

Ray C. Anderson Foundation's Executive Director John Lanier | Transcript

Announcer ([00:00](#)):

Welcome to Green Building Matters, the podcast that matters for green building professionals. Learn insight in green buildings as we interview today's experts in LEED and WELL We will learn from their career paths, war stories and all things green because green building matters and now our host and yes he has every LEED and WELL credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti!

Charlie ([00:33](#)):

Be sure to checkout, the green building matters community where you can have unlimited exam prep for any of the professional credential exams you're tackling next, as well as putting your continued education on autopilot, saving time with GBS, reporting your hours on your behalf. Check it out. Gbes.Com/Join now. Enjoy this episode of the green building matters pod.

Charlie ([00:58](#)):

Yes. Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I'm your host Charlie Cichetti. Today we've got John Lanier here in Atlanta, Georgia, where I'm based and John's the executive director of the Ray Anderson Foundation. And for those that don't know Ray and know his story, I can't wait to tell you a little more and see what John has to say about what they're doing and just what an impact he's had on an entire industry and also here in the Southeast. John, thanks for being on the podcast today.

John ([01:27](#)):

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Charlie ([01:28](#)):

Well, I know we've got some things in common both dads both in sustainability, both in Atlanta. But let's go back and let's talk about where you grew up and where you went to school. You know, keep it in the ACC here.

John ([01:42](#)):

Yeah. So I'm very much greater Atlanta area kid. I grew up in Marietta. I went to Maris for high school. For those in your audience that know the Atlanta space. But then when college rolled around, it was time for me to experience something new. So I headed off to the University of Virginia and got my undergraduate degrees in history and economics and then spent three more years there to get my law degree. And after seven great years in Charlottesville, Virginia, it was time to come home. I came back to Atlanta in 2011 originally starting my career as a tax attorney.

Charlie ([02:21](#)):

Love it. Take us through the interesting background and then you get into tax. But I want to know at what point, maybe sustainability. So did you have any influence early on? How'd you start getting exposed to sustainability?

John ([02:36](#)):

Well, not surprisingly. That's where I have to tip my cap to my grandfather, Ray Anderson. Some people think I was born into sustainability, but I wasn't quite, he had his personal epiphany, which is I suppose the story I should tell, but he had it in 1994 when I was eight years old. So when I was eight, that's when sustainability became part of my life. And it's because Ray Anderson, he was the founder of interface, the world's largest manufacturer of carpet tiles in 1994 after reading a book called the ecology of commerce, written by Paul Hawkin, Ray came to see that all of business and industry would need to pursue sustainability. It became this moral imperative and a moral opportunity for Ray to transform his multinational industrial manufacturing company, embracing a deep commitment to sustainability. And for the last 17 years of Ray's life, he and the people of interface proved that when done right, sustainability would be good for the bottom line. Interface was the first publicly traded company to really show how much more valuable a company could become if it was deeply committed to the environment. So that's what I grew up around. And as I came of age, went off to college. I was fortunate to have so many tremendous conversations with my grandfather. One of the Titans of the environmental movement about why all of this stuff matters.

Charlie ([04:13](#)):

Well, it's amazing, you know, over a hundred podcasts, John and I ask a question, Hey, you know, who had influence on you and what's a good book

you'd recommend and Ray Anderson's name comes up over and over. So it's so cool that obviously his worked connected to him. You are connected him, you're running the foundation. So if you don't mind, tell just a little bit more there about how this was such a big deal on the textile and the flooring industry at the time. Obviously that industry sense is, is, you know, if I go to a Greenbuild conference and I see the amazing things that we're seeing happening coming out of that industry, but it was really one of the early industries. Again, if you could unpack that to, you know, have Ray say we're going all in and we're going to be a profitable business. It's the right thing to do. So what else do we need to know about maybe some resistance he had early on there?

