

Founder of The Conscious Builder - Casey Grey | Transcript

00:00:01

Introduction: Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the Green Building Movement. Your host is Charlie Cichetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a LEED fellow. Each week, Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. Settle in. Grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why green building matters.

00:00:34

Charlie: Hi everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti, and today I've got Casey Grey with us. He's with The Conscious Builder, and I can't wait to just hear more of his story, his background and what's keeping him busy today. Casey, how are you doing today?

00:00:51

Casey: I'm doing good. Thanks for having me on the show.

00:00:53

Charlie: I've been checking out some of your material, your YouTube channel, and I can't wait to talk about that. Take us back for our listeners here every week on the Green Building Matters podcast. I start with that origin story. Where'd you grow up and go to school?

00:01:08

Casey: In some suburbs of Ottawa, the east end of Ottawa is called Orleans. I don't know what's normal these days. My parents have been divorced and remarried quite a few times each, so I have four brothers and two half sisters. I had a good childhood, let's say that. I was in Orleans

most of my all my childhood up until I was about 21. In high school, though, I realized that construction was my talent. That was my strong suit. That was my best class. I was the only one that I really enjoyed going to. Inevitably what ended up happening is they started pushing trades a lot at that point, and I was going through school knowing I like to build stuff, but not really understanding who did what in the industry. I thought I should become an engineer of some sort and that's what I was going through high school. Once I started to push trades and I realized that was an option, it made sense to me. I stopped trying all my other courses because I felt they were useless. I still ended construction with 98%, but calculus was like 50%. I think she just let me pass just so I could finish high school. Out of high school I got a job. I turned down a couple of jobs for bigger builders, but got a job with a small renovator. Started in construction at 17. They gave me a great opportunity. I was running jobs by the time I was 20 years old, eventually going on my own. By the time I was 23 or 24, I guess right before I turned 24 and have been on my own ever since. Learn from some great guys there. I really only worked for one other construction company and since then have been doing my own thing and eventually evolved into doing high performance building.

00:02:51

Charlie: Let's unpack their amazing. I did check out your YouTube channel and your intro video. We will link to it, so make sure everybody gets to know you more. It was cool to see your family, your upbringing, those influences and obviously fast forward to just being an awesome green builder there and all these passive houses and net zero. I'm enjoying the content. I want our listeners to definitely check out the Conscious Builder there, at least start with that first video. When it comes to sustainability though in green, did you have an Aha moment or at what part of your journey did that really start making its way into your career?

00:03:26

Casey: That actually started to make its way into my life, not just my career around kind of thinking differently. When my wife and I attended a Tony Robbins event and at the time I was maybe two years in business, something through three years, and it was about three years. I remember I bought my book, I don't even remember why I bought the book for my wife, but it was Success Principles by Jack Canfield. He talks about Tony Robbins and my wife, when she was reading it, she's like, "Oh, I remember Tony Robbins from the infomercials when I was a kid watching him on satellite TV at my grandparents home." She looked him up, realized that he was doing events and said, "Hey, do you want to go to this event called 'Unleashed Fire Within?'" I said, "Sure." Typical guy didn't really ask any questions. I just said, "Yeah, sure, I'll go." I had no idea what I was walking into but that ended up really being the catalyst for huge changes in both of our lives. We left that event with a lot more questions than answers, but we were kind of questioning everything, including what we do and why we do it. Not long after that, at another Tony Robbins event, because we ended up buying his master's university, doing a bunch of his events. At another event that we were at, we found out we were having our son. At that point, that's when my brain started to think a little beyond myself. For anybody who has kids, can kind of relate is once you start to have kids, you realize that it's more than just you. You have to lead by example. If I was going to tell this person that I didn't know this boy, a girl at the time, that he or she could be or do whatever she wants, I have to lead by example and I have to do the same. What kind of legacy do I want to leave behind? Where can I put my skills to use? Being in construction, that's when I found Passive House. I saw a presentation by somebody and all of that clicked and it's been evolving ever since. It really kicked off with that Tony Robbins event. Eventually knowing that we were we were going to be bringing up a little person very soon. He's now. Almost nine.

