

Caroline Vanderlip on Scaling the Circular Economy with Re:Dish Co. | Transcript

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 lead 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. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee, and get ready to find out why, Green Building Matters.

00:33

Charlie

Hey, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I've got an easy job. Once a week, I get to just meet someone amazing doing sustainability work. Sometimes we have developers and architects, sometimes technology, and then we also have those that are just passionate about not just waste and recycling, but today, reuse. That's what we've got. A little preview is sometimes we forget we learned it as a child. Reduce, reuse, recycle. You're supposed to do it in that order. And I think we've got just the expert on today. Caroline, how are you doing today? Thanks for joining us on the podcast.

01:09

Caroline

Thank you, Charlie. Happy to be here.

01:11

Charlie

I like to ask my guests please take us back. Where did you grow up and go to school?

01:17

Caroline

I'm a New York girl through and through. Born, bred, educated, never left. New York City, Manhattan, to be exact. I'd like to think I'm a little more cosmopolitan than just that. That would suggest I have traveled a great deal, but always end up back in New York. Went to Vassar College, did a little stint at Dartmouth College, did a journalism degree over at Stanford. So I moved around a lot, but came back to New York.

01:45

Charlie

Amazing schools there. That's fantastic. This is sustainability. Some discover sustainability later in their career. Some grow up on a farm. I don't know for you, did you have an aha? When did it first show up for you?

02:00

Caroline

I was in prep for having this conversation with you. I was actually trying to pinpoint exactly when I started to care. And I don't remember what year it was, but it's decades now. Do you remember when the New Yorker used to have these massive pieces? Sometimes the feature story would be the whole magazine. So I'm going to say Sometime in the 80s, they did a piece on water scarcity. And honestly, Charlie, I don't think I'd ever thought about water prior to that. But this article just stayed with me for the rest of my life. And now I'm one of those annoying people who tell you to turn off the water when you're doing the dishes or brushing your teeth.

02:47

Caroline

But I think if I really had to date it would be back to reading about how important water is, obviously, and how so many parts of this world really don't have enough.

03:01

Charlie

Water is so overlooked and so important and I'm glad that stuck with you there. Okay, so we're going to get back to that sustainability. A little bit of

an aha. But tell us about your early career in a little but we'll talk about your amazing company you're building today. Re:Dish. You've been doing that for five plus years. But what was early career like for you?

03:19

Caroline

Early career was mostly in the media. Started out in journalism, started out as a reporter actually, and print reporter to boot, which some seems a little strange today. But the media for, oh my God, 20 years or so finally ended that part of my career at NBC where I was one of the first people working on cnbc, actually on the business plan as well as on the launch of cnbc. It was an exciting part of my career and of the media world in general. And did a little, followed that with a little telecom, a little tech, a little publishing technology, a little edtech until it came to Redisch recently.

04:05

Charlie

Okay, thanks for that review. And that's exciting. EdTech, we also have an education company. I have a lot of respect around just teaching people, teaching adults, teaching professionals and our world lead and green buildings and how do you pass this exam and what's the latest? So that's a special place in my heart. Caroline, I love to ask about mentors. Not everybody's really had a formal mentor. Some do sometimes a mentor someone, you read their material, you see them from stage, they inspire you, sometimes it is someone you have breakfast or lunch with, they challenge you, they open doors. Have you any mentors along the way?

04:40

Caroline

I think it's really hard. I can only speak as a woman, can't speak for everybody else. But I think it's also very hard as a woman not to have mentors. But I would really like to go back. I was really lucky. I had some managers who were mentors early in my career who got me, which was half the battle, right. They, they go how I was the most productive when I worked and what I enjoyed and what bored me to tears. And they really

highlighted for me kind of how to take all of those strengths and weaknesses and kind of pull them together and make them work. And they were available to me, and they guided me in terms of just kind of talking through what worked and what didn't. And always encouraging me to be independent, encouraging me to think differently than the norm and to try not to look so bored when I was.

05:50

Charlie

Got you. And I can tell they had a big influence on you. That's so cool. As you look back on this career, really just in life here, what are some of your proudest accomplishments? What's on the highlight reel?

