

Brandie Townsend on The Value of Waste: Transforming Trash into Treasure | 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. Green Building Matters.

00:34

Charlie

Hey everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. My job is easy. Every week I get to interview someone cool, passionate, especially about sustainability, green buildings and today, waste and recycling. We've got a waste expert with us. It's actually a pretty big pet peeve of mine, just buildings, especially all the leaf work I've done over the years and man, how can we do better with our waste management and our recycling? I've got Brandy with us today. Brandy, thanks for joining us. How you doing?

01:00

Brandie

Great. Thanks for having me, Charlie.

01:03

Charlie

I know we're connected in some circles in and around Atlanta, here in Atlanta, Georgia, where we're based. And I know you're just a little bit north of Atlanta and I just want to learn more about your background first. So if you could take us back. Where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

01:16

Brandie

I was born in Lackawanna, New York, which is in a little suburb of Buffalo, New York. And my parents, my father in particular, worked at the Ford plant. And he said this is not the life for me when I'm raising two little girls. He had a little hunting cabin and a good friend that showed him the ropes of dairy farming. So we moved south to Chautauqua, New York. I grew up on a 40 head dairy farm where the value of work and work hard was instilled in me. And I think that's where I get my work ethic from, is growing up on a dairy farm. I then went to SCAD Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah for their five year master's program.

02:14

Brandie

And that was right at the beginning of the United States Green Building Council. And so that is where I fell in love with this idea of renewable energy. My thesis was in Beaufort, South Carolina with every type of renewable energy I could research and implement within my thesis there because it was something that really, you see nature being your best resource and how do we use it effectively.

02:47

Charlie

I love that hard work on the farm. Out of my 380 plus podcast guests, some started farming and I love that connection to nature. Probably resourcefulness too, right? And all right, you've been in the south for a while. I lived in upstate New York for about four years when I was young. And that's where I guess your accent develops. I don't hear too much New York there anymore. Somebody's been in the south for a while. And then for those listeners that aren't familiar with scad, just an amazing college in Savannah. Expanded the campus here in Atlanta too. And just love all these amazing degrees coming out of scad, so make sure everybody check that out. Even when you were taking classes or maybe just out of school, you said the USGBC was just kind of ramping up. I mean, was green buildings

the thing in lead or it was just. No, it's renewables. I don't know what sustainability was at the time?

03:40

Brandie

It is so funny because I think coming from New York State, they're a deposit bill state, so bottles and cans was my gas money when I was going to soccer practice and you come to the south and they're throwing everything away. And so there was an interesting conversation. I worked throughout college as a waitress, but then in the architecture department as an administrator, filing all of the things you had to keep NAB accredited and all of the projects and understanding this little group of us, we started a project. It was called Project Green. And going green's hard. Kermit was our mascot. You know, somebody's gotta do it because you wanna have a green about. All of these like little ideas that were floating around with the students saying, how can we build better?

04:38

Brandie

What is this United States Green Building Council all about and how can we implement it? So I literally started a little itty bitty club for green building and recycling on campus. And then it really just stemmed from me graduating from there and looking at Atlanta. And I worked for Cooper Carry Architects with their hotels division and department and specified green building products at the time. Who was doing it, who wasn't doing it, how much was it costing? The upcharge in the early 2000s was quite a bit of money to go green. And what did that mean for a developer or even a contractor or an architect too. Let's not engineer this out because it's the Right thing to do.

05:34

Brandie

But there's a really fine balance at that time of the cost of specifying a green building product or a renewable energy source. There's the H Vac system. Big fan. I'm going to forget the name of it because I'm not an engineer. But

all these new technologies were coming into play and that was the conversation we were having.

05:59

Charlie

Okay, all this new tech is kind of starting to show up. Fast forward though. I mean, Cooper Carry, another great firm there, Hospitality, it sounds like. Just tell us a little more of how that career stacked from there.