00:05:34

Charlie: That's that perspective we need. I've got three boys there, 13, 10 and 8. All have summer birthdays rolling over this year. I love how on your

LinkedIn profile you put husband and father first. Tell us a little more about that. What other impact there?

00:05:53

Casey: We're actually going through the adoption process and we're waiting at this point. We haven't heard any news since you went through that. I think it's been almost a year at this point, but so who knows, there might be another one in the near future that will be changing our lives, obviously. The husband father portion, definitely my wife, continues to have a huge impact. I really believe that you can do a lot more when you work together, when you find the right partner. She has like any partner, I think they should, at least from the male perspective. I think your partner should make you a better person in my life has definitely made me a better person in many ways, and she actually helps a lot with what we create here at The Conscious Builder. I go to her for advice and vice versa. We make a great team, but I think I put the husband before the father because I think we also have to continue to lead by example showing our kids that we can have good relationships outside of construction. I think a lot of parents put their kids first and it affects their own relationship and then by default affects the kids relationships in the future. Like I have a little bit of experience growing up with that. I mean, parents have been going through a few relationships. We're all learning along this journey of life.

00:07:18

Charlie: Let's talk about mentors or anyone that had any influence on you as you were navigating maybe life decisions, career decisions, any mentors.

00:07:27

Casey: There've been a lot of mentors that have come and gone. When I started working for the first company, the only company I really worked for in the construction world, I learned from a couple of great carpenters and my boss at the time. I learned different things from all three of them, the

three main guys. Tony Robbins, even though I don't know him personally, I would consider him a mentor learning so much. All the books that we read are all mentors. Tons of books that I read and continue to read. I don't think there's just one person I could call out. Actually, I could call it one person, Chris Castillo. He's a good friend and mentor that's helped me a lot over the years. On the business side, not in the construction world, but just understanding business and becoming better and continuing to grow and evolve and I'm sure I'll meet more along the way. There's a lot of people like we all learn from each other. I'm not going to pretend to know or pretend to know everything in what I do, because I think there's always more to learn because there's always new things happening. We're learning new information all the time. I've learned my son is a mentor. I always tell people, who's my greatest teacher?

00:08:44

Charlie: Sometimes it leans humble, but it's really curious. You gotta stay curious. There's so much to learn and then share. Our motto here on the podcast is Teach everything you know. It's important. What are some of your proudest achievements?

00:08:59

Casey: What do you consider an achievement? I think in terms of my proudest days, I can honestly say that like my wedding day where I was with my wife for almost seven years by the time we got married, but like our wedding day was perfect. I don't know if you consider that an achievement, but I feel like that's one of the greatest days. Obviously, having our son would have been number two on the list. I guess it goes into business. I'm definitely one that focuses more on the future and I'm really bad at stopping and celebrating when we do have wins. And we were talking about that at a meeting this morning actually with a couple of team members. And that couple of us are like that. We need to be conscious and stop and reward ourselves and celebrate. Starting the business is obviously an achievement and also just going through all of the inevitable problems that come with

owning a business. We went through a lawsuit. We've had our ups and downs and we continue to learn and continue to get better. Being in business for 12 years is an achievement because most businesses don't survive. There's some businesses that maybe survive but don't thrive. I feel like we're really starting to hit our stride 12 years in the making sort of thing. Overnight successes are always 20 years in the making.

00:10:26

Charlie: I've been doing entrepreneurship for about 13, 14, and it takes a lot to get that flywheel turning right, as they say in the business. It sounds like you've got a good Segway. Tell us about the Conscious Builder.

00:10:40

Casey: It started as a general contracting, it grew into the Conscious Builder when we kicked off with our first certified Passive House about nine years ago now. Now what we focus on is high performance homes and renovations. So that could be Passive Homes, certified Passive Homes, net zero homes here. It could be deep energy retrofits. We do a lot of additional renovation. Our main business on the construction side. We also have what we're calling the production side where we create all of our YouTube videos. We do our podcast as well, so all under the Conscious Builder, and we started something called the Builder Academy, which is directed towards helping other smaller contractors become better at what they do. So we that's actually going to be that was our meeting today actually was discussing that and how we're going to start to separate those two. They'll still be working together but kind of become separate entities at this point. We still have the construction side that's going to continue as is and we'll continue to grow and develop like that. We're just going to be adding some other services on the other side.