06:03

Caroline

You mean outside of my family? I think it's very hard to stay married, have kids, raise a family, all while pursuing particularly entrepreneurial ventures. I gotta start there. I have an incredible son in his 20s, and I have three incredible stepchildren and a husband and a family life, which is really important to me. And they've allowed me to be very independent and entrepreneurial on the work side. I'll have to go back to CNBC. It's been a long time now, 30 years, actually, since CNBC was launched. But it was a very exciting, very heady time. When we built that business, there were three networks and Fox was a far away fourth. And that was the media world. There were not a lot of other media elements. And we look at it now and we look at this look, the podcasts alone, right? You look at the thousands of podcasts and all different kinds of media and all the ways that we consume media today. And you probably forgot that at one point there were just three broadcast networks and everything was appointment viewing. So when we launched cnbc, it was really a highlight. It was a highlight to get on a dial that only had 20 slots. Think about that. Cable TV only had options for 20 networks, which included the broadcast networks at that time. We're now in a digital age where there's a channel for everybody. But it didn't exist at the time. So that was really the start. And it was great to be there at the start.

08:00

Charlie

What a big highlight. I can tell that had a profound impact on you. That's so cool. Congratulations on that. So entrepreneurship a little over five years ago, you decided to start Re:Dish. How did you come up with that idea? How did you get that started? How did you make that leap of faith?

08:17

Caroline

Well, you have to be a little stupid to do this, but only because whenever you're starting something and have very grand ambitions. I don't think you ever realize all of the roller coaster moments that are going to happen between the idea and the implementation and the growth. If you did, I don't think anybody would ever start a business. But at the time, the motivation was, as you said at the top of this podcast. The order is to reduce, then to reuse, then to recycle. We seem to have lost sight of that, and the disposable society that we've created is not particularly attractive to me. I didn't outside of my interest in sustainability, I certainly wouldn't have called myself an expert by any means. There were a lot of folks out there that were trying to particularly tackle the takeout space. You know, we all take out, we all know all of the waste that comes with each takeout, whether it's the containers themselves or the napkins or the plastic forks and knives, et cetera, and how much we throw away. But I thought Re: could be much bigger, and I knew that it needed to scale in what we call closed environments rather than open. Open is, as you and your listeners know, is consumers interacting. Closed is where there are lots of people, and there's a way to influence those people as a group. And there was no reuse there.

10:03

Caroline

And mostly there was no reuse there because in the built environment, in buildings, it is really hard to create the dish rooms that are needed to make reuse feasible. I mean, are you going to spend \$150 a square foot to wash dishes? That would not seem to be the ideal way to use that square footage.

So it just came to me. If we can outsource linens and we can outsource laundry and all sorts of other activities for which people don't have enough space, why couldn't we outsource reuse? And part of that reason was that reuse at scale is hard. It's easy to wash 10 dishes. It's quite another to wash thousands every day. And there were no systems or processes or equipment or innovation in place to do that at scale.

11:00

Caroline

Which goes back to my original point of, if I had known all about this at the beginning, would I still have done it? But having said that, we've come a long way. Reuse itself has become much more mainstream, I think. There's been so much media around plastic pollution and landfills that are overflowing and loading docks that are overflowing, waiting for waste management to come retrieve that there's a real interest in ways that we can reduce waste. And that's what Re:Dish is all about.

11:34

Charlie

I've been checking out your website. You've won awards, you've been an honor for this. I'm glad that you didn't know how hard it was going to be. And look at what you and your team have created. Who are your main customers? For those listening, give us some visuals. What are those physical dishes and cups that you actually are working with?

11:54

Caroline

If you go to many K12 cafeterias, you'll see in some cases still Styrofoam, unfortunately, but you'll also see compostable trays, all of which go into the garbage. So the idea is that there is, there's a lot of products where people have had good intentions. Let's use a compostable tray for our kids. Let's use compostable salad dishes in the salad bar at a corporate cafeteria. But most of those are compost, and aren't ever composted either because there's no commercial facility in the area or because for the most part, commercial compost facilities don't want packaging, they want food. That

makes a lot of sense. So the idea here is there are over a trillion food and beverage packaging units that are used in the US alone every year. And we are trying to make a dent in that by making them reusable so that they don't have to be manufactured over and over again.

