

CEO and Co-Founder at Rainstick, CleanTech Startup | Transcript

00:02

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 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 Buildings building matters hey, everybody.

00:35

Charlie

Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Once a week, I interview someone in this green movement somewhere in the world, and sometimes I bring on those that are entrepreneurs, those that might have an amazing, innovative product. And that's what we've got today. We've got Alicia with us. She's in Canada. I can't wait to talk about how she got into what she's doing as the CEO of Rainstick, but I just want to just unpack her story. So I'm really glad you're here today. Alicia, how are you doing?

01:01

Alisha

Hey. Doing well. Thanks again for having me.

01:03

Charlie

We got connected through some mutual green friends, and here we are. Just can't wait to have everybody listen to more about how you got into

what you're doing. So if you would take us back, where did you grow up and where'd you end up going to school and university?

01:17

Alisha

I am originally from the West Coast of Canada in a smallish city called Kelowna, which is actually in the Okanagan Valley, which happens to be Canada's only desert region. A lot of people don't realize, but yes, we have a desert and that is where I grew up. And so, yes, we have cacti. There's even some scorpions that have been found in this region.

We really have all of the seasons, but we feel the effects of water. And so growing up, that was always. Something that I noticed, and I was made to notice because of some of the challenges that existed within my own community. But in terms of school, I ended up going on. I went to a university here in Victoria. In BC, that's where I went. And got my international business. I majored in sustainability. But then I went on and studied. Through SOAS in the UK, and I. Studied climate change specifically, but it was. Kind of climate change and development.

Understanding adaptation, understanding a little bit. More about what may need to happen in terms of where we need to. Go in order to ensure equality. And really everybody is able to take advantage of some of the opportunities, but also lessen some of the impacts through mitigation and adaptation.

02:55

Charlie

Sounds like early, you knew you would do some of this mission driven work and sustainability, but when did you first come across sustainability? Was it that program in college or you just had that background growing up where you grew up? Like, where do you think that influence came from?

Alisha

It's a good question. I think for me, I knew that I always wanted to do something that was mission related, but in the early days I worked actually in the tech industry, completely different from what I'm doing now. I worked for Disney Interactive, and while I was there, I knew that I always really cared about social issues. I ended up getting more involved in some of their volunteer programming and kind of during that time, I was tasked with finding some of the organizations that Disney was going to support. And throughout that, I started doing more and more research and really grew to know some of the environment. And so while I was there, I expressed that I wanted to do more and I started to learn more at the same time, so I gave more presentations and I was working at a tech company, but it wasn't until after that. I was so motivated from some of my learnings, and I grew up knowing water, but not necessarily thinking that I was passionate about the environment. It wasn't until I started learning about all of the challenges and really I would say how everything is interconnected. And that really led me to pursue my masters in climate change. I ended up moving over, actually, I lived in rural Kenya, focusing on water management, then went to Ecuador looking at water management before I came back to North America and said, really, everything is interconnected. We have water issues. It doesn't matter where you go in the world, water it's been the same for millions of years. We've always had the same amount of water, but where we need it, when we need it, at the quality, at the quantity it's challenging. And in North America, our problem is despite the fact that we don't always have water or it's being depleted, we use too much of it. And so there's a huge opportunity to do more with less. And that was kind of maybe the theory that I was trying to get into previously to really building out this crazy water startup.

05:19

Charlie

Did you know at the time, all that great work moving around the world, learning and doing this work might lead to this? Did you always want to

start a company one day or what was going through your head at the time, you.

05:30

Alisha

It's interesting because when I look back, I think, I never said I'm going to start my own company, but I was always looking at ways to innovate in the companies that I worked with. And so there were always opportunities where I'd either open up a new program or I would do something, because I would say, there's a better way that we can be doing this. And so I think that when it came to Rainstick, I wasn't planning on coming up with this very specific recirculating shower. But I asked myself, I said, if not me, then who and when? Because we need this technology. And so that was really the impetus to jumping into it. And because I really felt from, like, a world perspective, we needed this type of technology and we needed it now.

06:28

Charlie

I love that. And sometimes when you can tell yourself, who better to build that than us, right? And another thing I like to say is there can be intrapreneurship within a company. You might be in charge of a revenue stream or be an innovative entrepreneur within a company, and then some choose to break out like you, like me, and beyond crazy entrepreneurs. So I love this. I love this backstory. One or two more look backs and then we'll get to the present day. I like to ask my podcast guests, Alicia, about mentors. Was there sometimes a mentor, someone you look up to but you never meet, they influence you. And some, it's someone that opened a door you meet with. Were there any mentors along the way?

