better job of defining the way and their role that electric vehicles will play and interact with buildings in that conversation. So that's a lot of fun. So that's the climate protection plan. Austin is also experiencing a period of rapid

growth. So we are working on a lot of projects. I think it's upwards of 20 million square feet of commercial property going up now. So that's 130 projects and we're a staff of six. So that has led to some pretty intense time-management skills. And also I'm currently volunteering with the USGBC as the vice chair for the Technical Advisory Committee and there's a lot of important work there and it's just really important to understand how Austin Energy and our green building programs plug in to global green building initiative.

Charlie: [12:44](#) And so when you say these green building initiatives, a lot of us on here, we know LEED, you're a LEED Fellow, you've advocated for it, but is it not necessarily those certifications, it's more of what you're doing within the city limits to promote sustainability and that's even not just energy saving. So can you tell us some more about what you're looking for on these projects or sometimes is it to get that LEED certification?

Sarah: [13:05](#) That's a really good question. So Austin Energy city of Austin back in 1991 got a grant, it was a public partnership and we actually developed the very first green building rating system. It was primarily for homes. Then in 1995, we developed the first grading system for commercial properties. So we were really instrumental in the beginnings of LEED and we've all along maintained our independent rating systems. I have three, there's one for single family, one for multifamily and one for commercial. They're just for new construction and they apply only to full buildings. So we really don't let you break things up into a Foreign shell scoping, interior scope. We really make sure you're looking at the whole scope building. So the way in which I describe what we're doing here and the need to maintain an independent rating system just because our rating systems are tailored specifically for the Austin climate and to Austin policies.

Sarah: [14:12](#) So we use local Austin codes, which are fairly progressive compared to the global standard and we use that as the baseline and build on it. So our energy code, our water conservation codes, when our city leaders mandate an Austin Energy green building rating and say you have to achieve one of those, they're ensuring that projects built here are built to even higher standards that are already aggressive codes and to further the objectives and policies that they already have in place for the environment. So when we talk to things like density, we'll be referencing specific plans about where Austin desires density and where we're specifically trying to preserve land either for farms or wildlife or to preserve water that's for anything. So they're our own independent rating systems tailored to Austin.

- Charlie: [15:12](#) I love it. I didn't realize you had such a good origin in the early nineties the first of the green building rating systems here and big influence on LEED. That's good to hear. I know there were some early, if not the first green build in a place like Austin. So it's great. So anything else today though? Anything else we need to know about Austin? You're right, you've got that growth. I hear Nashville and Austin, two of the cities I love to visit, but I know you've got a lot of people moving in. What kind of other challenges are you finding maybe on the residential side?
- Sarah: [15:46](#) I think it's probably an old blues song about traffic and affordability and the way in which it changes the community and make particularly the creative class and then people who have made this town the special place that it is feel like there's less opportunities. So I think we as in most progressive cities are struggling with affordability, traffic, equity issues, homelessness is real and a really challenging problem to solve.
- Charlie: [16:21](#) We're all in it together and these are great cities, but you're not alone. All these growing cities are having these issues and when you collaborate and it makes sustainability part of those answers, I think it's going to help the cause. So I like to ask this question. If you had a crystal ball, Sarah, what's around the corner? What should we be reading up on now in the green building and sustainability movement?
- Sarah: [16:45](#) It's interesting and most of the conversations I feel like people are really focused primarily on carbon and limiting carbon and that's absolutely imperative. But I also think that we really need to be focused on adaptation and resilience, particularly when we're talking about new construction. These buildings need to be prepared to face the next 25, 50, 75 a hundred years and those years hold a lot of challenges that we historically haven't faced in such rapid succession. So I think we need to get really serious about the way in which we talk about wild fires, floods, drought, the new climate files that we need to be using to model our buildings. And being from the South and building for heat and humidity, I feel like there's a lot of climates North of us that don't quite understand the challenges and risks that humidity and heat are going to pose.
- Charlie: [17:52](#) Those are all real. Thank you for making sure we don't forget about those. And you're right, a lot of the talk at the Greenville Conference recently was embodied carbon, not just operational carbon but you listed off several others that you and your team are facing on a regular basis. So let's go through some rapid fire here. What's your specialty or gifts? What are you best at?