John ([05:01](#)):

Oh, there's so much to the story. There's a lot of initial resistance. There was other people in the Csuite and interface who thought he was maybe going crazy. He was 60 years old in 1994 when he had this epiphany. Wall street certainly reacted negatively thinking that Interface was about to pursue something that would hurt its value as a company. The culture at interface was not ready for this and the broader industrial world was laughing perhaps at Interface because the myth at the time was so pervasive that you could not choose both profitability and responsibility to the planet. It was one or the other and the fact that a manufacturing company in the carpet industry, one of the dirtiest out there, I mean Interface's product, carpet tile was made entirely from oil based fiber. The binding and the backing are all different types of plastic or it happened in that industry and for Ray to first transform the culture within interface, prove this is a better model and then force all of interface's competitors to catch up, to compete with interface, not just on the quality of their product and price their offering to customers, but to actually compete on the good things they were doing for the environment.

John ([06:28](#)):

The fact that it was carpet first as an industry where that happened, made it way more of a success story that the people of interface, we're, we're responsible for creating

Charlie ([06:40](#)):

A true trailblazer there. It's amazing. Wow. What a lot in there. So obviously a great mentor and your grandfather there, you know, tell us, maybe I'm a little bit more about what the foundation does today. So if you'll connect those dots with Ray's legacy, what you do today and some of your grant work. Why don't we talk a little more about what you're running today.

John ([07:01](#)):

So Ray, he was the leader of interface and his legacy continues to live on at the company and the good work that they're doing. But our foundation is not the interface corporate foundation. Rather. When Ray passed away from cancer in 2011 he made the extremely generous decision to leave the majority of his estate to this family foundation. It was this charitable entity that he had created. And upon his passing, my mother and my aunts raised two daughters along with my step-grandmother who has since passed away. But the three of them, these three women were called into Ray's attorney's office and they were told, well, here's what Ray has decided to do with his estate. We are philanthropists, you have to give his money away. That's the nature of what the Ray C Anderson foundation is. We are a philanthropic grantmaking foundation, so it's very much oriented around family.

John ([08:04](#)):

Today it has four trustees, my mother, father, aunt and uncle, so Ray Anderson's daughters and their husbands. We are looking for and have largely found key initiatives that advanced what Ray was known for that legacy within the environmental movement that is associated with his name. It's unique. I mean when you think about sustainability, it's so broad. People can come into this movement if they care about the polar bears out of diversity. Loss could be the issue in general that people care about. But you can also come to it if you care about clean air. If you care about climate, you can come into it. If you care about increasing efficiencies in the built environment, which is the green building movement is its own niche within sustainability. People in the policy side and the education side, the food space, so many different waivers of sustainability. So what was Ray known for? We believe he was known for the intersection of business in the environment when done right. Business can be a force for good in the world. And we wanted our grants and the various nonprofits and universities that we support with these dollars. We have that Ray left to us to advance that

part of the movement to show even more fully that what Ray represented is still so valid and relevant today

Charlie ([09:31](#)):

Obviously great, great businessman and an environmentalist here. John, if someone listening is thinking, okay there's these grants and I've got a cause and I've got a company. What do you look for in those that you do fulfill grants with what stands out I guess would be my follow up question there.

John ([09:48](#)):

I think it's probably worth saying that we're pretty narrow in our funding given that legacy, that niche within the environmental movement we're trying to hit the sweet spot on and we believe strongly in long term commitment, the key initiatives. We want to have a really significant impact with a few partnerships rather than spreading themselves too thin. So looking back over the last several years, the way I would answer your question is to say that we have solidified some really tremendous partnerships and grants that we've made. First, I'll give you an example of a couple perhaps. The first that we committed to longterm was Georgia Tech. Ray went there, he loved his Alma mater and we were thrilled to be able to fund and name a center within their business school that's now called the Ray C Anderson center for sustainable business. Basically, it's the place where the Ray Anderson's of tomorrow can be educated.

John ([10:51](#)):

Students have so many more opportunities to explore sustainable business at Georgia Tech because of the center, but it also offers opportunities for faculty research in this space and industry engagement. So a lot is happening at Georgia Tech and we're thrilled to be partnering with them on that. Another brief example that came out of our evolving funding priorities. We have a long relationship as a family with Janine Benyus. Ray and Janine were good friends. She was an advisor to Interface. Some people listening might know that name. For those who don't. She coined the term biomimicry. She wrote a book about it, a design discipline where you look to the natural world or how it solves problems. Fundamental belief is that nature is better at making stuff and organizing itself than humans are. So what lessons can we learn from it? Interface learned a lot of lessons and finding better ways to make their carpet by utilizing biomimicry.