06:12

Brandie

So they rewind just a little bit. It was interesting because when I was working in Savannah, I actually apprenticed with an electrician and that. So were. One summer I was building Hilton Head High School and really got to know the trades and the industry of saying, okay, it's not just a drawing, it's drawing to actual built structures. And how does every trade work together? The amount of waste then in the original in the entire building process. As I went to, I think Piper O'Brien, she was in Alpharetta. And then when I went to Cooper Carry, it was this idea of specifying, but then building. And that's when I got bead certified. And from there, 08 happened and they laid 200 of us off. And so I said, oh, what shall I do? Because the building industry has tanked right now.

07:17

Brandie

And I really went back to this idea that I had at SCAD if you don't have as many recycling opportunities in the Southeast as you do in the north, because we still feel like land is plentiful here and it's really not. And so they had just passed the building ordinance to offer recycling to multifamily residents. And having that in Fulton county and in the city of Atlanta proper, I teamed with my partner Ashley, and she and I built a cart service for commingled recyclables. And we employed guys who were at the halfway house at Jefferson street because our warehouse was off of there. We were employing guys who needed a job and had a record and we had a small service. And that's how I got into the waste and recycling business,

because I had all of these contacts at different management building complexes and offered them a service that they didn't. There was one other. One other provider of recycling, which was Conex Recycling. And they were overwhelmed. Let's try to build this service out. And from there I stayed in the Industry because it's recession proof. Everyone has trash. Everyone will forever have trash. And that's when I really recognized my motto of placing waste in the right place. Because whether it was me in a consulting role at Rubicon Global or some small waste consulting firms, everybody didn't know how to recycle what was valuable, what wasn't valuable.

09:13

Brandie

And then this idea of deconstruction came into play to say, oh, maybe we shouldn't just blow and go and demolish everything. Maybe we should deconstruct it and pick it apart so that we can then get money back for the metal or chip it up for wood or those kinds of things. And that's really where I've been at some waste recycling. GBB Gerstner, Brook Nerd Ratten was the most recent waste consultant I was at. And we did deconstruction for Apple Stores. And because Apple has a lot of sustainable goals, they said, okay, let's be better and let's build to a LEED standard, but also deconstruct and get those waste points as well. And it was this idea of, okay, do we divert to restore? Can we ship it up on site? Who's got an aggregate facility nearby? Resource materials? Damon Carson, I forget, I'm sure you know him. He took our skylights and repurposed them and all of our I beam steel. So that's really where you were recognizing how much value was in trash.

10:34

Charlie

I love that. Recession proof. We're always going to have it, we're going to need it and put everything where it needs to go. One of my earliest lead projects was in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and they didn't have good recycling for the construction. Insight on that early leap project. We're talking about 2009. Fast forward today. Should our attitude be that everything can go somewhere? I know I'm jumping ahead a little bit to the present day, but

you know, what have you seen change? I mean, can most of this be at least reused, recycled?

11:07

Brandie

Honestly, the fundamental R, reduce, reuse, recycle is still at the core of everything I do and implement. And I truly believe that it's actually, I do believe that landfills are obsolete and we can use our real estate of that \$11 million hole in the ground to the highest and best use rather than just throwing stuff in there. And all of that stuff is truly embodied energy. We took a lot of time to make all this stuff and then we ended up throwing it into a hole. And that's really not the best use of our embodied energy. And that is truly where I do believe that you can parse that out and separate it out and in volume, that's where you really see an effect change is to say, oh my Gosh, I've got 200 pounds of gypsum that can go in an aggregate mix or a cement mix off of a building site with just cut waste gypsum board. Or your old lumber can be mulch or you know, made into plywood. And that is the next best use of your resources instead of just filling up a hole. And I truly believe, I mean short from diapers, which I think is just a reduced kind of effort rather than a recycled kind of effort, there's some hazardous waste that might warrant going into the ground. But honestly, I really believe that bunion fill is obsolete and we shouldn't have them anymore or we shouldn't permit them anymore.

13:00

Charlie

I've got three boys, so my wife did cloth diapers there for most of the time. I hear you on that. I kind of jumped ahead. Let's do a couple more look backs. Mentors. Have you anyone along the way that you'd call a mentor?