07:08

Alisha

Very early days, I would say just the mentality and the thought around anything is possible, plan how to do it, but you could do anything you put

your mind to. That was actually my mom. And through everything I saw it. I saw her go back to school at a young age because she wanted to go and get more education and become an accountant before she was a bookkeeper. So I saw the long hours that she put in. I saw that I was involved, actually, in music when I was younger. And she really would just, the way that she would involve us and say, 'Okay, where do you want to go with this? Let's build this out. Let's do more'. I saw that she really cared, now looking back, the environment and everything that she did, actually, her friends would call her Granola girl. And that's because she cared a lot about people and the community around her. Being kind of influenced by that. Specifically within the environment came from a lady, Nicole Rustad at Disney. She was so incredibly passionate about not just social issues, but also the environment. It was actually her that said, "Alisha, Look into this, take some time, see some of the interconnections." And it was really through her that I began caring and began researching and began looking into it and seeing some of the challenges, but also the opportunities and ways to get involved.

08:54

Charlie

Fantastic mentor there. Thank you for sharing. Let's connect the dots on your entrepreneurial journey and bring us up to kind of present day anything else along the way that you were working on and then tell us about your company.

09:08

Alisha

I came back to North America and I said, 'okay. Our problem is that we use way too much water and there's a huge opportunity for growth. And it was at that time I ended up meeting Sean. He's now Rainstick's co-founder, and he came from an energy background, specifically energy conservation. And so he worked for Home Depot as their national energy manager. Working across their stores, looking for ways to reduce their energy consumption,

because again, as we know, it often leads to the bottom line and being able to see those accrued savings year over year. He then worked for a large restaurant group managing their energy conservation initiatives. I ended up meeting at Sean and really started to understand that water energy nexus. Typically, if you're using a lot of water, you're also using a lot of energy and it was really some of that brainstorming where we started to say, 'okay, what does the residential home look like today?' It's something that we can really identify with. It's definitely part of our whole water use, but it's also when we look at where water comes from or where water is used within the bathroom, 50% of that water actually happens in the bathroom. And the largest energy intensive application is showering. It's also now one of the top water intensive applications. I think that we've done a pretty good job in a lot of ways through either subsidies or some regulations, through cities to bring our water use down. But we can't really say the same thing for showering. I mean, the only real solution has been looking at regulated flow rate, so decreasing that which compromises experience. We looked at chunky solutions like whole home greywater systems, but they're really expensive to deploy. They don't save energy. They typically require space. They require double plumbing, 15 to 20 year payback period. And so they can be more difficult to make that business sense, to be able to integrate or be able to scale across North America and beyond.

11:35

And so we kind of looked at him and we said, 'okay, that's really where we started to say we need to get to the point of use as quickly as possible.' So how do we become extremely efficient with the shower appliance? And that's really, we really started to hone in on it. And When we look at point of use, we recognize the best water that you save is the water that you actually never used in the first place. And so that's really where this interest in developing this technology we call Rainstick Shower, that was now four and a half years ago. That was lots of prototypes, lots of variations of the technology. But what we've been able to do is develop this pretty cool technology that is a shower place. It doesn't require any double plumbing, like a whole home greywater system, and actually saves the same amount

as a whole home greywater system. Saves up to 80% water, 80% energy, while providing a really strong shower and flow rate. We actually push three gallons per minute out of the shower head, but we're only using half a gallon per minute from the house supply, so it's through point of use for circulation and also water treatment in real time. Every drop from the shower is always. Hygiene is always safe because of some of our treatment stages. So we're super excited about it. We're in Canada on the west coast but have been working more and more. We actually just went down to Cavus, where this technology won a best of Cabus award.

13:18

Charlie

I love this innovation. My background is LEED and green buildings. I've taught many classes instead of two and a half gallon per minute right over here, maybe 2.2. And in your case, the net effect is, I think you said half a gallon per minute, which is amazing. I know we're going to put a link to your website. Everyone can see it, see this product. But tell us a little more about just building a company, especially in, Cleantech. And This green movement, is it well received? There's a lot of things that are challenging, but how's it going where are you at? How can our listeners help?

14:04

Alisha

I always joke, oh, man, I should have started working on a water bottle or something like that. It would have been much easier to explain and go through, because this is brand new technology, and often folks have never heard of a recirculating shower. We go down to trade shows like Cabiz, where at CES and people come by and the first question they ask is, 'what is that? How does it work? And then they ask, okay, well, how does it actually clean the water? And then you kind of see the aha moment when they go through that piece of really understanding it. I would love to get to a point where over the next 24 months we're in a position where people know of the concept, they know what it is, and it's just a matter of choosing which

one. I think we're seeing larger plumbing players really interested in the space and considering. Coming up either with their variation or their version. But it's a brand new technology. And so in terms of ways to help, I think it's getting the word out that this technology exists. And number two is, yes, it can be installed. It's fully compliant. In our case, Rainstick is fully certified by CSA and meets hygienic requirements. Tell your friends about it, talk about it, and bring it up. We're always happy to have a conversation and take you through the technology.

