

Transitioning from LEED to ESG: Sharon Patterson Grant, LEED Fellow

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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 green building professionals from around the globe to share their war stories, 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: Everybody, welcome to the next episode, the Green Building Matter Podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti. Today I've got Sharon Grant with us. She's out in the Sun Valley, Idaho region. She's a sustainability manager, now at real estate tech advisers, but worked on many, many LEED . Especially even the tough homes and neighborhood development. We don't always have guests that have that specialty. Excited to hear her story. All things considered, it is good to be on here with you. Learn a little more about your journey, the green building journey. Take us back. Where did you grow up and where did you go to school?

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Sharon: I grew up in Ohio, I'm a midwest girl at the heart of things. I should say, I had a real passion for travel and various causes and wrote on my high school newspaper. Originally planned to go into journalism and decided to take a swing towards business and went to Ohio. I didn't go far from home. I really got bit by the bug and I ended up going to university in Hungary and at Manchester Business School and Moscow University in Russia and ended up with a pretty international background by the time I graduated. I decided to do what I considered a solid, reliable, right turn and

went into banking and decided that wasn't for me after a few years, but it's a good foundation. I had an exciting turn where they got an offer to join the cruise industry. I spent a decade working in the cruise industry in various roles. All making a total shift to sustainability.

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Charlie: Let's talk about that before sustainability. Global travels and education. How did you pick Hungry or some of the other stops along the way? How did you end up there while sitting at Ohio University?

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Sharon: Didn't feel like a big leap from home. I went to a presentation with a professor who was presenting about Hungary, and it just sounded so exotic back in 92. This was right at the cusp of when they were shifting from a communist society over to capitalism. The opportunity to be part of that and just see it and experience it and meet fellow university students that were learning this transition and we were actually brought in as college students to advise these companies in Hungary that had old school manager that we're trying to understand what it meant to shift over to capitalism and if we would teach them. Quote, unquote, you don't know that we had that much to teach looking back, but it was such a neat opportunity to be able to meet with senior managers and heads of companies and understand what their challenges were and try to help them work through some of those challenges. As students it was a really cool project to work on.

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Charlie: I think that's great, and the business, the management, the banking. You're building up all this business experience later on to entrepreneurship. How did you get to do it?

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Sharon: It was a pretty long route, I have to admit. Once I left Ohio I ended up going to Miami and that's where I was based for about ten years. Love

South Florida, love the climate most of the year except for the four months of the summer time. It was a really neat place to live and I love the ocean. I ended up deciding to make a shift and went up to Vancouver, BC. I lived out of the country for a little while and then after that I went to Seattle. Seattle is where I got my inspiration to make a total career shift away from the cruise industry and switch over to something that had been a personal passion, which was to renovate homes. Not that I had done any like serious flipping or anything like that. The few homes I had over the years I had done renovations and increased the value and become more and more conscious with each renovation. The turning-point was really in that Seattle point and then from there I got an offer to go to the Cayman Islands, which I couldn't refuse. I ended up taking that and that's what took me to Idaho.

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Charlie: What a cool journey so far. Sustainability. You said you had a personal passion for sustainability. When did you say, "This is what I'm doing for the next part of my career?"

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Sharon: I was working on a house in Seattle and doing some renovations and I ended up, if I remember correctly, it was called the environmental home center and it was probably a leading edge thing at that point in time, and roughly 2003. It might've been a year or so later than that. Right around that time-frame, I walked in there and just had no idea all the things to consider inside of a building that I had not been aware of before. The type of paint you use, the type of flooring you choose, what kind of impact does the amount of waste that you're producing out of this have? The true aha moment was I went to see Christine on Bainbridge Island and she opened my eyes to the concept of greenhouse gas emissions and the atmosphere and the impact of buildings and the need for us to do something seriously across the globe to shift the way that we were building, to change, to a whole different model. And that really was my pivotal moment. It had never really dawned on me that huge impact. From there I

very soon after got the offer to move to become an island. I still kind of had been bit by the bug, and so I had bought several books that I thought were just really interesting about green building and renovating a home to be more environmentally conscious and healthy and better for the impact on the environment. I got down to the Cayman Islands and decided to sign up for some online classes to further develop this. At the time the San Francisco Institute of Architecture had one of the best online programs in ecological design, and it was a really broad, theoretical based design degree. It wasn't a true design in any sense. I'm not an architect or engineer or anything like that, but a very theoretical based ecological design degree, and it turns out that some of the first few books that were recommended in that course I had actually bought out of personal interest and taken with me to the came in, and so to me that sort of was just an indicator that I had this personal passion. It was starting to line up with professional development and it just really seemed like that was the direction I was going to go. I took a big leap and I left and went to move with my sister to Boise, Idaho, where she said I could live with her and I could finish my logical design degree. I had the total, inflated, ridiculous confidence that I could start being a consultant while I was still actually getting my degree. An adventurous time, about 2006-2007 right when things were crashing.