13:15

Brandie

Sujin Wong at SCAD was really great. He started with my graphics class and showed me how to write and have happy dots and find the best out of life and the. And find a solution for everything. I actually embraced him. And

then also my father Jim, who took the leap of faith just said, let me do what's going to be right for me and my family, not what I'm going to hate for the rest of my life. And he was the true first entrepreneurial spirit that I had instilled in my life. And he said, I had interviewed him when I was seven and he said I'm my own boss with cows. Cows don't talk back. And I'm my own boss. I make my own hours. And that's what I love about being an entrepreneur. And that kind of stuck with me. Interestingly enough, he had pancreatic cancer and died in 96. And so that has really just given me the drive to live for him and through him and really do the best that I can with the passion that God's instilled in me. So he's my other mentor and I think those two have really sort of been a foothold in my life.

14:35

Charlie

Sounds like two amazing people. Thank you. I love asking that question. What are some of your proudest accomplishments so far?

14:42

Brandie

It's interesting because I've got a lot of projects that I've been working on. I think when I was at Rubicon Global, working with Marriott was really rewarding just because it had been part of my background in hospitality. I worked at IHG to actually make their green website, which they then said, okay we've got a handful of franchise Holiday Inn Expresses and they want to track how green they are. And so we. An entire dashboard for them. When dashboards were really new, we created our own dashboard for these franchisees to plug in their information so that they could track how much they were saving on utilities, energy, waste and water and really see that in a very fun way. Before gamification of the web was really a thing. And it really empowered the owner to really go green because it was fun and exciting to see like cost savings and how to track that all. And I think I, my. What I've been working on for a couple of years is proving the idea that you don't have to be in a deposit-build state in order to get cash back on recycling bottles and cans. In 2018 bought a reverse vending machine from a guy up out of Chicago. He. And it really proved our idea that you can,

people can come put their bottle and their cans in and get cash out. And no, you're not going to get rich quick, but you're creating a value on the things we throw away. And it's still a work in progress.

16:40

Brandie

And my big hairy, audacious goal is to one day have reverse vending machines in all 50 states, just 10. And really prove out and really expand the concept of value on the things we throw away in particular bottles and cans. And that's been a little side project that I've been working on. But it's fun to see something that you've had an idea about and really make it come to fruition. And it's kind of my little gold star at the moment.

17:13

Charlie

I love it. I'd love to put a link so everybody can learn more about that and see how they can support you. That's super cool. I'd be proud of that too. Let's talk about the present day. Hey, what's keeping you busy? What's the day in the life of Brandi right now?

17:25

Brandie

I recognized my husband about a year or two ago . I took some time off and my husband said you're passionate about some really particular things. Waste and recycling is really what you're passionate about. And I linked up with brewmark flooring and right now the trade show industry throws away a lot of stuff and carpet in particular. And I have created a program where trade show exhibit booths can recycle all of their flooring with brewmark and they produce carpet up in the carpet capital of the world, which is Bolton, right next to Mohawk and Shaw. And I have implemented a program, a logistically closed loop program with brewmark to recover all. Every piece of flooring that we sell out has the opportunity to come back in and either be our vinyl is being recycled into piping and water hoses for long term use and then our rebound pad is 100% recycled back into rebound pad because you don't have to look at it and it doesn't look pretty.

And then most importantly, we are taking all of our carpet turf and urethane pad and it's really hard to recycle because of the layers in it and the composite of it. And we are sending it to cement kilns for alternative fuel. And instead of them using coal, they are using carpet fuel and biomass for their thermal heat process and then re-entering that ash back into the cement mix. And I have been working on this program logistically for about 10 years now and it's finally coming to light.

19:31

Brandie

And the trade show industry is a very small niche industry in which I have the opportunity to control and affect change. And it keeps me up at night because I'm passionate about it. And I want to bring every square foot back to our facilities and recover that for alternative fuel because I want to show people that you don't have to send it to the landfill and it has the next best use. And I am working round the clock these days on that project. There's a lot of players. There's a lot of players there.