00:11:45

Charlie: Passive House and net zero. Let's get to that in a minute. But tell us about construction in Ottawa and in that part of Canada. What are some

of your challenges? What's now mainstream that used to not be? Can you give us a peek into your region?

00:11:58

Casey: Yeah. Ottawa has always been notoriously difficult. As long as I've been in business it has been difficult to get permits. I don't want to say make it difficult on purpose, but I think the biggest thing that's happened most recently is there's been a lot of people retiring and then new people come on and then they don't want to get in trouble and then everything's delayed. But they seem to be adding more and more red tape. There's always something new that you have to do, something new that the city asks for. As a city that's growing and as Canada as a whole has a housing shortage, but Ottawa has a housing shortage, they should be fast tracking a lot of these things. For example, it is surrounded by acres and acres of Greenland. When you get out into these rural areas, you're allowed to build one house on 100 acres. They're stopping developments to some extent. But they're saying we need more, more homes and densification to some extent. Some of the things don't make sense. I would suspect that that's similar in a lot of a lot of areas. But we've also built outside of the city and we get permits in a day, right. So it's possible in Ottawa. We don't have any issues with those houses that we built to some extent. I understand why they're doing it. You kind of got a greasy squeaky wheel. Somebody complains, they get to address it, but then unfortunately they kind of ruin it for everybody when it comes to one of the issues to deal with shoring, because one contractor didn't do what he was supposed to do. But so that's kind of like what's happening in Ottawa. But overall, the construction industry is booming. And Ottawa obviously, like most places, we had a big jump up. Now Ottawa housing has dropped 20%, but in some areas went up 75%. It's not like it's down. It's still way up from where it was two years ago. It's continuing to go. We still don't have enough houses, I think at least on the renovation and custom home side, like we're busier than ever. We're booking more than a year out at this point. We don't have enough manpower. Most of our subs don't have enough manpower. So that's

trickling down windows and doors. We all know it's hard to get like there's there's there's a lot of work in construction. Some people might be starting to get worried about what's going to happen with the economy and so forth. But from what I'm seeing, there's still a lot of money that's out there that people want to spend that they just haven't spent yet. We just can't get to it quick enough. We can't do the work fast enough and that's what I'm seeing.

00:14:28

Charlie: Yeah, I see that too. Actually, Canada is growing on me, even though I'm based in Atlanta, Georgia early in the year, went to Vancouver and then just in the last two weeks went to Montreal. I'm glad to hear it's booming, but you're right, those material supply chains and skilled labor. Right. So back to green and green homes. How does the conversation go with one of your clients and you and your team? Is it like you say, "Hey, here's what we should be doing and it's Passive House and then you end up valuing engineering some stuff out?" Or do you educate the clients early? How do you get Max Green or some of your clients?

00:15:07

Casey: A lot of our clients, because of what we do online with our YouTube channel, with our podcast and so forth, a lot of our clients are already educated, some more than others. So they come to us knowing what we do. We've done a good job of setting ourselves up in that niche. But that being said, I'm not one to preach to somebody about what you should or should not do, because I don't know your circumstances. I can't tell you what's best for you. I will give you the information that I know. My team will give you the information. I know if you have other information, we'll work that into it. But ultimately everything we do is custom. It is up to the client. If we're doing custom homes or a major renovation, it's up to them. It's their house. That's the whole point of custom. You get to design it and build it the way you want it. You can pick the products that you think are best for you. So the way we approach it, hence the Conscious Builders, we bring them the information that they need so that they can make a conscious decision.

