

Owner and LEED Fellow Robyn Dowsey of Eco-Build Strategies

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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 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.

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Charlie: Hi everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I've been doing this for over four years and I love it because once a week I get an interview, a green building professional somewhere in the world. Today we've got Robyn Dowsey. She's a LEED Fellow in central Florida. We're going to talk about her green building consulting firm, all the previous design work she's done and have a fantastic conversation. Hey, Robyn, how are you doing today?

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Robyn: I'm great. Good morning to you and everyone listening.

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Charlie: Excited to connect here. I know we've connected in our other forums but for all of my guests, Robyn, I like to say, "Hey, just take us back. Where did you grow up and where did you go to school?"

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Robyn: I grew up in the Bronx and I went to school as far as college is concerned. In New Jersey, Fairleigh Dickinson, I was a biochem major. I

wanted to be a veterinarian like most kids growing up, I loved animals, loved nature, and just wanted to connect in any way I could. So that's my founding roots.

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Charlie: I'm in Atlanta, Georgia, but I love New York. I've done a lot of business training there. How did you get to Florida, but connect the dots with the environment and maybe animals. What are their early influences? Can you tie some of your sustainability mindset to?

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Robyn: I think a lot of it has to do with your upbringing. My family was very nature forward. We did a lot of hiking and we spent a lot of time. When I grew up, my father was a big advocate and if you want anything other than the necessities, go out and earn it yourself. I worked at a stable. I worked at the animal clinic in the area. I did a lot of volunteer stuff and most of it was nature related. Growing up in that kind of environment, it's just a good fit.

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Charlie: I love that. Thanks for that origin story. Take us through that early part of the career, kind of getting out of school and kind of what was the job market like and what were some of those early jobs there?

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Robyn: I was studying biochem but had an opportunity to intern in a construction company. At that time, the project manager for the construction company was my boyfriend. Earning a couple of bucks, hanging out with your boyfriend sounds like a win win to me so I went ahead and did it. What I loved about the construction business was that every day was a new thing. You weren't doing the same thing every day. Working with him, I got a lot of exposure to the built environment and he did not last but my love for construction and development and all of that blossomed. I ended up doing that more as a career and switching my major

to business management. I still have a passion for biology and chemistry and we'll talk about that maybe later. I read a lot, so I delve into that as well.

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Charlie: Wow. Yeah, that definitely had changed course. I guess, as I understand from your bio, you spent many years at Wharton Smith there. Tell us about that.

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Robyn: My initial exposure to sustainability is because of my previous job. I worked for a company called Capstone in Atlanta, Georgia, and they were going after a LEED project in the very early ages of LEED . And they said, "Does anyone want to get LEED certified and help us go after this project?" And of course, I raised my hand. I went and I got my LEED AP when I was with Wharton Smith. We went ahead and relocated to Florida because my mother passed away and my father was down here by himself and family, my roots, Italian, Jewish, all of that leads to you having to take care of your families. We looked at each other, and my husband and I said, "We have to move down to Florida so that he has a support network." We moved down to Florida and I interviewed with Warden Smith and my kids at that time were very young and they transferred into a kindergarten and my daughter came home from school and she said to me, "Mom, you need to pack me water bottles or a water container when I go to school. And I said, "Do they not have any water at school?" And she said, "Mom, the air conditioning doesn't work all the time and it makes me hot and hard to learn." Well, that conversation needed me to become the Central Florida Green Schools chair, because I didn't see that our kids should have to worry about both learning and whether or not they needed water all day long. I got very active in green schools at that time, and that was my first real affiliation with being very active with USGBC.

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Charlie: Oh, fantastic. And now we know how you got to Florida. We need a great learning environment, not just acoustics and lighting, but some things we maybe take for granted there that make a good learning environment. I love it. Let's look at mentors for a minute before we come to the present day. Is there anyone that maybe you looked up to or maybe opened a door for you along the way.

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Robyn: I have a lot of mentors in my life. I've been blessed with being affiliated with so many bright minds, but early on, I guess it was a construction mentor that I had as a vice president of a construction company that I work for. He said to me, "Robyn, Fix what you can fix. Let go of what you can't and just move on. Be tenacious with what's important to you and don't let yourself sweat the small stuff." I guess it's very cliché, but that really stuck with me for my life. I use that as a backbone to my approach to things so that it helps me keep an open mind when I'm talking to people. I don't really, you know, dig down, in my opinion. I really open up and listen as much as I can.

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Charlie: That's a great nugget of wisdom, and it sounds like you've had several influences to help you get to where you are, and I know you've been a mentor for others. One more thing. As you look back, what are some of your proudest achievements?