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Sharon: I worked for a very large real estate developer Opus.

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Charlie: Look at us now, LEED fellows and so much more. Where did you get all this confidence in you? No fear of taking these leaps, traveling the world, trying different things. Where would you say that comes from? Any mentors or has anyone you've looked up to that's helped? I sensed that confidence and you're not afraid.

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Sharon: There's probably too many mentors to count. There's certainly been speakers like Christine, even those that have really been pivotal in terms of me listening and learning from them. There've been various professors that have been a great influence and there've been others that I just have so much respect for that have been able to start some different endeavors. Anybody that I see that is truly following a passion, is inspired and is having an impact, I would say as a mentor to me wanting to try to be an expert in what they're doing.

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Charlie: What are some of your achievements?

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Sharon: I started a consulting firm right at the point when the market was going to crash and my consulting was green building design and building construction and all that kind of came to a screeching halt right as I was trying to launch a new endeavour in life. You mentioned that. I must have confidence. I also have had a tremendous amount of fear and disappointment from having to build back up from some of those things during that crash. In the 2008 to 2010 timeframe, but I am proud that I've got a business off the ground and ran it successfully for 16 years and the amount of impact that comes from working with about a 125 different projects that went and pursued LEED certification, most of them LEED , platinum, and then the true thing that was meaningful to me and all that was. I started to gain a specialty and LEED for homes, for family, and I worked on 25 affordable housing projects, which are the the people that need it the most and usually don't know to ask for it or don't have the confidence or the feel that they can go in and say: I need energy efficiency, so my operating costs are lower. I need good indoor air qualities so that my health is better, and so that led to me being on a board of directors for a good sized West Affordable Housing developer. I felt like the ability to have impact in that space was truly meaningful and to go into those buildings. Part of LEED for homes is you have to go in and provide some training to

the residents and so you provide a manual to them that says here's your green home and here's how to be water efficient and energy-efficient and health, etcetera. But you also provide resident training where you walk into a space and you're presenting to these people that have just moved into this home and to see their faces and reaction and to hear their stories. More than one project I would have a resident say to me: "I had Asthma and regular asma attacks on steroids in and out of hospitals until I moved into this building. I haven't had an Asthma attack." When you figure the drain on our health care system, that comes from that and for that to happen more than once, to hear that story to me that's a proud moment, like I had to say, and helping write the specs for these projects and select these loves project products and truly shift the ventilation strategies in some of these as well to make sure that they're healthier. That's meaningful. Those are those are proud accomplishments.

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Charlie: That's pretty amazing. Thank you. Let's talk about your consulting time and the company you built-up, in particular, LEED for homes and LEED for neighborhood development. In my opinion, I've been doing this a little while. That's a rare experience. How did you kind of make your niche? It sounds like you've worked on commercial projects, all kinds of Green Building Health projects. Can you talk a little bit about homes in the neighborhood?

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Sharon: I have worked on almost every LEED rating system that seems like which, I have to admit, gets a little bit like brain fuzz. What was this credit in that rating system versus the other one? LEED online, doing submittal updates or I have to admit a little bit of brain fog that happens between the systems. I seem to get more and more involved in LEED for Homes and LEED for homes. If you can work on a whole neighbourhood like I did in Court Lane, there is a neighborhood called Meadow Ranch and to work on 80 homes in that neighborhood and know that you're transforming all

those into work with a developer that was truly passionate about pushing the envelope and not just doing it to get to the bare minimum. He wanted LEED platinum. He wanted to really build better and do the right thing for the environment and then promote that to tell people the value of that. He's been really successful. He was also pivotal in helping get my business off the ground when I was looking for some of my first consulting work.