- Sarah: [18:13](#) I think I'm really good at sorting through a whole lot of information and understanding how it fits together and how it relates. So I think I can come off sometimes as spacey or slow, but really I think I'm just sorting through a lot of files.
- Charlie: [18:33](#) Gotcha. Pretty calculated there. Just taking all that information first. I love it. What routines or rituals do you have that help you be successful?
- Sarah: [18:41](#) Well, I'd say I'm a communicator and I can be a little bit blunt. So if I don't understand that we're on the same page or it's good to just speak up and really address what could be a problem later. So I think I make it a habit to never shy away from hard conversations. And the sooner you can have them the better. Because frankly they are a whole lot easier if you address them quickly and in a timely fashion. So I think I just jump on hand grenades.
- Charlie: [19:20](#) Well let's unpack that because this is about pro tips and I'm actually kind of curious. So do you, let's say there's something, is it a private one-on-one, but you put it out in the open, you kind of make sure it's out in the world so you can kind of discuss it and hear both sides. Do you agree on a resolution or would you mind taking us there for a minute? How have you seen it best to put, highlight that elephant in the room, whether it's one-on-one or is it amongst a group? How do you go about that?
- Sarah: [19:48](#) Well, it really depends. I think you have to understand your room and understand how much faith and trust the people in the room have in you. So I spend a lot of time developing relationships and sharing that with people I work with. We'll have relationships with each other too, so that we can have healthy conversations where we really disagree with each other in a very respectful way. And so we really make it a priority to value diversity of perspective because that helps us understand our bias and it helps us understand our blind spots and being really grateful for the opportunities when people disagree with you to shed some light onto a situation. So as much as possible, I prefer to have the conversations out in the open so that everybody can come with you on your discovery process of how you come to a consensus when there's a lot of diversity of opinion, but sometimes you need to stick a pen in it and have a private conversation to build the trust so that you can have the more difficult conversations.

- Sarah: [20:58](#) So I think it's just a complex set of tools, but they're all valuable and necessary if you want to do this work well.
- Charlie: [21:07](#) Those are some really good leadership nuggets in there. Thanks for answering that follow up. So I'm a fan of the bucket list. I'm just curious maybe what are one or two things on your bucket list?
- Sarah: [21:17](#) That's a good question. I love the national park system and in Texas we have to drive so far to get to. So I really love a road trip and I would really love to visit more parks and ideally on a more regular basis. But of course those trips that come up that are like here's the most efficient and best path visit all of the best national parks. That would be a dream trip for sure.
- Charlie: [21:48](#) Well someone needs to map that out. That sounds amazing. So tell us about books. I'm not sure if you like audio books, or pick up a good hard copy, but is there a book or two you'd recommend?
- Sarah: [21:56](#) Yeah, I love books and I'm one of those weirdos who tends to be reading at least five books at a time. I like an audio book in my car because the traffic is real and I try to avoid listening to the news as much as possible. And I like a book by my nightstand and I have a different one in my travel bag. So right now I'm reading a really interesting book called Overstory and it's about the relationship between people and trees. I'm really enjoying that one. I'm listening to this book Nudge in the car and it's about choice architecture and how you can support people's abilities to make healthier decisions. And then by my bed stand right now I'm reading a book called American Wolf and it's about a she-wolf and it's just a really beautiful story about resilience and natural beauty and some feminism in there too.
- Sarah: [22:53](#) So yes, I like reading books. I also, by reading a lot of books at the same time, they bounce off each other and spark different perspectives in interesting ways.
- Charlie: [23:03](#) That's really cool. We're going to link in the podcast show notes to Overstory and Nudge and some that you've mentioned here. So this is great. Thank you. You know, just as we start to wrap up here, I'm just curious, is there anything, number one you wish you had known a little earlier in your green building career?
- New Speaker: [23:19](#) Yes, that's a really good question. I think I wish that someone had had a more honest conversation with me about mental

health and wellness and stress and wellbeing and taking care of yourself and prioritizing your health. I think that it's really easy to get really overwhelmed in this work and to feel like you need to sacrifice a lot of yourself to it. But for me, I'm doing my best work when I'm taking the time to eat right and exercise and go to yoga and that sort of thing. And I think it's important and I think we as sustainability advocates need to talk more about personal sustainability, personal wellness and not just the wellness of others. So really listening to yourself and considering what you need to be able to do this work and valuing what you need above even what others are asking of you.

- Charlie: [24:19](#) That was really good. Yes, take care of yourself first so you actually can take better care of others. You've probably heard it but when you're on the airplane, put on your oxygen mask first before you try to help someone else.
- Sarah: [24:32](#) Exactly.
- Charlie: [24:33](#) It's good stuff. Well let's just wrap up. A lot of our listeners here on the Green Building Matters Podcast some have been doing it awhile but some are just now jumping in. So just any words of encouragement for someone getting into this movement.
- Sarah: [24:48](#) You are all welcome here. We need you all. We need your brains, we need your energy, we need your perspective, we need your voice, we need your stories. All hands on deck and you are very valued. Thank you for doing this work. Do not give up.
- Charlie: [25:07](#) That was really encouraging. Thank you Sarah, a recently minted LEED Fellow coming out of Austin, Texas. Sarah, thanks for being on the podcast.
- Sarah: [25:14](#) Thanks Charlie.
- Charlie: [25:19](#) Thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters Podcast. Me and the entire team are stoked and just so glad you continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us straight to you.
- Charlie: [25:40](#) Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast. At gbes.com our mission is to advance the green building movement through best-in-class education and

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