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Robyn: My kids, I love to say that it's some work or another. I'm very proud of some of the things that my clients and my team have been able to accomplish. We've been blessed with working with one of the major airports and really launching aviation as far as sustainability is concerned. My work with affordable housing, all of it is very rewarding. But being able to really help my children have a view on life and grow up in a hopefully a better place than I grew up in is very important to me. I have to say that if I

was asked for a couple of things that really are important to me as I move forward, it's don't ever stop learning, keep trying 40, 50, 60, keep learning new things and give back as much as you possibly can. All of us have moments in life where we've said, "Wow, that really helped me get from point A to point B, and if we can give anything back in life that leaves a footprint to give to whoever you possibly can and pass it on, mentor anyone you possibly can.

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Charlie: I love this conversation. Tell us about maybe credentials, the USGBC there in your region, you've been super active and also LEED Fellow and what that's meant to you?

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Robyn: I have too many acronyms I'm told. Obviously in the sustainability world you want to touch everything possible. As I told you, I read every single solitary day, storm water pollution prevention. I work with FDP, I work with USGBC, I work with BCI, I work with green gloves, I work with everyone I possibly can. But LEED has provided me with a family and a community where I feel that there's a very strong two way dialogue. And I think that's very important. A lot of the certifications that we attain in life, it's really trickling down. You go through the steps to be able to get the piece of paper, you have the piece of paper and then they use the piece of paper. But USGBC has allowed me the ability to have a voice in both directions where I feel like I can really help in whatever area I want to go. I think that is always very rewarding and valuable in a person's life and career.

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Charlie: Yeah, I too owe a lot to the USGBC and really the entire LEED movement. I started my company way back and also doing a lot of education and honored to be a LEED Fellow there with you. It's just kind of validating, right? It's a little give back and forth and how can we keep LEED

going as that tool? There are so many other rating systems, like you said and other credentials.

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Robyn: I have to tell you a funny story. I don't mean to derail the conversation, but I told you that I started out in being involved in getting my LEED because of a job and I studied religiously because I was told that the LEED AP was such a difficult exam. I know engineers who didn't get it the first time they tried out for it. I was very passionate about it. I went in and they tell you to throw all of your stuff in the locker, you're not allowed anything. You go into the room and you're in there. I took the test and I sat for it, and I went outside and I started bawling like a baby and the guy said to me, "You do know you passed, don't you?" And I said, "It was such an emotional ride for me that it was a total release when I walked out of the exam room." I'm not sure whether or not everybody had that, but I felt the same way when I got my LEED Fellow . I was very honored to be up there with my husband and all of the hierarchy associated with LEED , it was very welcoming.

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Charlie: I had that feeling, too and the rest is history after that. LEED AP back before June 2009 when the exams changed and the LEED green associate and also the LEED AP was specialty, but the old exam LEED AP by itself was only about a 60%, 65% pass rate. It was pretty tough. You almost have that feeling of when you get that relief and you move on. Fantastic. Let's talk about the present day. Tell us a little more about eco strategies and what's keeping you busy today.

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Robyn: We have a lot of wonderful clients, both in central Florida and abroad. Our specialty is working from the beginning, strong in development and operational policy with our clients. We have been blessed to have the Orlando airport as one of our large clients and they are just so wonderful to

work with and have been able to accomplish so much here in Central Florida to be able to support the community and also pass along that message. And as an example, for the central Florida area, I do a lot of volunteer work. I have some legacy projects that are going on and I have clients that are just looking to be able to align their product line as well as affordable housing. I guess one of the main things that I have been able to do by having such a large client like the Orlando Airport is as they set their goal for LEED V4 certification at a time when a lot of the manufacturers weren't yet in alignment with LEED before, I was able to work with many, many manufacturers to help them find that alignment and find it in a fiscally responsible way. And much of this I did without any cost, but just to be able to help them, help my client and that was very rewarding.

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Charlie: Oh, absolutely. I'm sure airports are kind of tough on the energy consumption of recycling. Is it kind of like we want to get the certification? It's validating, but there's another kind of sustainability goal. How do you program that out?

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Robyn: Most of the challenge comes from the fact that there are so many moving parts in an entity of that size. You have pockets, silos of work that are being accomplished, and you have to make sure that whatever you do weaves in a win-win scenario for all of those entities. It can just, you know, the old saying about that three legged chair, I really believe that that is the case. I believe that you can find a win in all of these areas if you work hard enough at it. We do a lot of road mapping and discovery charrette and also we test drive things. So maybe we will launch something in one department and work the bugs out of it in that department before we do a broad launch. And I think that is a really good approach when you have such a diverse client that is so diverse.

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Charlie: That's great. Let's talk about the future. I love asking this question to green building enthusiasts like you, what are you reading up on? What's next? What's coming at us in this green building movement?