15:49

Charlie

We'll help with that. We have thousands of listeners every week, a lot of architects and construction professionals that have been listening for years. Let's remind everyone one more time that you're right. A lot of people forget that you save energy too. We're pumping less water, we're heating less water with these efficient fixtures and in your case, the recirculation. So I assume it's. It's not using much energy at all to do within Rainstick. Anything else about your company, the product? We'll put some links and really bring some awareness to you. Happy to do that.

Let's talk a little more about you because I'd like to get to know you more. You're working on this product, you're working on this company. But what else in this green movement that could be broad it could be cleantech. What else is kind of exciting that you're seeing out there at these conferences, or are you personally, with all your climate work, what's coming at us in this green movement you're kind of reading up on?

16:48

Alisha

Absolutely. I think we're seeing. It's really exciting for the clean tech, green tech, prop tech space. There's a lot of ways to put it, water tech. One of the fantastic parts of what I do is I am typically able to meet with innovators and learn a little bit more about what's out there, what's coming, what's being invented. I'm personally interested, of course, in that waterside. We've

seen energy now for the last ten years really start to make mainstream, hit mainstream interest, I should say. And I feel like water is about ten years behind that energy conversation. What's exciting is when you bring in water and energy, I mean, this is what we do. I mean, it increases the payback period or I should say decreases it because the ROI is quite favorable. So when you start looking at these technologies, you can look at both. I think that's incredibly exciting when you can put that ROI to the water and energy. I think also looking at systems that take into account everything from start to finish. So I'm starting to see more atmospheric water generation, which I think is super cool, putting that in with super efficient technologies and then looking at outdoor recycling mechanisms to be able to create a full system for the home. I'm seeing more and more folks that want to go off grid and don't necessarily want to stay on grid. And so coming up with technologies both from energy, water plumbing, thinking about everything holistically. And I think when you start to think about it from that perspective, then you really appreciate the systems that you have. But also it's pretty exciting what sort of technologies are out there.

18:57

Alisha

So much incredible efficiency with solar panels. We talk about solar panels in the last, whatever, 15-20 years to where they are now. I'm personally building an off grid cabin and looking at all of these full cycle systems to integrate and it is very exciting what sort of technologies we're able to now deploy.

19:19

Charlie

You just painted a very exciting future in this sustainability movement. I love all that. That was really cool. Thank you. Let's do some rapid fire questions to get to know you a little more, if that's okay. What would you say, Alicia, is your specialty or gift?

19:43

Alisha

Probably with my team specifically being okay with being wrong and encouraging folks to speak up, share their opinions so that we can have a candid conversation and get to the right point rather than just what I say.

19:56

Charlie

Nice. Oh, thanks for sharing. That's good stuff. Do you have any good habits or routines, rituals that help you stay on point?

20:03

Alisha

Every morning I get up and I write a to-do list and I think about the day. I look at my meeting schedule, what type of day I want to have, and I try to think about the priorities to really align on that. And I've since done that, I've probably been doing it the last year or so. It really helps with your productivity. My team meets on a quarterly basis and we have milestones, and so we actually go through milestones that we want to accomplish every quarter. Every individual is tasked with milestones and we reflect on them quarter to quarter, and it just helps us get that much further ahead, that visualization now.

20:44

Charlie

And now I don't know if you, with your team meetings, there's a book called Death by Meeting by Patrick Lencioni. I've heard how Jeff Bezos runs meetings, but just, I don't know, how do you do meetings within a fast growing company like yours?

21:05

Alisha

It's a good question, and I definitely feel, and I can appreciate the death by

meetings. We always tell the team, if it can be said in an email very quickly, like, what's the point? If you have a point, if you have a clear agenda and a timeline of how long that meeting is to be, then it makes sense. If that meeting can be canceled, then cancel it. And then the other thing we say. Is also time for the meetings. For example, if you're in business development but you're having admin meetings throughout the day, make sure that you communicate that to your team, that your time for those types of meetings is in the afternoon for 2 hours when you're not meeting with clients or prospective clients. I think we've tried to make an active effort and encourage our team. If you don't actually need to be in the meeting, then communicate that and typically that's part of my morning routine as I go through my meeting schedule and say, okay, what is really important to our objectives that we want to accomplish, or am I currently in any meetings that I don't need to be part of? And make sure that I go through that list and actually just say, either excuse myself or say, fill me in afterwards. Because I'm going to be doing X, Y and Z during this time.