If they have. I think a lot of people out there when they hire somebody that a lot of builders might say, yeah, do it this way. We've just been doing it this way for years. So that's what we're going to do. We've been using this product for years, so that's what we're going to do. And they just say, Yeah, because they don't know any difference. Maybe they don't have time to do the research. We all know, like if you're not interested in something, you're not going to go out of your way to learn it. Hence why I got 50% in calculus. I was not interested in that. Most people are not necessarily interested in their house. They know that they want a comfortable, efficient and a comfortable, efficient and healthy home, but they may not know how to achieve that. So they just find somebody that they trust and hopefully that person knows what they're doing. But it's not always the case, unfortunately.

00:16:52

Charlie: We should be careful with that word and instead say, Hey, here's what's possible, here's the best practices. Let's talk about the future. Where do you think the sustainability movement, the green building, green home movement is going? What are you reading up on? What are you excited about?

00:17:13

Casey: I know they're pushing a lot of things like carbon taxes and getting off of fossil fuels and so forth. Obviously that's going to be happening. Luckily in Ottawa, that kind of works out because a lot of our electricity is produced by hydroelectric power. When you go fully electric, then at least you know that your electricity is coming from a cleaner source. But there's a lot of places where they still have coal, for example. So going from natural gas, if you go from natural gas to electricity, you could actually be going in the opposite direction in terms of trying to reduce your carbon footprint, is that's something that you're trying to do. So that's something that I think people need to be aware of, there's a lot in everything. If you watch the media, if there's anything we've learned over the last couple of years it is

don't trust everything you say. You have to kind of do your own research and figure out where it's going. And that's why I continue to ask a lot of questions. And I don't pretend to know everything because there's often when you dig a little bit deeper, you'll find it wasn't quite what you thought it was going to be. We're seeing a push towards electrification. We're continuing to see a push on solar panels. Luckily, at least what we're seeing here is that they're starting to put more emphasis on air tightness, even with other people that have big, really big followings, other people in the construction world, they're starting to talk about air tightness in areas like Texas. Where they might not be as concerned with the or they haven't been in the past, but now they're understanding how important that is. I hope that we start to see more trades. I feel like the younger generations coming up, it's being brought in automatically. They're they're learning with that. But I learned from old school guys as well. We didn't know the difference between a vapor bear and an air barrier when I started. We've learned that there's a big difference now and understanding that is important. The biggest change that I see is people are starting to understand, at least the people that we see, that their house is a system that works together. It's not a bunch of individual components that stand alone. One component affects the next, just like our body. If we don't breathe good air, if we don't eat good food, if we don't take care of ourselves, other things start to get affected. It's the same thing. You need to look at your house as a system. You need to understand how one thing affects the next. And the people building the house need to understand how their work affects the next person as well. A lot of stuff that I'm seeing is all good. I don't know where it's going to end up. Hopefully technology will allow us to build houses quicker, better. We're still kind of building houses the way they were built hundreds of years ago. we're still slapping wood together. The only difference is we're putting some insulation in between. We're starting to understand that vapor barrier and air barrier stuff. So there's not really much of a change there. There's some product changes. There's hemp insulation or insulation made for mushrooms. But

how we build houses, we're starting to see 3D printing, but I think we're still a little bit a ways away from that.

00:20:26

Charlie: You're right, you still need innovation to speed it all up, too. I agree with the system approach. You mentioned trades a couple of times. How do we get more up and coming young professionals to say, I might want to go the trade route and you can make good money in that you can have a whole career know does there need to be a shift that, hey, trades not only is there a need, but that's a good place to specialize. So what do you think that message is maybe to someone listening that might be considering trade work?

00:20:57

Casey: I actually was interviewed on the Lane Foundation's podcast last night, great podcast, young guys running that, which was great to see because that's exactly what they're trying to do. They're trying to educate the younger generation that, hey, there is a great opportunity here and I didn't realize this, but at least what they're saying, they're from the US as well, and they didn't even have a shop class in high school. I didn't realize that stuff like that was coming up. When I went to high school quite a few years ago now, they didn't have the auto mechanics at our school, which I wish they had because I would have taken that course. Luckily for me, they did have woodshop woodworking. It's kind of like anything. If you don't expose yourself when you're young, if you're not exposed to these types of things, you'll never know what you like or don't like and what's out there. There definitely needs to be more people like those guys running and getting out there to spread the word and somehow get into the schools. I think schools are pushing a lot of technology type stuff. I think the system, in my opinion, is broken. The education system is broken. My wife and I talk about this a lot. Her background is in child and family therapy. She definitely has a lot of knowledge in this world. If you look back to how the school system was developed, like it was developed to create workers to

