

## LEED Fellow and Vice President at WSP USA Keith Amann Transcript

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*Introduction:* Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the Green Building Movement. Your host is Charlie Choquette, 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.

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*Charlie:* Hey everybody, welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Every week I get an interview with a Green Building Professional, and it's fun because sometimes it's someone in my network, someone I kind of know, and I get to know them better and that's what we have today with Keith Ammon. He lives in the New York City area. He's the LEED Fellow and the vice president at WSP USA, and I can't wait to unpack his story. Keith, how are you doing today, man?

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*Keith:* I'm doing well. Thanks, Charlie. How about yourself?

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*Charlie:* All things considered, nets out to life is good. Couple curveballs here and there, but all good, man. I know we always have fun hanging out at Green Build, anyone listening to Greenbuild is coming up in November in San Francisco, make sure you're out there. I always like to ask, take us back to where you grew up and where you go to school?

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*Keith:* I grew up in central New Jersey in the suburbs, although I guess when we were first there, it was really farm country. It's now considered a little bit more of a suburb outside the kind of New Jersey pharmaceutical capital of Bridgewater. I grew up in a small town called Branchburg, which is part of Somerville, New Jersey, and went to school, went to Central High School, and then went on to the University of Connecticut, the School of Business there, and studied business management. Afterwards, I knew I was getting into the environmental field and ended up going to NJIT, New Jersey Institute of Technology in their School of Architecture for a master's focused certificate in sustainable design. That was my education.

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*Charlie:* Couple of things there. As An undergrad, I also understand some sports, lacrosse. Tell us about that.

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*Keith:* I grew up playing sports and soccer was my best sport growing up. We had a really great program in my town and we won the state championship at Somerville when I was there. I went on to coach there for a little while, the high school team as well. Soccer was really my passion. I also liked to dabble in lacrosse, so it wasn't great. But the Yukon had a club team, so it was fun. My buddy on my floor was playing so I played as a way to stay active and exercise. I didn't have a lot of ball skills, so I played a defensive mini and was just good at defense mostly.

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*Charlie:* Oh, I love that. Soccer in the US, just even in the last 15 years, is just booming. It's great to see the MLAs success and more people playing soccer. How about the sustainability in your case, what guided you towards a graduate program in sustainable design?

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*Keith:* I have to give big credit to my parents. Both were environmentalists and my dad specifically, who is a mechanical and electrical engineer and

really had me thinking about the inability at a really early age. He owns an MEP firm in New Jersey. He was one of the founders of the US Green Building Council, New Jersey chapter. He was the chair of the chapter for a while. Growing up and when I was going to college, I knew I wanted to get into the environmental field. But I also knew having been raised by an engineer that I was mediocre at best in my math skills. And so engineering wasn't really going to be my career path, which is ironic since I ended up at an engineering company. I knew I wanted to do something in sustainability and I thought a kind of a broad degree in business would give me a background. I thought when I was in college that maybe I'd get into renewable energy companies or something like that. I did take some when I was in the business program that UConn has a really great real estate program. I took some real estate courses and really kind of enjoyed those were actually my favorite classes. The classes focused on kind of real estate law and real estate development. I started inching towards the building side of sustainability. When I graduated, I went to work for my father for a couple of years where they were still pretty new. He was on the board at the time and really starting to push his clients into doing LEED projects. I actually came to help with some marketing and helped to position his company to do green building. I got to work on a LEED platinum project when I was there, and that was really some of my first exposure to using LEED and other sort of frameworks as a tool to leverage good sustainability outcomes on projects. I really got passionate about that trajectory for my career and that's what kind of guided me toward doing that further education at NJIT and ultimately leading to where I am now, which is a focus in sustainable, sustainable building projects.

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*Charlie:* What a great influence there, both your parents and your dad's firm. One of the questions I like to ask is who had some influence or opened some doors for you? You're giving a good shout out there, but anyone else along the way? Who else opened some doors, had some influence along the way?