Working on a whole neighborhood, and that was the neighborhood also did the LEED certification, for I actually followed it up. Ladino had started the project in the beginning and done some of the initial work on it, and then I finished out the documentation and the submission of it on a local level for this developer. And then it just kind of grew from there. You know so much of the work and leave for homes ended up being for affordable housing and I just started to gain a reputation that if a developer was doing multi family development, they knew I was the person to call that. You know I had a passion for streamlining the process. I had a passion for not saying here's your water efficiency category and here's your. You know it is a sustainable site category and dividing it up like that, whereas , I would say well, who do you have involved in the project? Here's the list for the civil. Here's what the landscape architect needs. Here's what the painter needs. Here's what the mechanical engineer needs. Here's what the insulator needs to be like. I try to really think it through in a different way and develop tools and systems for tracking and providing education to these different trades that really help to educate them in the whole process. I've ended up working. You know multiple projects with the same developers or the same architects that I feel like we've just built a really strong and respected relationship of doing good work with each other.

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Charlie: That's fantastic in your region. That's the hardest part of the green project. Is it materials or is it education, technology, or energy savings?

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Sharon: I got to tell you when they shifted from 500 miles to 100 miles. That killed us. Distances between cities in Idaho are pretty vast. It is like that in the rocky mountains or mountain west, and so getting local is really difficult and I have to say it's typically just like the concrete aggregate. It even took wood off the table, which we were always getting local credit with a 500 mile, because there's so much wilderness in Idaho. We couldn't quite get that 100 miles source and process manufacture to the project site. It's so really that that's a huge challenge. In Idaho. In the early days it felt like LEED was a little more geared towards urban development and some of the ways that credits were put together. Depending on the location, like some of these affordable housing developments are going into little places like Emmet and Rexburg and they're not big urban centres that we can score highly in those categories. But it's where affordable housing is needed. Some of those credits are just inherently challenging if you're talking about community resources within walking or biking distance. In some situations it can be a little bit challenging but in other other ways we can achieve it. I work on projects here in Sun Valley and we almost always get those credits. We're urban but are really tiny so we can walk and bike a lot of places and we can achieve that and we can score well in those areas. But it's because we have this little teeny microcosm of 3000 or so residents in them, which is the little town I live in but it's very concentrated with a small urban car that we can still achieve the principle of a lot of those things. Those are some of the challenges and I would say the biggest challenge in Idaho is that we still have a predominantly very conservative population in general across the state and a fair amount of the population that doesn't believe climate change is caused by humans and that we have to do something about it. There's an uphill battle when you still have a lot of beliefs and political beliefs that don't line with that. It's challenging to do renewable energy here. They've changed net metering from a 20 year contract when you do a big renewable energy project to a two-year price commitment. That kills it for any investor. I've heard from major renewable energy companies. They've blacklisted Idaho because it doesn't there isn't a return on investment to do renewable energy and it should be. We have great

potential to be doing renewable energy and that can be a challenge just based on some of the political environment and some of the utility environments that are here in the state. Probably more challenges than you might hear a typical answer, but when to share all of them?

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Charlie: We may take for granted that you have the definite plans and you have some open space and you have some biophilia, but then it's like we've got all this other stuff too, and it's a little harder material and renewable. Let's talk about today. What's keeping you busy at work today? As I understand it, maybe in your career path you're taking on more focus. Tell us what's keeping you busy today.

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Sharon: I've got an offer that just seemed too good an opportunity to work with amazing people that are experts in their field, with a company that could have a really big impact. I appreciated the impact I was having in the Pacific Northwest. But joining Retake Advisors was a way to have an impact across the nation. I'm primarily working with Principal Real Estate, which is a very large real estate firm and hundreds of buildings, and so the impact that I can have by working with them on some of their strategies and the willingness and the, the forward thinking of that company to do some of the things that truly are going to be progressive in and make a difference in this world. I have been pleasantly surprised, after being a little bit sheltered in Idaho, hearing some of the opinions about climate change in the west or the not need to do something about it. To them being involved on a national level, and it seems to be pretty predominant through the commercial real estate industry that they're worried about climate change. They're worried about their assets, they're worried about insurance. They're worried about doing climate risk assessments on properties and how to mitigate against some of those climate risks. It's a practical business approach that climate change has really been integrated into. It's just been really fulfilling. It's only been a couple of months now that I've been with them, but just to work

with new clients on exciting new things and to work with people that I think we're really leading in the carbon space in the space of sand, putting together strategies for large companies.

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Charlie: Do you think you'll still from time to time, some other LEED and WELL, work or no kind of shifting now the future. Let's spend more time here on certain big accounts. What does your day today look like?