13:05

Charlie

Trillion. That's a big number. Wow.

13:07

Caroline

That's an upstroke. An industry association with really good insight into what's happening on the reuse side. And it's just I look at that number and say that means nobody really can count that high.

13:19

Charlie

Yeah, that's what that means. If a customer signs up, do you do an audit first? I mean, just to really get a good sense of what are we going to swap out here and what does early success look like? Curious about your process?

13:35

Caroline

Absolutely. So we swap out everything at the same time. So for instance, if you go to Barclays Bank's headquarters in New York City or their New Jersey campus or their offices in Wilmington, Delaware, they used to use single use cups and single use containers for salad. And you'd go to the grill station in the cafeteria and you'd get it in a single use container or package of some sort. So they switched everything out to reusables. So now when you go to any of those locations, it's a reusable product. Instead of going into waste when you're finished, it goes into a reuse bin. Instead of going to landfill, it goes to our facility where we wash it and we sanitize it and we track it so we know how many turns it gets and it goes right back out the next day to be used again. And by not manufacturing that cup, that boat, that plate, etc. You're saving on all the energy and water that would have

been used for manufacture. And the water and energy that's actually used to wash it is minimal in comparison.

14:53

Charlie

Okay, I was going to follow up and ask, are you ever asked to do analysis of the embodied carbon or the water? And sounds like you've done that.

15:02

Caroline

Charlie, many of these companies do waste audits through other companies. And so they're concerned about sustainability, they're looking for ways to become more green. And they've done a lot of homework and research on what they come to us because we do all the tracking, because we take the data very seriously. And so we're not only giving them the products to be reused as well as the transportation back and forth and the washing, et cetera, but we're also giving them all the data. So we've done life cycle assessments on each of the products that we offer. So we know that our cup, for instance, uses more material than our plate.

15:49

Caroline

And based on the actual product usage, we can tell our clients what's the waste diversion they used before, how much carbon has not been emitted as a consequence of their reusable usage, and how much water has been saved. Going back to my age old water concern.

16:13

Charlie

So important. Okay, so you've done the analysis. What an amazing company here. Where do you want to take Re:Dish?

16:23

Caroline

I want to take Re:Dish into every market in the U.S. But more importantly,

recognizing that it's highly unlikely that I will be able to take this company into every market, there are lots of reuse providers around the US that are starting up. And so my goal is both that Re:Dish be successful, but also that reuse become the norm across the US and while we're starting in food and beverage packaging, because it's a little bit of low hanging fruit and very obvious to people, there are so many other things that eventually can be reused if the washing capability exists. So we see this not just with food and beverage packaging, but ultimately with packaging for Beauty and grocery products and kind of across the board where currently there's so much single use being used.

17:23

Charlie

I love that vision and love what you're building. Try to help you any way I can. We have a lot of clients in New York and we should definitely connect on that more and. But other markets, when you're ready, let's do it. I wanted to ask a little bit more. Sure, in a minute. About the future. I noticed on your LinkedIn Unreasonable fellow. Can you tell us about that?

17:47

Caroline

Unreasonable is an organization. I'm going to botch what their goals are, but essentially it's an organization that brings entrepreneurs together, particularly in the Impact space, with the idea that by secluding us all in the middle of nowhere for a week without media, we lean on each other, we start to communicate with each other and we share best practices and visions and kind of support each other in our entrepreneurial endeavors. The Unreasonable week that I was invited to was for Impact All Sustainability. It was almost three years ago and it was actually sponsored by Barclays, although that has nothing to do with our introduction there. But they're big supporters of sustainability and they support this group coming together to build best practices.