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*Keith:* Certainly my father and I don't know if I mentioned he's also a LEED Fellow and still really involved in the local chapter and all that. I give him a lot of credit as a mentor and he remains a mentor to this day. We really annoy the family around the dinner table when we sit around talking about renewable energy or HVAC systems and such like. We try to take it inside our conversations as much as we can. Certainly it's still learning a lot from him. I think another mentor to name would certainly be my first boss at RG, which is Lauren Yarmouth. She founded the company YRG with Josh Rudolph in Colorado. I got the chance to meet her when she was speaking at a conference in New York the first year that they actually founded the company. She hadn't moved, she hadn't moved out to New York yet, but was thinking about moving and we started a dialogue. When she moved out here to open an office, I was her first employee. I remember our first few weeks on the job. We were looking for co-working office space and stopping at stores to buy trash cans and stuff like that. It was a real startup feel. Beyond those things, Lauren was really to this day a dynamic and inspirational speaker, motivator and thought provoker. I credit her a lot to the approach I take to projects and to speaking with clients. I learned so much from her about how to approach this type of work. I don't know anyone that could keep an audience engaged in an eight hour LEED workshop the way that she did. I had the privilege of joining her in a lot of those training early on when we were doing a lot of elite AP training. I just learned so much with her style and her personality and how she approached topics. To this day, I still think about when I go into meetings with clients, how might she kind of approach subjects like this and how do you communicate kind of complex topics to folks that may not understand some of the nuances of the details of these things.

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*Charlie:* I've had Josh on the podcast, I know him well and I know Lauren. I'd say OG, so to speak. I love the start up feel there during that time. Was it

LEED for existing buildings, LEED for new construction or a little of everything? What kind of stuff are you working on in New York at the time?

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*Keith:* At the time that I started, which was in 2007, we were focused mostly on LEED and saw a little LEED . A year or two later we started doing more IB work. I'll say that around the same time Jenni Carney also joined the team based in Chicago. She focused a lot on the EB work. It wasn't an area of focus for me. I was really more on the B and C or C at the time. We did a lot of commercial buildings and multifamily projects in New York as well as commercial interiors. That was really the focus. We did some projects internationally. We got to work on some mega high rises in South Korea and elsewhere, some master planned community work. I would say the bulk of the work was in the kind of traditional LEED B and C type of projects.

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*Charlie:* You and your dad, they're both LEED fellows. It's like LeBron and maybe his son playing the NBA one day or something like that. Good stuff, man. Let's connect the dots on the career path there. Ten years at YRG, employee number one essentially in New York, number two. And then you became a part of WSP and built ecology. Tell us how that transition went and kind of get us caught up to even kind of current day?

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*Keith:* YRG was really a successful company in terms of it being a small but strategic sustainability firm. That was one of the first out there. We were really able to harness name recognition and work on some really amazing projects and grow the company. At one point we were probably around 30 plus people. We had probably had 15 in New York. It was a really great and fun ten years of. My career where I learned the ropes of sustainability consulting. Ultimately, we were acquired by WSP and that was a great opportunity to expand our reach. WSP has a lot of additional areas of focus,

and so we felt it was a good strategic move due to all the additional areas that they have expertise in that expand the window of the types of projects that we could work on. Ultimately, we joined and were acquired by WSP as a group. We actually joined forces with an existing group, although relatively small in number at WSP, called built ecology. They had a few sustainability specialists kind of around the country focused on high performance building analytics primarily. IAG joined forces with those team members to kind of grow that Built Ecology Brand. Our team is a national business line focused on sustainable design consulting in the built environment, focused on delivering sustainable equity, equitable and resilient outcomes on projects. We work doing design analytics like energy modeling and daylight analysis and CFD, all the kinds of traditional analytics services that you'd see in a sustainable consulting firm, as well as the kind of sustainable strategy and certification work as well.