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Sharon: Most days it's predominantly working on commercial real estate and doing the work that needs to happen for a large organization. I ended up bringing four LEED projects over with me because I didn't want to let go of the commitment I made to those developers. I had already signed the contracts and we've already gone into design. Most of them started construction at this point and I didn't want to walk away from that. I negotiated that I would bring those projects on. They're multi families so they're pretty streamlined for me to work through one rating system. I really can't form a mental capacity and workload, bringing in a ton of projects. That's really not what Retail advisors does but , for those existing relationships and projects that were already going. I'm still working on those. This morning I was up doing some of the checking of the stormwater calculations and the bicycle space calculations and looking at some of the other submittals that had come in for one of the multi family projects. Then I shifted gears to interview and then I'll shift gears and and do several meetings about commercial real estate and and then I'm going to hopefully spend most of the afternoon really working on rewriting some some policies and some other things that just take focused attention to be able to think through a strategy there and and how you want to take those those writings.

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Charlie: Thanks for Sherry, because it's exciting what you've got in front of you. I think that's a good way to answer my next question. I love to ask or

podcast guests what's next? What else are you reading up on? What do you think is coming around the corner and this kind of green movement?

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Sharon: I see people really moving to Netzero and I didn't have that perspective locally, but more of a national scale and stage. I feel that's the shift that anyone of significance right now is moving to Net zero and is really concerned about carbon. I do see that that's the future. To keep looking at it from a standpoint of truly reducing and getting to Netzero carbon. I also see a huge movement. I mean, look at all the social upheaval that's happened. Thinking about diversity, equity and inclusion is a pretty prominent thing to consider now in organizations and I think it's been nice that ESG feels like in some ways it may have been a little more prominent, but I think the S is really taken off in the last year or two as important thing to to really think through and incorporate true strategies in the social arena and governance is what pulls it all together. If you have good governance, then that's going to keep the ENS going.

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Charlie: The S is sometimes more of a Leading indicator to the good we're doing. It's a little, maybe hard to measure. We can measure, but the ease is very. It Was an interesting journey, but Net zero wholeheartedly agreed with you, and so I still work to do there and we got a point in that direction. Let's talk a little more about you.

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Charlie: Maybe some kind of quick fire questions here. What's your specialty?

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Sharon: I grew up with a father who is an electrical engineer and he's not just a simple electrical engineer, he's a master's degree from MIT as well as going on to a doctorate degree later in electrical engineering. It was natural to hear engineers speak. I'll call it and realize that not everybody always

understood that. I do feel like there's been a certain amount of translation that I've done between people that that speak very technical and people that don't and sort of meeting that middle ground between them, so that there's not a miscommunication between two technical to speak and and somebody who's just not thinking that in that technical way and maybe a little bit of the fearlessness and adventurousness of just wanting to try things. I still have a desire to see more of the world. I have more adventures.

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Charlie: How bout bucket list? Then? You've traveled a lot, you've seen a lot of the world to any other adventure travel or write a book or what's in the bucket list?

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Sharon: I feel like it's a pretty standard bucket list item, but I do want to write more. I want to publish more. I've done a few articles, but I do feel like there's more in me that I'd like to write, and so we'll see where that goes. I have to admit life took a different direction. I became a mom relatively late in life at the age of 40, and so I really wanted to be there for my son for the last eight years, and so it's not that I haven't run a successful business, but I also have realised that there's a true need for balance, and when my son needs me, I like to be there for him when I am at work. I like to give all to that work. They're always keeping a balance and I want to continue to always try to be an expert, and I think that you never get to the point where you feel like you are the expert. At least I don't feel like I ever do. But if I always feel like that's a desire for things that I'm constantly learning and I'm constantly going in new directions and I would imagine at some stage maybe I'll like to. I would like to teach somewhere and that's another. It seems like a pretty standard bucket list item, but I think it'd be fulfilling. I got two things in my school when I graduated. One was that I would be a TV talk show host some day, which hasn't actually happened, although as a radio show host for several years. But that also means that I

would be a professor like a university professor, and so people were saying that back in university when I was a student. Maybe someday I'll go in that direction.

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Charlie: That's fantastic. Let's go back to habits, routines, rituals and anything that just works for you.

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Sharon: I think it's keeping balance going and it's really easy to let self-care go. A lot of focus is on professional, but I think if you don't keep the other part of your life balanced. I see a trainer one day a week, one morning a week, where I just focus on how do I keep some strength building up physically and that's a really important thing to keep on some sort of irregular cadence. I also live in a place where there's a lot of outdoor amenities and making sure that I get out and go for a hike or we have a sky hill within walking and biking distance so that I get out and go for a sky in the middle of the day, if I can, during a lunch hour, for example, or make the time on weekends, because that's when I can. Or we go out on the lake in the summer getting that fix of outdoor fresh air and scenery and just that it helps to balance the computer time. I feel like again going back to a balanced message. But that's really important to me and I think making a point of when I pick my son up at the end of a day I might walk to get him and welcome home as opposed to jumping in the car to do that and that I live in a place where I have the luxury of that being an option is really great. Trying to always find that balance and not to say I don't still work some crazy hours sometimes, but I've got to offset that somehow and make sure that I stay a good mom and a good business owner and a good person to you of all those things.