18:48

Charlie

Wow, that sounds like an amazing group of people to be around and just helping each other where there's going to be a needed impact. Good impact. So thank you for sharing. Let's talk about the future. What's next, maybe especially niche down to your industry. What are you excited about? What's coming at us? What's next?

19:05

Caroline

I think that at least for us and our industry, creating the mechanisms and the processes to be able to take reuse to a whole different level is what we're all focused on. People talk all the time about reuse being a change of behavior and yes, it is. But we forget that before Coke went to aluminum cans, they washed the bottles and refilled them. Everyone always uses the milkman as an example, but the milkman's a great example. We used to use the bottle and when we were done, we left it for pickup. Reuse is not a new concept. We just as a society became more accustomed to the convenience of disposable. I think that what we're trying to do and all of our fellow travelers in this space are trying to do is just make that slight change in behavior. Back to thinking about your point, using less, reusing that which we do use and then looking at recycling as the last resort, not the first.

20:17

Charlie

I love your examples of Coca Cola and the milkman. And that's what you're doing. So many of those things worked well. We need to do that now. It's not just gone. Kind of rapid fire here. Get to know you more. This is a wonderful conversation. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

20:37

Caroline

Can you answer that for yourself?

20:40

Charlie

Well, sometimes you just have to think of what others have said, others that

you care about, maybe colleagues. I'm kind of curious. I'm a pretty positive person. So I think that's what I would say.

20:50

Caroline

Well, that's part of it. Regardless of how my day went yesterday, I wake up every morning as an optimist with the glass half full to tackle another day. I think also my gift is the ability to see both the forest and the trees. In other words, to think of things in a strategic fashion, but also be able to get into the nitty gritty as necessary. I think for a lot of people, they're better at one than the other. And I'm probably I'm probably strong at both. Not as strong as a lot of other people, but I can see both sides of it, and I think that's really important in order to build something.

21:34

Charlie

There you go. Well, you answered it. I like to ask the tough questions here, so it's good. Do you have any good routines, rituals, habits?

21:43

Caroline

I got up very early. I like the time a couple of hours in the morning when no one is up and no one's disturbing me. I drink two cups of coffee, but never after 10am I think we all have our little rituals like that. Those probably are the most important to me. Peace, quiet, time to think, and time to think before the day gets chaotic.

22:14

Charlie

I love that. Thank you for sharing. That's wonderful as we get to know each other more. I'm a fan of the bucket list, but not everybody has a bucket list. Could tell us what are a few things on your bucket list? Adventure, travel, write a book. I don't know what's on the bucket list?

22:30

Caroline

I don't know, Charlie. I want to live in Paris for a year.

22:34

Charlie

Okay, that's a good one. I will improve. That sounds wonderful.

22:38

Caroline

I recently was there for a week and took an apartment with some friends and just became locals for a week. And all it did was remind me that I want to do it for longer.

22:49

Charlie

That's a fantastic bucket list.

22:51

Caroline

What's top of your bucket list?

22:55

Charlie

Oh, I'm a big fan of the bucket list. I have over 100 things on my bucket list. Some of it's a travel adventure, some of it's something I could do soon, but I want to wait for the special occasion. Everything from drinking a mint julep at the Kentucky Derby, to sitting courtside at an Atlanta Hawks game, which actually I did. To travel. And I checked one off last year, and took my family to Japan. That was amazing. Definitely travel, adventure, but also some. Some things you could just do. I'm a big fan of the bucket list.

23:33

Caroline

I think that high on my bucket list should be actually reading all the books that sit on my bookshelves.

23:41

Charlie

Oh, that's a good one. I have a lot of books. I've not read them all, so.

23:48

Caroline

Well, that's exactly it.

23:50

Charlie

My wife is an avid reader. I'm an okay reader, challenge accepted. That's a good one. Well, maybe bring some books to Paris. That's great.

23:59

Caroline

Exactly.

24:01

Charlie

Speaking of books, that's a good segue. I love to ask my podcast guests there a book you'd recommend? It doesn't have to be about sustainability, but just something one of our listeners might say that sounds great.