John ([11:58](#)):

We fund the biomimicry Institute, a nonprofit that tries to get this discipline out there for a design challenge and then an business accelerator and ultimately a pitch competition for entrepreneurs for startups that are focused on biomimicry, that have nature at their core. And we give a \$100,000 grant each year called the Ray of Hope prize to one of these startup businesses that wins this competition all because once again, we believe they can be proof points that business when done right and be a force of good in the world. So those are some long term relationships that we've had. And there's a couple others as well that have come out of our grant priorities.

Charlie ([12:44](#)):

There's a lot of really great achievements in there that you just rambled off a Georgia Tech's my Alma mater. I'm really happy to hear about the sustainable business initiatives. Just incredible work there. So John, let's talk a little more about your career. What else stands out, personal and career. What are some of your proudest achievements? If you look back on your highlight reel?

John ([13:02](#)):

I'll answer that in two ways. One generally and then the second specifically. I am so fortunate. I'm just the, I might be the luckiest person that I know because from a relatively young age, I was 27 when I became executive director of this foundation. I've had the opportunity to do really meaningful work working with my family to advance my grandfather's legacy all around a field that I have tremendous passion for, saving our planet. I mean, it's very much a personal calling for me. I'm not just trying to carry my grandfather's water here. I believe in what we do. I'm proud, but I'm also extremely grateful for the fact that this is work I get to do. And I wouldn't have gotten to do it if I hadn't been born into this family. Something I did not earn but I've tried to earn it ever since getting the job.

John ([13:56](#)):

And perhaps this most specific example of a proud accomplishment was writing a book. Ray Anderson wrote the first book in 1998 called Mid Course Correction. It was my grandfather's first attempt to really share his story with the public at large. It was only four years into his journey and the journey of

his company as they tried to climb mount sustainability. So it was still very forward looking and this vision for what he wanted interface to become what he called the prototypical company of the 21st century. Now that vision is still very valid. Today we need more prototypical companies of the 21st century. So back in 2018 my board of trustees authorized me to go and republish the book to write new content. We were thrilled to find a publisher to work with us on this. I spent the summer of 2018 writing six new chapters to be added to the book, bringing the story present.

John ([14:59](#)):

Where interface is today and what lessons have they learned along the way? But then dedicating chapters to a forward looking vision myself. I tried to imagine if Ray were still alive today and he was looking around the corner, what would he see for the sustainability movement? What would he point to as the issues to be solved next? So I shared those thoughts in that book and was honored to have it released in May of 2019. The updated edition of this book is called Midcourse Correction Revisited. It is a humbling experience for me to look at the cover of that book and see Ray Anderson's name and right there underneath it. John Lanier.

Charlie ([15:45](#)):

Well, who better to write that down than you, congrats. We'll definitely link to the book in the podcast show notes. That's so cool. Well, I think you're probably a little bit of a futurist, I'd say just from some of the thinking you're doing around the companies you're working with and investing in. So my next question here is, you know, what's around the corner in this sustainability movement? What should we be reading up on now?

John ([16:07](#)):

I can answer that in two ways as well. I know that your audience might be interested in the green building space in particular, so we can talk to that, but I'm going to go up a level and just say really for the broader movement, and this is some of what I explored in my book with building upon my grandfather's thoughts. He advocated for, as I said, the prototypical company of the 21st century. So within sustainable business itself, we've seen a lot of success there. Sustainability has arrived in the common discourse in society and within business. There's not a fortune 500 company that doesn't have at least one person whose full time job is to work on

sustainability. So it has arrived, it's on the agenda. And that is a huge success. But I came to realize in my research for this book that we don't just need prototypical companies of the 21st century to fundamentally solve at scale the sustainability challenges that we face on planet earth.