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*Charlie:* Thank you for that. WSP is this larger firm and you're kind of on this special ops unit here and kind of high performance buildings. But on a broader spectrum, it sounds like you've done some research and planning all things decarbonization. It sounds like a lot falls to the built technology group?

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*Keith:* I would say that over the last few years are the services and the type of work that we're doing has really evolved quite a bit as wired you we did some corporate sustainability work but the majority of our projects are bread and butter was focused on kind of individual projects, making them more efficient, conducting the energy modeling, commissioning and the certification process of those of those projects. Part of it is our expansion into WSP and the resources that we have available, as well as the industry changing quite a bit in terms of what the industry is looking for. Recently a good amount of our work has been more at scaling that from the building level to portfolios and kind of corporate strategy work as well where we're

grateful to have another sustainability group within WSP that's focused more on that kind of corporate side, the Climate Sustainability Resiliency Group, CSR, they've changed names a few times and rebranded the last couple of years, but they're also another large specialty sustainability group just working in kind of a different market than us. Over the last year or two we have been collaborating on a lot of projects and it's been really, really awesome to work with them to deliver some of these more nuanced projects that have expanded roles for us.

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*Charlie:* A lot of resources, a lot more team members to collaborate and smart people. Let's look back one more time and what are some things you're really proud of? What are some accomplishments? What's on the highlight reel?

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*Keith:* There's certainly a number of projects I'm really proud of in terms of when we were engaged in them at the beginning and what we were able to achieve in terms of what their initial goals were and how we were able to support them in kind of exceeding those goals. I really have enjoyed working on kind of historic building projects and preservation of historic buildings and adaptive reuse projects. I've done a number of those, including New York City Hall, the TWA Flight Center, MetLife, Clocktower, so 100 plus year old buildings and also affordable housing projects. We've done a number of those projects. Homeless formerly homeless transition housing projects have been an area that we're particularly proud of because sometimes it's hard to justify really aggressive sustainability outcomes on those projects due to funding challenges. Some of those projects have been some of the most rewarding to me. Earning the LEED Fellow has been really rewarding because it demonstrates not just your knowledge of LEED, but also your commitment to the industry mentorship and volunteerism and those types of aspects of it that I'm proud of as well. When I first started in the industry in New York at RG, I got involved in the Emerging

Professionals chapter and I became chair of that. That's the Young Professionals group of the Urban Green Council in New York. On a number of events. Some of that was some of the most fun, but also some of the most rewarding work. We were raising money for charities or building a house in the Ninth Ward in New Orleans. Things like that have been really, really interesting parts of my career. One other area, I think in terms of the mentorship, that's been one of the areas I've enjoyed the most as well. I participated in mentoring for a few years, one of those years which was led by a client in front of a friend of mine at Inspire. Jonathan Flaherty. We were able to work with a group of schools from Queens students that came in, and we taught them all about sustainable building design and construction. Ultimately, the project we we built with them through the ACE program was built in Kolkata, Liberia, through another partnership organization, which so that was really fun because we were able to mentor these, these high school students on sustainability and also achieve an outcome which was a school in a in a country that really needed it. I would say some of those are some of the most rewarding things I've worked on.

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*Charlie:* What a great highlight reel. I love the significance, the impact, not just one building at a time. It's over here teaching, mentoring. I'm a big fan of the Urban Green Council, and I think it's one of the most active USGBC chapters. I'll never forget Keith, the EB Awards back in the day. Fortunately, one of my projects won one 2014 a 2015, I guess, and that was a lot of fun. The EB Awards, anything else kind of present day just keeping you busy or are you doing project work you do business development? How has your career kind of been evolving?