20:09

Charlie

I love it when we can take byproducts from a certain industry and not just do better with them, but you know, I've taught a lot of lead prep classes over my career and fly ash, it's one we kind of forget about too. It's like, hey, you know that in our concrete mix designs less cement, we're taking something that's very carbon intensive and now we don't need to create as much cement and it's just overall better. I think structural engineers have really finally caught up to oh no, the strength tests are there it's more of a look, we can cover it up or we'll figure that out. I love that you're just staying the course on that initiative. What else do we need to know about waste and recycling today? Sounds like obviously you help with not just buildings, but industries, construction projects. I mean there's a lot of ways. Statistics I remember is almost 40%, like 36 to 38% of what goes in our landfill sadly is from construction and demolition debris. I'm not sure if that's still the number. Hopefully it's improving. But I don't know what else you are tackling?

21:09

Brandie

That's the value proposition. I think without naming names, I've got some folks that are my nemesis because they may have money falling through the air. And you know, you put carpet or lumber or jibboard or anything into a dumpster and it's really bulky and they charge you for hauling that and hauling the air that's in there. I really am passionate about people understanding that that is. You've got to look at what your trash bills are like, what are you paying to have that haul away. And if away is to the landfill, okay, we can do better because that is truly what is a renewable resource. Let's keep on renewing that, chipping it up, making it into a new resource. Heavy timber and plywood and all of these glulum options need that resource. That is going straight to the land sales these days.

22:19

Brandie

And you're paying for it. I mean 75 bucks a ton, a five ton max on a roll off, 30 yard roll off, like do the numbers. That's, that's throwing money literally in the trash too. I think that there's this logistical supply chain new way of thinking to know that a tree guy is going to take your dimensional lumber or if there's a redesign on your local landfill. That's what I'm working with in Rome, Georgia. Let's take \$3 million of that \$11 million landfill cell development and just make a larger material recovery facility so that it could deny different things. It could mulch up Gibson board and aggregate and then sell your sand and rock and out back to the guys who need it. And I think the value of what we're throwing away is sort of what I'm trying best to educate those on it and to really show them and lead by example. It doesn't have to go in a hole and you don't have to pay more to go read. It's really very fundamental.

23:39

Charlie

Oh, Henry, it's. You do just light up about this. I mean it's amazing. So say we have someone listening that they maybe work on lead projects. And we

still see only a couple points really on a new construction project to do better here, maybe existing buildings, we can get a few more lead points. I don't know how we can support a program like that? But instead just hey, start here. Most office buildings I work on are 33% diversion. In San Francisco we can get up to like 80%. Sometimes I don't know if someone's just like, gosh, Brandy, there's so much with waste and recycling. Where should I start? Any advice there? Whether it's a building that's running or.

24:17

Brandie

It's a construction project. I think the biggest place you can start is to look at how you can use Gaylords or super sags or small hoppers or even rolling carts instead of a 30 yard dumpster and just start to parse out the waste. I mean, large office buildings have to go down an elevator shaft anyway. you're, why throw it all into one big pile and heat when you could literally take that cart and you know, cart on a trailer and trailer it off to your local lumber yard and get it mulched and you save \$500 on a dumpster fee. I think the first place to start is to look at how much you're paying for dumpster service and see how you can trailer it and separate it out separately. And even on the procurement level, you're required by the guys to like to take back their own waste. Like all plumbers should be taking back their piping or your electricians should be recycling out their bent pipe and wire. Like that's copper. It should be, have them be responsible for their own waste. It's like going to a campsite like what you bring into a campsite you better take out because it's valuable to that trade and they can make money on it. I think the biggest thing is to just not go for the easy button and just say, hey, let me just trailer it away or put it back on the trade to take care of your own waste and keep a clean site and to recycle back your goods and that sort of thing. I know that's a big ask for most contractors, but you start small and you can grow from there.

26:17

Charlie

Yeah, that's a good point. It's got to care a little bit. It's one thing if a project says you have to do it, maybe there's penalties, maybe we're holding back

retainage, but at some point it's like look, this, like you said, this is not going away. It's got to be a part of even the general contractors requirements. It's like, no, even if this is not a leap project, this is how we do it here. It's just gotta be part of our means and methods for how we do this. Let's talk a little bit about the future. What are you seeing around waste and recycling? I know there's some technology, even cameras can really monitor some things. But I don't know what's exciting. What are you reading up on?