John ([17:17](#)):

We can't wait for one company after another to replicate the successful model that interface pioneers. I don't think we have enough time for that to be the way that we see sustainability scale. We need a systems level approach to sustainability, a redesign of our economic system. I think the best way that I can express the need and urgency for that is with a little bit of math here. I have looked at talking about Interface, how much money they generated, let's use 2018 the most recent data that I've got, top of mind interface has done so much for sustainability and they've grown as a business. They did 1.2 Billion in earnings in 2018 that's, I mean, that's real money right there for sure. 1.2 billion of near sustainably generated revenue. But then if you ask people, I'll ask you what was the revenue of planet earth in 28 of all countries around the world and all businesses within them? It basically add up all the GDPs of countries around the world. We call it the gross world product. Do you want to guess what that number was in 2018 no worries. If you don't, I'll just tell you

Charlie ([18:35](#)):

I could guess, you know, 15 trillion,

John ([18:40](#)):

84.8 trillion

Charlie ([18:43](#)):

Well, okay, there you go.

John ([18:44](#)):

1.2 billion is what interface represents, you would need more than 70,000 interfaces to say that all of the revenue, in other words, our economy is functioning sustainably. We're a long way away from that. Now, there are other companies like interface doing great work, but the scale is huge and critically that number is only meant to go up. We want economic growth. That's how our economic system is oriented. So trying to make all of that

sustainably. While that number needs to grow for our economic system to succeed, it makes me realize that the strain on our planetary boundaries, our natural resources and our natural systems is only going to increase and I think we need not just prototypical companies of the 21st century. We need to figure out what a prototypical economy of the 21st century looks like, which I would argue is an evolution, a positive evolution from the current economic system that we have, which has generated more quality of life for more people than any other economic system ever in the history of the world, but it doesn't mean it's sustainable.

Charlie ([20:04](#)):

I love the way you think. I'm glad you went there on the economic side of it too. We're not thinking this macro as we need to be and that was a really good, good analogy. Thanks for doing that. John, lets talk more about you? What do you think is your specialty or gifts?

John ([20:18](#)):

I've stumbled into being a good writer, I suppose, or at least I think I am. I'll leave that up to your audience. If anybody does go get the book, and I'd be honored if you did, but also I write a weekly blog called Egocentricity. I'd be just as honored if people would go and subscribe to that. So sharing through the written word is something I genuinely enjoy this work that I do of trying to empower others in the sustainability space because honestly that's what a philanthropic organization does. They don't do the work, they just write the check. So the most important thing is to lift up others to support others. And I have been so thrilled that we as a family have been able to identify the most impactful, tremendous partnerships that we can make. So the talent there, the gift that I think we all have is being able to spot the really smart, really dedicated person who is going to have success for the broader sustainability movement and lift them up. And so all credit really does go to our partners out there that our foundation supports.

Charlie ([21:35](#)):

Got it. No, thanks very much. Let's talk about some pro tips, some productivity tips. John, do you have any routines or rituals that help you stay on point

John ([21:44](#)):

Coffee in the morning and I think that's probably the most important thing. No, this is an interesting question for me. I think I struggle with that from time to time. I'll be honest with your audience. My wife will make fun of me at times that I don't always get the most important thing done first because psychologically I like to finish my to do list, so I've got three to do lists and one of them only has one item on it. The others have lots. I'm probably going to go do the one item so I can feel a sense of accomplishment. That means, I don't know, he's getting the most important thing done, but the flexibility that fortunately I have in my job to work wherever I am and whenever I need to. Work allows me to keep up with things, so I feel almost like my checklist orientation is a bit of a curse in the nature of what I do.

Charlie ([22:36](#)):

Well, human nature, we want that momentum, right? We want to check something off and move on and keep that momentum up so I get it. But there's good books out there like deep work and some others to make sure we're time blocking and focusing on the number one thing. Mark Twain and eat the frog first thing in the morning.

John ([22:54](#)):

I like that quote.

Charlie ([22:55](#)):

Yeah, it's one of my favorites. I actually argue even during the weeks you should do that one thing you're going to be putting off to do Monday morning. The rest of the week. It'll be easy if you can just two hours Monday morning, get it done, eat that frog. So let's talk about a bucket list, John, as we get to know each other more, you'll find that I'm a fan of the bucket list. So what are one or two things on your bucket?