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*Keith:* I certainly do a mix of both. A lot is happening in the industry these days. As part of my role and built ecology, I lead the strategy and certifications group. The way Built Ecology is set up is we're really focused into two areas. One is the kind of analytics, team design, analytics and then



strategy and certifications. I lead that group and help kind of with overall kind of knowledge sharing and kind of staffing of projects and such like that as well as business development. I have what I've done since I started in my career, which is project management, managing my own set of projects as well as kind of doing these other things. As I mentioned, the industry is changing quite a bit. I certainly still work on a lot of building scale projects. I'm working on a few towers in Hudson Yards, working on a number of commercial interior fit out projects. We do some kind of nationwide work with some financial institutions, and I kind of oversee all of those projects. We've certified probably nearly 40 fit out projects for some financial institutions. We're also working on electrification projects and decarbonization of some building portfolios. That's some of the kind of newer, more interesting work because it's different and newer to the market and to the ask from clients. But that's keeping me busy for sure, because it's certainly a challenging subject. We're right now working on decarbonizing an affordable housing portfolio of roughly 100 buildings and going through and tackling the nuances of all of the available incentive programs. How do we decarbonize the right way looking at the grid and makeup of each of the locations that these buildings, these existing buildings are based to really understand what's going to be the best, most efficient way to decarbonize these. Is it through replacement of HVAC systems or is it through looking at renewables offsite onsite? There's just so many variables to this and we're working through it. It's certainly an area that's still in its infancy in terms of really understanding the impacts. A lot of this is driven by local codes and also corporations setting commitments to ESG and such commitments to decarbonizing. It's really interesting work. I'm really excited to be working on this, but it's definitely keeping me.

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*Charlie:* Busy and I love decarbonization electrification. I know in New York, local law 97 is probably something you were hinting at, too, that's got a big push here to do some of this work. It's a good segue to my next question. One of my favorites to ask a LEED Fellow like you is OC. What's

next? What else are you excited about? What's coming down the road in this green building movement?

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*Keith:* I think certainly decarbonization or carbon in general is going to be a continued focus. It's been something that the last couple of years has. It has really grown in importance. We're seeing clients really interested in and caring about that. I would say the number of clients reaching out saying we want this project to be net zero. That didn't used to happen not even a few years ago, nearly as much as it's happening now. That's certainly a trend, certainly for the better as well. We're also seeing just scale. Moving from focusing on individual buildings to focusing on kind of rolling out portfolio scale strategies or corporate wide sustainability goal setting. The other area I think that we're focused on and some of this is also work that I'm doing as part of the LEED steering committee and LEED advisory committee volunteer roles is just kind of where LEED is going in the next iteration as well. Certainly a focus on social equity resiliency are areas that I think really need to be emphasized in kind of the shift toward green buildings. Buildings won't be sustainable if they're not equitable. We know that's an area where we're trying to focus on our projects. We're also focused on delivering in the next version of the LEED rating system. It's interesting, you go down these rabbit holes and I find out more and more about areas where we need to focus on equity more. We had a meeting with the Grace Farms Organization and their Design for Freedom campaign focused on the supply chain, material supply chains and how we need to start understanding better how forced labor how child labor is, is kind of influenced in the in the supply chain of our materials and make better decision making processes of that. With more and more focus on sustainability, you go down these topics and realize, well, we solved one problem, but there's so many other areas that we also need to figure out for these to be truly sustainable. There's a few areas where I think we're evolving as things become mainstream in some categories, we're kind of

moving to also influence and improve upon areas that might need more focus.

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*Charlie:* Buildings won't be sustainable, fair and equitable. It sounds like you got a good feel for what's next or and what's needed and you're really excited about it. If you could talk a little more about volunteering, guiding some of the next iterations of important programs like LEED. So to our listeners that might think they don't have the time as busy professionals, what would you say to them? Can they have some influence here or should they volunteer at their local U.S. chapter or or even bigger like you're doing to steer the steering committee? So how do you find the time to make that impact?