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Robyn: I wish I could answer that. I want to come at us from this green building movement. But I think that in the next five years, some of the buzzwords are obviously going to be focused on ESG, social and health for building occupants. I hope that we continue our march towards stringency and carbon neutrality as we move forward in sustainability as far as development is concerned. But there's so much out there that really needs to be addressed. I think we're on the way to addressing this. I don't know if you read the book. Good to great.

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Charlie: Oh, yeah. Jim Collins is great.

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Robyn: One of the things that I've taken from some of the books that I have read is I want to get to a point where I can touch the doorknob and get my daily vitamins. When that happens, I feel like we've achieved something in the sustainability world. One of the premises is that you don't just do less harm, but that you start doing good. A lot of the things that surround us in the world are still doing harm. I listen to a podcast. I'm not sure whether or not it was yours, Charlie, Apologies. They told me about the fact that the clothes that I'm wearing are putting credit cards worth of plastic in my bloodstream every single solitary day. I'm like, that is not what I want. I really do see that we're moving in the direction. Obviously, looking at climate is an important thing, making sure that whatever we do, we walk forward in a way that is beneficial to all. I hope we let go of some of the labeling that we put on people and take ideas of their value and go ahead and blossom the ideas that are worth moving forward with and let go of the ones that don't. What do you see moving forward in the sustainable

industry? You and I listened to all those calls together. Where do you think we're going?

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Charlie: We love podcasts. When I ask you about books, feel free to drop a podcast or two because I think that's the world we're living in. Is, is more that we get to pick what we want to come at us for the most part with some of our media and influences. But in a way we could talk about that for a long time. With the green building movement, when we double down on healthy buildings, even post-pandemic I think we've got to keep asking questions. Is this a healthy space, a healthy building or not? Programs like WELL and FIT Well, I think we'll continue to succeed. We're doing some work with digital twins and making these virtual copies of a building to really figure some things out before you build them. I think the construction industry hasn't innovated like it is needed to. I see some breakthroughs on that front. You're right, ESG, it's one thing if there were a LEED book for the whole world companies and buildings, I used to say you in SDGs. Let's pick some of the sustainable development goals and try to align with them. We're still seeing a lot of that with companies and even nations or cities. Everyone needs to get up to speed on what ESG is and what part of it is important to me or my business or my set of properties. Validating a few things you said and and I would just add, I think technology when it comes to kind of we can say metaverse, but in general digital twins of buildings before we've built them and definitely after we've built a grid.

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Robyn: The measuring and matrix thing is such an important part and I think that we really have missed the ball on that. Even in 2022. I don't think we do enough to be able to catalog what we've learned from the last 20 years worth of doing this in the industry. I really think that is an area that we're lacking.

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Charlie: In great, great perspective there. Robyn. All right. Let's go to learn a little bit more about you. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

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Robyn: I'm tenacious.

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Charlie: Oh, good word. Any examples?

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Robyn: I don't know whether or not that's a specialty, but I think that if there's anything that has allowed me to succeed as a woman in the construction industry to blossom, my ability to work in sustainability is that I just don't give up. I try from a different approach. Just look at things from a different angle. I don't do it with a negative connotation to it, but I just don't give up on a concept because it fails at first to just try to rebuild it in another way. Obviously, as I said, in development. Anything having to do from the grass roots of design and construction is, is my area of expertise. But I don't think that that is what has allowed me to get from point A to point B in my career.

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Charlie: Tenacity. I love it. Do you have any good habits or routines, rituals that keep you on point?

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Robyn: Yes. Every day I drive somewhere, unfortunately, or spend time on mass transit. I wish there was more here in central Florida, but not yet. I spend that time listening to a book every morning. I listen to a book every afternoon. I rock out to my favorite music. So that is my mode of chief. I came at a disadvantage into this industry. I'm not a mechanical engineer, not an electrical engineer. I'm not an architect. So we don't have that piece of paper that says to everybody else that this is somebody who you should listen to, and therefore I have to know as much, if not more. I find the way

of doing that is reading. We are in an age where just like our computers, what was good yesterday is obsolete tomorrow. And if you don't keep learning and stretching you won't get there. I make it a habit that I have to read. I must get through about ten books a month, even with my workload, which is kind of like 100 hours a week right now, it seems. So that would be the suggestion I make. Just just read. Just pick up a book. There's so many good ones out there that have really formed and shaped my life. I'm sure we have the same big pivots, now blessed unrest. I'm sure we have the same library of books that we've read, but there's just so many good ones there. And you pick a jewel from each of them, put that in your tool belt, and then it arms you with the ability to approach things in life.