John ([23:16](#)):

I'll say two things. I love to travel. It's one of the ways that my wife and I build our marriage is to experience the world. And we both very much enjoy seeing different cultures, different cities as well as experiencing different natural wonders. I think I shade towards the natural wonders my wife somewhat more towards the urban scapes and different cultures. But all of it has been so rewarding. So to continue to travel and at the top of my wishlist and as an environmentalist, I'm fully aware that this is a guilty pleasure, but I

would love to do an around the world cruise, take six months and literally sail around the world, stopping in dozens and dozens of countries, even if just for a day to get a flavor for what is out there. If I get a chance to do that, then I would feel so fortunate to have an adventure like that over such a long period of time. It may need to wait until retirement.

Charlie ([24:21](#)):

You know what you want. That's amazing. And I'm sure that's less carbon emissions than jet setting around the world.

John ([24:26](#)):

I'm not sure about that. There's a lot of carbs associated with those groups. Well, I mean all of the same, I'll make sure to offset it at the very least. But I'm also a big sports guy and this bucket list item is somewhat outside of my control. I have become a big Atlanta United fan and enjoy following soccer and all its forms, but it'd be really cool if I ever got to go see Atlanta United play in the club world cup, which would mean that they would have to win a few tournaments for the ride to get there. But it'd be cool for me to be able to see Atlanta United compete on the international stage in soccer. That'd be an absolute blast. I've tried to make that trip for sure.

Charlie ([25:08](#)):

Well, I love it and it's just great to see soccer and the soccer movement across the US, but definitely here in Atlanta, obviously we won the MLS cup a couple of years ago. Unfortunately a certain injury is gonna be tough this year, but Hey man, let's get sports started back again and that's great to hear you as a fan of our soccer club, man.

John ([25:28](#)):

Yeah, I'm glad you are as well. You if you're following enough to know Joseph Martinez. I actually want to say one thing to that is I have learned so much from the Atlanta United phenomenon here that has application more broadly that could be relevant to the sustainability movement. So I'll share here, and I recognize many folks listening may not know much about Atlanta and the soccer club, but the club here is supported by tens of thousands of fans. We had 55,000 people per match in our stadium last year and that it was top 25 in the world. And when you walk into an Atlanta United match and look around, you see more diversity then any other public gathering that

Atlanta has to offer. And that to me is the best measure of the success of this club. It has been something that has brought all of Atlanta and its various flavors together and it's done that by celebrating the unique cultural background that everybody comes from. It is the melting pot for Atlanta. That's the sustainability movement. And I want to say, how can we learn from that? How we become more diverse and more inclusive

Charlie ([26:47](#)):

I was about to say that same thing. Melting pot, that's what Atlanta is known for, but Atlanta United fans, it's amazing. And luckily they play in a LEED platinum stadium, Mercedes-Benz. Well, John, fascinating conversation. I want to ask just one last question, which is to say someone's listening right now. I want to jump into this sustainability moment. Maybe it's green buildings maybe it's something on the corporate sustainability side, but what advice do you have to them if they're jumping in right now?

John ([27:15](#)):

I would say read, learn as much as you possibly can. The sustainability movement, regardless of where you fall within it, for the most part, it's gone mainstream at a one level in a one on one level is much better than no understanding at all of sustainability, but it won't solve the problems we have at the pace we need them solved. We need as many people understanding the intricacies, the nuances of what it takes to solve sustainability challenges as possible, and that requires people being willing to read and listen to podcasts like this and go deep on these issues. Becoming experts in as many different areas within sustainability as possible. It's hard work. It takes time, but it's a rewarding journey. It's been, it's one that I've been on and have been so grateful to have been on. I have learned so much in the last seven years since I've joined the foundation and so I would, that's what I would encourage people to do. You spend your free time continuing to deepen your understanding of this space.

Charlie ([28:24](#)):

Fantastic. You brought a lot of energy today, John. I can't thank you enough and just for everyone listening, please go check it out. We'll put the link in the podcast show notes, John and Ray's book and the great work they're doing, but there's been John Lanier, executive director at the Ray Anderson foundation. John, thanks for being on the podcast today.

John ([28:42](#)):

Thanks Charlie. This was fun.

Charlie ([28:45](#)):

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 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 ([29:11](#)):

Thank you for listening to this episode of the green building matters projects@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, and you can actually 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 and we'll see you in next week's episode.