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*Keith:* Great question. I will say that I think volunteering has been some of the most rewarding work in my career. I make the time and I'm fortunate to work at a company that values participation in committees and organizations. We still have to get our work done but they recognize that I may have to give up hours during my workday to participate in some of these things. But the reason I initially got involved at the national level was because in my work on projects and discussions with clients, particularly in New York, I was just seeing kind of a trending disconnect between the LEED rating system and kind of where the industry was going or what was already required by code. And really just wanting to be involved in helping shape LEED to continue to be the market transformer that it was when it came out. And that's really been my kind of guidepost for the next version in terms of how I participate and provide my feedback and recommendations on where on where the rating system is going. And that needs to be meaningful and it needs to have impact and it needs to help push the market. It's finding that fine line between not being too neutral, too challenging. No one can use it and not being too easy that it doesn't have value. I really wanted to get involved because I felt like I had a lot of

insights in my work on these projects, to kind of help to navigate those challenges. The last few years that I've been involved, it has been really rewarding because I've gotten to see kind of the inner workings of how consensus is reached on some of these topics and all the challenges of compromise and governance and these things. I would say to folks that are too busy with work to volunteer. You get a lot out of it, and it makes you better at your jobs by getting these. Hearing these different perspectives from all these other industry stakeholders that are also volunteering. It's pretty important and I would encourage you to think that the USGBC has a call for volunteers for new committees now. I'd encourage folks to get involved because I found it to be some of the most rewarding work I've done.

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*Charlie:* Good answer, man, that's amazing. Let's get to know you a little bit more. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

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*Keith:* I'm generally pretty good at communicating complex topics to folks in a way that they can understand and find kind of meaning from. And so that's one of the areas I think is important in my workday is kind of interpreting my team's research and analytics to say, "All right, well, this is all great information, but how do we convey that to someone so that they can actually make a decision on what we're presenting?" I think that's something one of the things I learned from Lauren, is how to communicate these types of topics so that they're engaging, inspirational and fun so you can help realize those outcomes. I don't think I'm much of a chatterbox, but communicating things in a clear way that people can act on is something that I feel like I've been able to be successful in.

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*Charlie:* Knowing your audience and adjusting, if you need to keep any good habits, routines or rituals you could share.

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*Keith:* Any routines that I had pre-pandemic, I think have all gone out the window. Life has changed quite a bit. Every day is a new day, wondering am I going to be watching kids at home because they can't go to school today or what have you? I would say in terms of routines, I'm a very good sleeper. I almost always get a full night's sleep. As much as I can be busy. I make sure to go to make sure I get a good night's sleep. When I leave for work before my kids are up, I always give them a kiss in the morning before I head out. I think that's probably one of the only routines I've been able to maintain in this pandemic.

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*Charlie:* Things change for all of us. I love that you're consistent with that and the kids. And that's got to be grounding before you go into the busy chaos of work. Thanks for giving us a peek into your world as we get to know each other a little more. I'm a fan of a bucket list. What are one or two things maybe on your bucket list?

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*Keith:* I probably have a ton. I would say that my wife and I certainly love to travel and so a lot of places we still want to hit. Doing some good travel is certainly there. I also would love to live on a sailboat for a while. I've actually talked to my wife about sailing around the world. She's already vetoed that idea. Maybe spending some time cruising the South Pacific or something for a few months, I propose the idea of taking the kids to a high school at some point and taking a year off and learning the ropes of living out on a sailboat but we'll see. Maybe I can convince her one of those days. That's definitely something on my bucket list. I don't know if this is cliché or not, but in terms of a bucket list, I'd love to to feel like I had an impact on leaving a sustainable future for my children and my grandchildren. If I can say that I was a part of that, that would be pretty good in terms of a bucket list item.

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*Charlie:* You're doing that and just keep asking your wife on the sailboat stuff on the travel boat before the sailboat. What's a destination you really want to get to or get back to?