create employees originally. We don't necessarily need those. So to some extent now you get out of school, you can see there's a lot of push towards entrepreneurship and going on your own start ups, but we don't necessarily want that either. I think school, in my opinion, should be a place where you're exposed to many different things and then you figure out what you like so that you can then make a decision and continue down the path. And to make that decision when you're 16, 17 might be a little young. I think you still need to get out there. Some people like myself, you're lucky and you find out what you like when you're young. But that doesn't happen for a lot of people. It's partly because they don't really have options where they are. Going back to your question, what can we do? I think it really relies on the parents. As a parent. It's our responsibility to get our kids to these opportunities to learn something new. It's our responsibility. We can't blame somebody else. We can't blame the school system for not doing what they were supposed to do. It's up to us. We have a say as parents, and we get to choose what our kids get to do. I think that's the biggest thing we can do. If you're a parent and you've got kids, it's up to you. We take your responsibility just like a boss. One of my team members makes a mistake. We can talk to them and figure it out. At the end of the day it's not like plumbing doesn't flow downhill. It flows uphill in a business. We have to take responsibility and we have to do that as parents too.

00:23:56

Charlie: Getting that exposure. It's not just the schools. It's on us as parents. I grew up in a small rural town in North Georgia, and I had some of those vocational classes and a technology class and a shop. You're right, maybe maybe that's not in the curriculum anymore. I think you nailed it. Hey, let's do some rapid fire questions to get to know you better. What's your specialty? Your gift?

00:24:19

Casey: I don't know my specialty. Obviously, I was good at carpentry. I don't really do much of that anymore. I think what I'm good at and what I do well

and I was just talking to my team about is is this getting me in front of people chatting with people, having conversations and and whether I'm being interviewed like this or whether I'm doing the interviewing, I think that's that's what I'm really enjoying these days.

00:24:41

Charlie: Do you have any good habits, routines, rituals?

00:24:45

Casey: Yes. I think that's been a big part of helping me keep my sanity. I have a very strict, I guess, morning routine, which is a very strict sometimes obviously, you know, traveling or something will happen. But for the most part, my morning routine is I get up, I do my lemon water, I meditate, I do a workout. I'm learning Spanish, so I do that in the morning as well. I start my day off with wins before I open my emails, before I start dealing with inevitably stuff that's going to happen. Because what I've realized over the years is that we think we have control over more than what we do. But the only thing we really have control over is how we act in any given situation. We have no control over the weather. We don't have control over whether or not my employees show up to work. I have control. I don't control whether people are going to get sick, their clients are going to be upset or anybody's going to be like, someone's going to hit me while I'm driving somewhere. Like, there's no control over any of this stuff. So having that routine where you start is actually extremely valuable and continues to be. And we're also my wife and I are also very conscious about what we put into our bodies. So she's much better than I am. I still like to call it cheating away from those things. But that's also been because I've realized that and getting good sleep, because I've definitely noticed that if you don't get good sleep, you make poor decisions, you actually make poor decisions when it comes to food, make poor decisions when it comes to work or what you're focusing on, your focus isn't there. Sleep has been a big priority over the last couple of years as I always make sure we get our sleep. There's days here and there where you're going to get less,

obviously. And beyond that is another thing is designing. I realize it's designing your space or your life to win, meaning that the environment is more powerful than willpower. If you do not want to do something, then make sure if you don't want to eat junk food, don't have junk food in your house, if it's in your house and there's a good chance you're going to eat it. That's the simplest example. But if you design your environment to win, then you're obviously going to win.