26:52

Brandie

I truly think that like I said earlier, the idea of understanding I'm part of a group with Larry Lamont out of Washington state and the idea of making money and the things we throw away for a municipal landfill that still hasn't sold out to a big guy, a big dog away, a big waste hauler, but somebody, a small municipality, understanding the value of all of that dimensional lumber almost creating a restore or habitat restore within the landfill itself. Because that is that the contractor bringing material over the scale and maybe getting a rebate so that when he goes to the recovery facility that's right on site at the landfill, he can get the small Joe guy who's just a house flipping contractor and go to this material recovery store and have a couple of credits because he's brought in material and then he can now get a discount on the material he really needs. And that's then the circular economy and scope 3 of carbon measurement that we're really trying to hammer out now. And where do we start? Let's start at the scale house. Let's start at the landfill scale house and see how we can change that diversion methodology so that the municipality that you're working in is really making money and not actually based costing a municipality millions of dollars to bury in a hole, but actually sell back out and parse out as a revenue generator.

28:48

Charlie

You almost have to human nature to gamify it. We want progress, we want tokens, we want badges or. I love what you said. There's almost a

marketplace that's created. You can almost call it bartering amongst some of these items. I love it. So circular economy in my opinion, I don't know if you'd agree. I think the pandemic hit, we had to focus quickly on healthy buildings and what does this mean, healthy homes. And you know, I think there's certain programs like, well, which I love, where we got away from green walls and we got away from stand up desks and active furnishings. Like I'm at my stand up desk now as we're reporting this and I think all that's coming back slowly.

29:25

Charlie

But I would probably argue too the material side, especially circular economy, we didn't talk about as much as we should have. I'm sure you had been all through the pandemic, but you know, is it back? How can we jump back into saying, oh man, this is what circular economy means, this is my role in it.

29:41

Brandie

Well, and here's the question I've been asking. They're saying, hey, are the tariffs going to affect what you do? And for me it's always been about the triple bottom line. It's always been about that circular economy. So if you logistically plan out those materials and resources to stay not just local, but just to stay in the nation of America, because most contractors are working in multiple states. You can see that there are processors out there, raw plastics, gerda, like SA metal. They will take your metal and they will pay you for it. And that keeps the resources within the nation and it then creates that circular economy and then it helps the supply chain and all of that dimensional lumber and those kinds of things.

30:45

Brandie

Here America has the resources, let's use them in every step of the way and then continue that process and give it to the right reprocessor so that we

truly have that circular economy being established within the United States and not having to go overseas for anything. Really?

31:06

Charlie

You heard it. Let's keep it closer. Less transportation to do and just it's kind of these smaller communities, these smaller economies. There's a micro grid on one side and here on the material. Just keep them close and circulating around our communities. Let's get to our rapid fire part of the interview. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

31:31

Brandie

My gift is my passion. You hear it in my voice, it comes down. No matter. I have been told that for the past eight months and I can't turn it off. So it's a blessing and a curse. But definitely my God given it is the passion that I wear openly and know that I won't quit even though the challenges are for many.

31:56

Charlie

Well, one of my mentors says you can't fake passion. So you're right. That's right there, front and center. And I love it. And it's contagious in a good way, so keep it up. Do you have any good habits, routines, rituals that help you stay on point?

32:09

Brandie

It's funny, I was thinking about this and honestly, I have found myself with a lot of challenges and I was raised Catholic. And the most consistent thing I do ritual wise is say, the Our Father to help me get through every scenario and challenge and so religious. But I find myself saying that Our father at least 25 times a day to get through that.

32:45

Charlie

It's something to be proud about. And it works well. It works for you. I'm Cicchetti Italian, so I was raised Roman Catholic, my wife raised Baptist, and we found a really good kind of just Christian church in the middle. But recently, obviously the Pope passed. He had done so much to be more open for the church, but he did a lot for the climate. He did a lot for climate change. And when his cyclical came out, I think it really inspired a lot of people there too. So just thank you for reminding us of that. And not many better poems, prayers than Our Father. So thank you for bringing that up. That's amazing. Cool. All right, let's talk about a bucket list. Brady, as you get to know me more, I'm a fan of the bucket list.