24:12

Caroline

Oh, God. I haven't. I haven't read anything I've really loved in a long time. That's part of being an entrepreneur. There's not a lot of extra time there. You know, what I am currently reading, but slowly, is there's a new biography of Nixon, which is really. Which is really terrific and provides a lot of insight into where we are today based on kind of. Kind of what he started and some of the things that transpired. So I love history. I also love fiction, but I happen to be kind of focused on history at the moment, given the environment we're in.

24:52

Charlie

Okay, well, we'll have to put a link to their book in our podcast showing us.

24:56

Caroline

Thank you.

24:56

Charlie

Thank you for sharing that. Well, just a couple more things as we. As we wind down. As you look back on your career, Caroline, is there anything you wish you'd have known earlier?

25:07

Caroline

Great question, Charlie. I think the most important piece is don't be scared, Try things. I think that over time, you realize that everybody has a bit of imposter syndrome, not just you. And actually, I'm always surprised because it's both sexes and both genders and all different kinds of People, everyone seems to have a bit of it and but don't realize that they're not alone and that it's universal. And I think I would have said, jump, leap, take chances. I did take a lot of risks, but even more so than I even took don't be scared to take those risks.

25:55

Charlie

Oh, love that. I'd love to peel it back one layer, if that's okay, because I do think life's about asking great questions. You know, it sounds like you're a resilient person. I feel I am too. But maybe just how does someone have a little more self confidence early? Is it if they've not faced that adversity, if they've not failed? I mean can people really just say, hey, what's the worst that can happen? I mean, and not get paralyzed by it? I don't know any tips

for maybe a young professional here thinking, yeah, I don't know just, am I resilient? Any tips there on how to really go for it and not be scared?

26:31

Caroline

I think you hit upon it in your question, which is self awareness is really important and self knowledge, which a lot of people don't take the time to think about. Ask the question as you just did, what's the worst that can happen? So you're out of a job or you gotta move back somewhere or. Life hopefully is long for everybody. I know it isn't for everybody, but it is a journey. It's not just this week or this day or this year. And there's a lot that can shift and you personally have the ability to influence all of that.

27:13

Charlie

Thank you. I love that. Thank you. Okay, so last thing as well, wrapping up. Let's say someone's listening to the podcast here. They're just loving your story and getting inspired by it. Maybe they want to get into your industry. Maybe they could help you in the next city you're expanding to. Any words of encouragement though, for someone just getting into sustainability now?

27:34

Caroline

Well, I think the world of sustainability is so wide open right now. There are so many ways to be helpful and knowledgeable. I think it has to start on a personal level of being sustainable, of having practices that are supportive of sustainability efforts. I'm actually shocked at how many people are in the green space, but don't necessarily practice a lot of what's being preached, if you will. But I think it's wide open for entrepreneurs. I think we haven't even begun to touch the kinds of endeavors that we'll see 10 years from now as we try to combat a lot of the things we created. Right. A lot of the forces that we created. But you know, I don't know how to answer it any differently, Charlie, but there are, unfortunately, there aren't a lot of large businesses in this space.

28:31

Caroline

There are a lot of mom and pops. I think it's very right for people with ideas, who are entrepreneurial, who are mission oriented, who want to make an impact. All of these are important to be able to kind of sustain the highs and lows of new business. But it's really gratifying to know that you've made a difference. Really, really gratifying. And I think that goes a long way and can keep somebody going amidst all that.

29:02

Charlie

That's fantastic. Well, to those listening getting inspired, reach out on LinkedIn. Please connect with car. Just love the company you're building. I, I think it's, there's a huge need for it. I love your energy towards it and just really enjoyed our talk today. So just want to say thank you for being on the podcast and to all of our listeners, make sure you reach out and take out, take a look at what Re:Dish is doing. So thank you, Caroline. This has been fantastic.

29:27

Caroline

Thank you, Charlie.

29:29

Speaker 4

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building matters podcast@gbes.com Our mission is to advance the Green building movement through best in class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to gbes.com podcast for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing guests. Please tell your friends about this podcast, tell your colleagues, and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on itunes. Thank you so much and we'll see you on next week's episode.