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*Keith:* There's so many places. We're currently planning a trip to the Amalfi Coast. I've not been to Italy before looking at doing that, but still haven't done some of the historic sites. I'd love to see the pyramids. Do some of those types of trips? I'd also love to get down to Patagonia.

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*Charlie:* Wow, that's a good bucket list. Let's talk about books and reading. I don't know if you listen to podcasts or audiobooks or if you like to hold a book in your hands. Is there a book you'd recommend to our listeners?

*Keith,* It doesn't even have to be about buildings.

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*Keith:* I'm not a huge reader. I try to read when I can. I would say I'm currently reading a book by Majora Carter. She's someone I actually heard speak very early on in my career, and I've always followed her and really been inspired by her kind of like grassroots campaign campaigns she's done she has a book called Reclaim Your Community, which I'm reading now, which is interesting, especially as we tackle with how to incorporate equitable equitably into our projects and really understand what it means to have an equitable community. I'm enjoying that one right now. I would say in terms of influential books, Cradle to Cradle is still the book I think about that really made me stop and think about my career, what I wanted to do with it. And also taught me that there are a lot of things that we do just as business as usual that may not be the right way to do things. And that book was really enlightening to understand that not everything that we do is done in the right way. We need to stop and question things when they look, they don't make sense. I've actually carried that idea a lot through my

work in terms of not being afraid to ask questions about, "why are you doing it this way? That's how it was done in the past. Well, it's not a good, good reason to continue to do the same thing over and over again. I would recommend that book if in terms of just an inspirational read.

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*Charlie:* We're going to put links to the books in the podcast, show notes. Everybody check out these great recommendations. Keith, just a couple more questions as we start to come to a close. Looking back on your career, is there any advice you wish you'd have known a little earlier?

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*Keith:* When I started in my career, obviously everyone that starts out I think has some knowledge that they don't have all the answers. One of the things I wish I knew earlier is that no one has all the answers. Don't be afraid to ask the what might be 'the silly or the dumb question.' If you have an idea, it's worth exploring. As someone starting their career early on, you may think that you're the person who has the least experience in the room. That also means that you have the least preconceptions about what's how something is supposed to be done. You have a really unique perspective and value to add to any project or engagement that you have. I wish I knew that earlier because I think early on in my career, I kept things, kept ideas to my chest because I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. In my project work now, particularly as we start new project engagements, every time we have a kickoff meeting, we allow and we ask that this be an open space and a time for people to bring to the table the crazy ideas that they think they had or they might have read about, they might have heard about in the news, might might not make sense, but throw it out on the table. Let's not judge anyone because there's a lot of specialists that have technical expertise and a lot of different areas. We really need to hear from them what those ideas are to have the best outcomes so we allow that kind of safe space on our projects because something I learned was, you know, a lot of times people might be afraid to speak up and offer.

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*Charlie:* Those nuggets of wisdom here. I think my calculations show we're about the same age. And Keith, man, you're dropping some really good, good wisdom here. Thank you. My last question, let's say someone's listening right now and they're just getting inspired. They're jumping into this green building movement now. It's not too late. There's still a lot of work to do. Any words of encouragement for them?

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*Keith:* I would say there's a lot going on that can be oftentimes demoralizing in terms of the political climate and what's happening out there in the world. I would say to be hopeful, there's always hope for a more sustainable future. Everyone has a key role to play in that. I remain optimistic that despite all the hurdles that the sustainability movement has had, we continue to maintain an upward trajectory despite the challenges. Don't get discouraged, I would say to folks that are starting off in this career, don't get discouraged with short term failures or obstacles. Continue to push for the things that you believe in. Hopefully the outcome will be positive.

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*Charlie:* It's awesome. I really enjoyed getting to know you more. I hope all of our listeners did this week, so. Keith, man, thanks for your time and keep up the good work.

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*Keith:* Thank you, Charlie. It's great to see you and look forward to connecting with you either in New York or in San Francisco.

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*Charlie:* I 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, we're 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](http://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 on next week's episode.