00:26:58

Charlie: Those are great habits. Sleep does recharge your willpower battery. I got a second that and then you're right as what is it James clear atomic habits. You don't rise to your goals. You fall to the level of your habits and your system. I think the environment that you're saying it's good stuff. I'm a fan of Bucket List. Casey, give us a peek. There are one or two things maybe on your bucket list.

00:27:27

Casey: I got quite a few. Definitely want to own a place down south which will be happening sooner than later. Actually, I have a place down south with some partners now as an investment, so that's exciting. One thing I want to do is fly. I love driving things. I had my motorcycle license at 16. I'd love to get my pilot's license, my helicopter license, just something new to drive. So I think that would be really cool to do. I did start learning guitar, which is also on my bucket list, but I kind of replaced that with the Spanish lessons that I'm doing now because I only had so many hours in a day. Once I get the Spanish up, then I'm actually going to go back to the guitar. So these are all things that will bucket later. This is kind of underway and then lots of traveling and stuff, right as things start to open back up and so forth.

00:28:16

Charlie: A great bucket list. Those are all fun, fun things. I love it. Is there a book you'd recommend to our listeners?

00:28:24

Casey: One book that I've read over the last couple of years that's really got me thinking about how the world works is Ray Dalio's new book, and I always forget the name, the exact name of it. I wrote his book *Principles*, which is also another great book. But he has. I'm just going to look this up quickly. The principles for dealing with the changing world order y nation succeed and fail. So that is super interesting and it's written in a way where you can read the entire book. But he also has bolded, so he has bolded points throughout the book so he can kind of read the Coles notes version, which is just go through the book and read all the bolded points, and then there's also bolded points with red dots beside them. I think they're also italic, which is like the really important points, but it's all sorts of charts and studies that he's done and why nations have risen and why they've fallen and what's happening with the US and what's going on with China right now and how that affects other areas of the economy. Super, super interesting book.

00:29:25

Charlie: That's a great book recommendation. We'll put that in the show notes for our listeners as we start to wind down here. Two final questions. Is there any career advice you wish you'd have known a little earlier?

00:29:38

Casey: From a business perspective, it was really around the financials as I didn't understand kind of what I needed for overhead and the difference between margin and markup. If I knew that when I was younger or when I first started the business, that would have helped me get ahead a lot faster. If you go to the consciousbuilderacademy.com I do have a free course and it's the five things I wish I knew before I started my business. So that's essentially five things I wish I could do. But that's one of them is kind of really understanding that portion because that would have made a big difference.

00:30:14

Charlie: Yeah, just that business, financial literacy. You're right. When I was at Georgia Tech Accounting, gross revenue, net profit, it just didn't matter. But it matters now as a business owner. I love it. I'll check that out. Last question here. Let's say someone's listening to the podcast they're enjoying. Their story. Maybe they're in Canada. Maybe they're just now jumping into the green building movement. Any words of encouragement for them?

00:30:40

Casey: There's lots of work. There's not going to be any shortage of work any soon. From what I can see, if you're good at what you do and I'll put an emphasis on if you're good with people, you can do really well in this industry because there's a lot of people who get work, especially during times like this, who get work because we they need bodies sort of thing. But the people who do really well are the people who are good with people, because those are the team members that you want to keep. Right. You can teach somebody how to swing a hammer to some extent, or they need to have some sort of basic skill. But you can teach somebody how to frame a house or put insulation or whatever it may be. But people's skills are a little bit harder to teach. And I think if anybody has that, you will do well in really any part of life. But if you're willing if you're trying to get into this world, then it's still going to help.

00:31:41

Charlie: A lot of good nuggets of wisdom. Casey, Thank you for your time today. To all our listeners, connect with Casey on LinkedIn. We'll put some links here or check out his content on his podcast and his YouTube channel. But this has been Casey Grey, with The Conscious Builder. Thanks for your time today.

00:31:55

Casey: Thanks. I appreciate it.

00:31:59

Charlie: I just want to say 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 were 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. 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 encouragement. Remember, you can go to GBES.com/podcast for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode. See the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing guests. Please tell your friends about this podcast. Tell your colleagues and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much. We'll see you in next week's episode.