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Charlie: That balance, those good habits you have in place. Thank you for sharing that. A couple more questions about books. Is there a book you'd

recommend to our broadcast listeners that doesn't have to be about building, it could be about anything. Is there a book you'd recommend?

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Sharon: I'm totally deficient and I'm not going to be able to answer this in a good way because any reading I've done in the last little while has been commercial real estate focused. I can't really say that I've done any great reading or have any great recommendations or I'm reading books to my son. I can say: Doctor Suess has been enjoyable and James Lee Curtis writes some great children's books and last night we read the Gruffalo. So for me it's more in my spending time with my son and making sure he's getting the reading, and so sometimes that's me opening a magazine next to him while he's reading one of his books, or it's nighttime reading in bed focusing more on whether or not he's developing his reading skills and I'll get back to enjoying pouring through books at some stage. But I'm not at a stage right now where I have that time.

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Charlie: That's the great answer. Thank you, with a kind of our industry related news, commercial realisation. There are certain websites you like to read or there's certain magazines. I don't know what are one or two sources that you may consume. Some of this information is related to our industry.

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Sharon: I got a ton of distributions. These better buildings now do as tricky as to get just tons of things that come through that I always try to just keep up on what I see coming through as articles or trends or new ideas. Those are the sorts of things to our paces. Listeners check out those trade organizations, those publications, those newsletters sign up for them.

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Charlie: Lastly, two things: anything you wish you'd have known earlier in your career and just career advice?

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Sharon: I wish I'd have known this earlier. I wish I had followed passion a little bit earlier, purpose a little bit earlier. It's good that I didn't I spent ten years working in the cruise industry, where I got to travel all over the world and I even lived on board the ships for a while running revenue for for various ships across the rail, arabian fleet. In some ways feel like I wish I'd moved towards a purposeful career earlier. But I suppose everything happens for a reason. I don't know that I would regret that. But maybe the lesson learned is always to try those sorts of things. If someone offers you a job to move to the Cayman Islands, take it, try it. It was a leap of faith and it was something different to do so. I would always go back and still want to take those risks and and make those attempts and tries. Most things work out. If you do hit a barrier and a challenge. Usually it helps you in the long run be better, even if it seems like for a period of time there you're you're struggling with it. I would say: keep perspective, that things change when there's a struggle and don't be afraid to try to move things, and I would just stick to. That sounds like a lot of fun, no regret, but kind of seek out that purpose by trying things.

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Charlie: That's a really good last thing. Let's say, someone's listening to this podcast right now. They're inspired by your story, what words of encouragement do you have for that?

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Sharon: It's the most important and critical thing we can do in this day and age if we don't change the amount of carbon emissions going into our atmosphere. We're not going to have a future for our children and my son is eight. I want him to have a future, I want him to have future generations and I want them to have a prosperous life when those generations are born. To think that I could be compromising that and that I could be compromising for any of the future generations. I just think that there's a possibility right now and there's a joy that can come from making that shift

and creating a better world for the future. We're at a critical junction where we have to make some changes and we have to make real changes, and they may not always be easy and they may not always be the most cost conscious. In the long run they are going to be cost-effective and they are going to be the things we have to do to have a better future that's more prosperous.

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Charlie: Well said, a lot of good wisdom today. Sharon, thanks for sharing your entire journey here. I can tell you're really excited about this next chapter and not just the ESG, but even being an awesome mom and enjoying nature there. Congrats everything and thanks we're spending time with it today.

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Sharon: Well, thanks to you, Charley. I mean, I love that you've been doing this for a few years and that you're passionate about this and you like to hear other people's stories and share them. I think that's awesome and I hope that I hear more and more stories as you do, more and more broadcasts that inspire me to keep going.

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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, and the entire team were stoked, and just so glad you listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building process here in this industry and protips we want to make sure that you are getting straight from straight to you. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building Matter Podcast at GBS.com. Our mission is to advance the Green building movement through vesting class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to dotcom slash broadcast 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 guess, please

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