33:27

Charlie

Not everybody has a bucket list, but if you do or if you're going to write one, what are a couple things on the bucket list? Any adventure, travel, you want to write a book. I don't know what's on the bucket list.

33:36

Brandie

I have a vision board and it is chock full of things. I think Kohan Koshin is mine. I am Polish and that's my maiden name. And there are probably three largest priorities or bucket list items for me is to write the biography of my blind and deaf uncle. My uncle Ray is blind and deaf and he is brilliant. I've actually started a draft called Cooler than Helen Keller. And then there's also a cookbook in which my badu. My mother's mother, Chesterine Budew. I have compiled a cookbook, but I want to expand upon it and actually include some Wicijenjonki, which is actually cut Polish artwork and some other cool crafts. Not just a cookbook, but also crafts with it.

34:31

Brandie

Because I'm kind of a crafty person and being Polish, I want to sort of create that cookbook that has a little buffalo Polish heritage. Background to it.

Lastly, I think my bhag and my bigot bucket list item is reverse vending machines across the nation, because that is truly part of my passion and something I would love to bring to fruition.

34:56

Charlie

Oh, that's an incredible bucket list. Keep me posted on the book. I love it. I love it. That's what it's about. And I love the vision board. So books. Is there a book or maybe a podcast or something that you'd recommend to our listeners? It doesn't have to be about recycling.

35:13

Brandie

It is not. And let me tell you, I have learned something new when I read it. But it's Bill Nye's Everything all at Once and he is awesome. And when you talk about a realist with climate change and just changing the world and being motivated, Bill Nye is still the guy. He is pretty phenomenal.

35:40

Charlie

I'm gonna have to get a copy there. That sounds great. I grew up around that and it's good to know. He's out there doing amazing work, inspiring. And that's a great reminder. I'll put a link to the book in our podcast show notes. That's really cool. So just a couple more things here as we kind of start to wind down. As you look back on your career, Randy, is there anything you wish you could own earlier?

36:03

Brandie

I would say don't accept the status quo and ask so many questions like I. And listen to the inner gut, like there were so many people in architecture saying you're a woman, you need to get registered, blah, blah, blah. And so I went down all these. But this wasn't. It wasn't my passion. I wish my old self would have listened to my gut way earlier and sort of clawed out the noise and just really gone with my gut and knowing my inner voice, like

learning my inner voice earlier, I wish I would have learned that earlier. And to really go with my gut.

36:46

Charlie

Is that just a confidence thing out in the world? Is it just really knowing, having some self awareness, what's the worst that can happen? It's okay. I don't know. Any tips for someone that might struggle with that?

36:59

Brandie

Take time for yourself and that. Find that inner voice travels and don't accept the status quo and. And really be out there. Just ask yourself questions and then ask everybody around your questions. I was in seventh grade. I was called the question girl. And asking questions in every way possible makes you recognize like, what's going on inside yourself and then what's going on around the world and just understanding more and learning more, just not accepting things as they are.

37:37

Charlie

I think life's about timing. I think life's about asking great questions and a little hope and love in between. Last question. I think all of our listeners get inspired by this one. This is great. Brandy. Let's say someone's just now jumping into this industry. We can call it sustainability. We can call it waste management, recycling, green buildings just in and around the industry that you and I have been working on for a while. Any words of encouragement for someone that's just now jumping in?

38:05

Brandie

I would have to say look at what's out there and look at how you can put your own stamp on it and know sustainability and green building. And sustainability really is a really big word, right? And I didn't know that architecture would lead me to trash and waste, but it did. And so just

having your eyes wide open. To define what green building means to you in your own eyes is really where somebody's just starting out. Read up, but keep your building perspective open, because I didn't think architecture would lead me to waste and recycling, but it did, and it's a perfect fit.

39:04

Charlie

You heard it here. Well, everybody connects with Brandy on LinkedIn. Check out some of the work she's doing. We're going to put a bunch of links in the podcast, show notes and brand. I look forward to hanging out more in and around our Georgia sustainability circle. And thanks for being on the podcast today.

39:17

Brandie

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

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Thank you so much. And we'll see you on next week's episode.