22:24

Charlie

It's a permission and expectation thing. Culture where it's like, hey, it's okay for you to opt out here and respect each other's time. So thank you for sharing those best practices. Just a few more questions here. Really enjoying this. I'm a fan of a bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list, but if there were a couple things on your bucket list, do you want to travel, do some adventure? You want to write a book? What's on the bucket list?

22:48

Alisha

Finishing my cabin when I bought this piece of land. It's almost three acres, a beautiful lake in the middle of nowhere. And part of it was, I asked, I looked to see if there was connection, wifi connection, network and there isn't. I was like, okay, I'm in. That's great. That's what I'm looking for to get out. And so part of my bucket list is to be able to get this cabin done,

finished over the next twelve months. And then one that I have over. The longer term is that I really enjoy diving coral reefs. We're seeing the quality in a lot of areas are becoming less and less so. I have a few immediate ones that I would go and travel to and I'd love to spend a few years and dive different locations.

23:42

Charlie

That's a great bucket list and way to make your off grid, off Internet cabin as sustainable as possible. Last year my family, we discovered Belize. And as I haven't seen it, okay, they have the second largest coral reef right to the Great Barrier Reef. Good dive in there. I would highly recommend just a couple more things here. I like to ask my podcast guests, is there a book you'd recommend or a podcast or documentary? Just best practice. Say you got something out of this that you want to share with our listeners.

24:13

Alisha

This is an older book, and I think there's now been a lot of iterations, there's been a lot of people building on this theory or concept. but if you haven't yet read it. I would recommend it. The book *Start With Why* by Simon Sinek. And the idea is just everything that you do, what's the why behind it? The milestones or objectives that you're building personally or for your business. We often say, why are we doing this? And if we don't have a good answer, then you're able to figure out what your priorities should be and if you should shift some things around. And maybe the other one I would recommend, and this is more so to deal with workplace communication. And I think when you start either working with teammates or you start building your own team, it can sometimes be a little bit challenging from a communication perspective to make sure that people have what they need. Feel like it's an open environment where people can express some of the challenges that they face. And I found there was a book called *Radical Candor*. The author is Kim Scott. And I just thought it

was a fresh take on communication. She really dives into the best way to communicate is being incredibly, being forward, but doing so in a respectful way. She goes throughout the book and there's a lot of examples and a lot of her history of work environment, what she's learned. I thought it was quite insightful.

26:05

Charlie

Awesome recommendations. I'll put links to those two books in our podcast show notes everybody. Make sure you check those out. You're sharing a lot of wisdom here. Just two final things as you look back on your career so far. Any career advice you wish you'd have known earlier?

26:19

Alisha

Listen to the trend. Not every single piece of feedback from everybody. It's particularly important when you're starting a company, you're going to get feedback from everybody you've talked to and it can be a little bit unnerving and you're going to want to listen and then maybe try to pivot. But I would say if ten people have told you the same thing, then you need to change. If you've heard a piece of feedback over here, but then you completely heard the opposite, then trust your gut.

26:51

Charlie

That's some of the best wisdom I've heard in a while. I 1000% agree. So thank you. Thank you for sharing that. So let's say someone's listening to this podcast. They're loving your story, and they're just now kind of getting into cleantech property, green buildings, if you will. Maybe they're making a career change, or maybe they're a young professional going down this path. What words of encouragement do you have for them? As we come to a close, our.

27:18

Alisha

Space that we work in within the green space, prop tech cleantech space is evolving. It's an incredibly exciting space to be a part of, but it's also so new. So there's a lot of challenges. , there's a lot of unknowns. Sol would say if you're interested in being part of it, do your research and do your research often listening to these types of podcasts, listening to podcasts that really look into the science and some of the regulations, the codes. Because those are constantly being updated is probably quite useful. But I would say don't give up. Because we need more and more folks that are passionate about this space to be involved.

28:09

Charlie

What a fantastic interview. I hope everyone listening enjoyed this. Reach out. Check out the website here, rainstickshower.com. Connect with Alicia on LinkedIn, let her know what you thought of the interview, and thanks for sharing a lot of wisdom and your story, and best of luck as you're building your company. This was amazing. Thank you so much.

28:27

Alisha

Thanks again, Charlie, for having me. It was fantastic meeting you and definitely keeping in touch.

28:35

Speaker 5

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. 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.