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Charlie: I mean, learning, reading, listening in the morning, rocking out in the afternoon. I love it. The books. You named a couple. That's literally my next question is, is there a book or two you'd recommend for our listeners? If you could remember one of those podcasts, too, we love to just share best practices here. You shared some habits, but is there a book or two that we definitely need to get a copy of?

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Robyn: There are a couple that I would recommend reading and not the normal ones. They're not really that new. But Jacqueline Ottman wrote a book called Green Marketing. It's a small book, a really easy read. But one of the statements that she makes in the book and it's really worth opening in and absorbing the pages, is that there are five types of people in the world. There are those people that are going to agree with you 100% of the time because they are passionate and share all of your same passions. And then there are those people who are going to disagree with you on premise 100% of the time, because they have the exact opposite view of everything you believe in. And both of those sets of people are obsolete to your life. The only people that you have a chance of really touching are those that somewhat understand and believe in what you say, somewhat

disagree, and don't believe in what you say. And those who have no opinion, those are the ones. Those are your audience. Those are the ones that you really have the ability to touch as long as you approach it correctly. So it's a great book. She teaches a lot of lessons and the other one that really had a very, very strong impact on my life and I don't even know who wrote it. You might be good to great. Do you know the book?

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Robyn: Jim Collins Just a great book to read. As far as just growth, just normal growth in your life, it really does put things into perspective for you and podcasts. Listen to so many of them. I wouldn't even know where to start.

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Charlie: I love this gosh, so much wisdom. We'll put links to all the books you've mentioned in our podcast show notes. Everybody can check those out. Good the great is really relatable right, Robyn because it's I know that company and I know this company and they're both pretty good companies. But what made this one great? What was that one thing they did to really just take over? And it's fascinating. As we get to know each other more, I'm a fan of a bucket list and I was curious, what are one or two things maybe on your bucket list?

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Robyn: Well, right now my bucket list is to golf in every state in the United States, but I'm not sure what that has anything to do with sustainability. I guess I really do want to travel. I want to have exposure to both the good, the bad and the ugly of everyone else's life. I feel that it's very hard to have an opinion or to do anything in a bubble. And I find that my life has been, you know, it's not perfect, but it's definitely more privileged than so much of the world. And unless I have more exposure to everybody else's normal day, it's very hard for me to have an impact. I want to travel to different places around the world. I did go to Haiti. I don't know if you did during the

disaster in Haiti with Gordon Smith to be able to try and help out. And, you know, you just when you stop and you look at life through someone else's eyes, we really have a better perspective of what we're doing. And so I want that.

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Charlie: I love it all. Travel and do good. No, I know on our LEED physical, we're talking about seeing what we can do in Ukraine. The USGBC was very active there on Rebuild Haiti. I just love everything you're saying here. A couple of final questions as we start to kind of come to a close here on our podcast today. The first one, is there any career advice you wish you'd have known a little earlier?

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Robyn: Oh, boy. That's a hard one for me. I think that probably early in my career, I thought I needed to know everything. Whenever anyone asks me a question, I kind of if I don't have the answer, I kind of like to fudge it or try to give an answer because I thought it was unacceptable to be able to say, I don't know. I wish I'd have learned that lesson that the proper answer to every question is I will find out. Now I know the answer.

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Charlie: I like that. That's good. Okay, let's say someone's listening to this podcast they're going to inspired Robyn here in your journey there and the old stories on how you instead of going this route with veterinarian, you had the boyfriend in construction and now look at you and LEED Fellow and just they get really inspired and they're thinking if you know what, I'm going to jump into this green building movement. What words of encouragement as we come to a close do you have for someone that's just now jumping into the green building movement?

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Robyn: It's not going out and getting a boyfriend in the construction industry. Let me just share that with you.

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Charlie: I got it.

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Robyn: Volunteer. I think that that is the best way. If you start by giving and experiencing whatever it is you want to do in any aspect of sustainability or anything in life, start by volunteering, get involved. It helps you have a rounded opinion. It also is a great way to meet people and talk to people and have an association with someone that you wouldn't necessarily see on a daily basis. So volunteer everybody needs help right now. Whether or not it be LEED or ABC or any of the organizations out there, just get involved.

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Charlie: Wow. Volunteer. That's fantastic. Gosh, this has been an incredible conversation today and thanks for letting us see your career and your journey. Everybody, check out Robyn on LinkedIn. Connect with her, let her know what you thought of the podcast and we'll put a link to everything we discussed, like the books and Robyn , just congrats on your successes and putting a dent in this green building movement. Thanks for spending time with us today.

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Robyn: Well, thank you. And out to your audience. I'll probably regret this, but if anyone has any questions, my email address is on my website. Don't be scared to look me up. I'm happy to help anywhere I can.

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Charlie: It's amazing. Thank you, Robyn . 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, 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.

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