

Voices of Sustainability: Season 1, Episode #13

Phillip Schlies

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Intro

Hello and welcome, I'm Phillip Schlies and you are listening to the Voices of Sustainability Podcast. Join us as we delve into the various strategies and challenges faced by the government, businesses, and non-profits, all striving to balance economic growth with environmental and social responsibility.

This season from the University of South Carolina, our reporters are all business majors at the Darla Moore School of Business with a concentration in sustainability. They'll be talking with various organizations to highlight how they're working to improve the world we live in and conserve our natural resources.

To explore the topic of sustainability, the episodes will explore how each person being interviewed defines sustainability, how the success of sustainability initiatives are measured in their organization, the motivations to be sustainable, and how to have a positive impact in your career. The conversations also provide insights into topics such as, circular economy and recycling, innovation and technology in sustainability, as well as regulation and policy that are influencing this space.

On today's episode, our reporter Taylor Krenzke will be speaking with Cynthia Davis, the Senior Vice President of Sustain SC. Cynthia has a rich background in education and workforce development across South Carolina before joining Sustain SC in 2021. Sustain SC is a non-profit that focuses on connecting businesses in South Carolina with local sustainability solutions, aiming to boost the economy, protect the environment, and empower communities. Tune in to hear about Cynthia's journey and her insights on driving sustainable practices in South Carolina. Let's get into it.

Script

Taylor

My name is Taylor Krenzke. I am a student at the University of South Carolina. We'll go ahead and kick this off with starting with you introducing yourself, what your educational background is, and what you do with your organization.

Cynthia Davis

Okay, great. Well, my name is Cynthia Davis, and I am the Senior Vice President of SustainSC, which is a 501c3 nonprofit organization established three years ago. And we have a very specific mission to connect the sustainability goals of businesses in South Carolina with local solutions for the benefit of our economy, our environment, and our people. And we can dive some more into what SustainSC does in just a minute, but you asked me about my education background. So I am born and raised in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and went to Spartanburg High School. When I graduated from there, I went to Wofford College and got a BS in psychology. And from there, I went to Commerce College and got a master's in education and started teaching eighth grade earth science at D.R. Hill Middle School. Continued my education with an education specialist degree, and then went to Clemson on a fellowship and got my Ph.D. in education leadership. So after teaching and being an administrator in middle schools and high schools, then the 2007 Education Economic Development Act came out, was signed into law, and that established these regional education centers, of which I was the director of one of them. So I was in the field serving seven counties in workforce development with the mission of connecting education and business. So from that, I moved to the South Carolina Department of Commerce, where I was the director of existing industries. And from there, I came to Sustain SC. My job as senior VP is to help companies make those connections.

Taylor Krenzke

Yeah, no, I was just listening to your educational background and like as your career and it was, I was just kind of taking it all in. And I was kind of shocked to hear that that was your background before jumping into Sustain SC. So that was, that's really interesting to me. What made you like, what really made you make the jump? What like, is it a, was it just like a personal, like, I want to be more, I want to be more involved in it? Like, what? What was that looking like

Cynthia Davis

If you remember, I told you my first job out of college was what actually out of grad school was teaching earth science, right? The earth, the environment, ecology, biology, all of those sciences have all has always been a great interest to me. And then in my personal life, we we own quite a bit of wildlife habitat property. So we own about 3000 acres that we manage in South Carolina. Yeah. So this is the thing that I was doing in my personal life. And then when I was able to, you know, retire from the state and I had a choice of, you know, do I want to keep working? Do I want to stay retired? What would I like to do? So then this position became available. And I was like, well, this is just a perfect fit for me because I'm very accustomed to matching up businesses with whatever their needs are. That's what the position at Existing Industry did. So we would specifically for manufacturers, we would talk to them about what are their needs. Do they have issues with waste stream, recycling, quality, production? And then we would match them up with state resources. And then oftentimes we would have funding to help them do a project. So that

was, you know, working in that existing industry space is very familiar. So this one is really kind of zeroing in on sustainable development goals, their SDGs and helping companies with their corporate sustainability report.

Taylor Krenzke

So I'll bring it back to you super quick. What is sustainability to you? Whether that's a definition or what it just looks like in your day to day. I know you mentioned, you know, your wildlife habitat acreage and some little things that you do, but whatever it means to you.

Cynthia Davis

So sustainability to me means learning how to be a human on planet earth, keeping in mind that our interactions and our decisions impact the earth. And that is something that a lot of people just don't get it. They don't get that when they crank their car, that has an impact. When they throw that cup, that styrofoam cup out the window, that has an impact. They don't get how they're changing ecosystems and what effect that may have. So that to me is sustainability, you know, trying to learn and it is a learning process. And I told you that before, but we're trying to influence other people to learn that they are a human on this earth for a specific amount of time and how you interact, the decisions you make, that is going to have an impact impact and we want it to have a positive impact instead of a negative impact because there are consequences you know for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction right so you know how are your actions being beneficial and not harmful and that's what interests me so much about sustainability. And that's how I look at sustainability.

Taylor Krenzke

Gotcha. Gotcha. I love that. I love that definition of sustainability. That's not one that like I've heard just in day to day, like even in my classes, that's not one that I've heard. I like that everyone has like such a different idea of what sustainability is. So tell us a little bit about like what your day-to-day looks like at Sustain SC.

Cynthia Davis

So I just started my position in October. I was able to retire from the state of South Carolina after 30 years on October 1st and then started this job October the 9th. So I'm still fairly new in the sustainability sector, learning a lot. Well, today we are doing recycling day at the statehouse. So we do different accelerator events and I'll tell you about the accelerators in just a moment. But we have technical assistance webinars every month that I'm in charge of getting the speakers for. We have accelerator events like today. Our accelerator on circularity is being focused on today and we have legislators coming over and we're going to have some great speakers and a really

nice reception. So all of that planning and logistics and things around those accelerator events is part of my job, part of my position. And then there's just the assistance you know, to the CEO in terms of organizational management, strategic planning, trying to make sure that we honor the brand and that we are doing things to promote the brand. And then membership. So membership is one of my responsibilities. So that means talking to our current members and looking at what are their needs and how can I help match that up, and then also recruiting new members. Every day is different. So that's one of the things I like about this job. I have to do a lot of scheduling to try to fit in everything. I have over 400 emails in my inbox right now, which drives me nuts because I can't get to it all. So it's just me and the CEO. And then we have consultants that we hire to help us with specific things like marketing. So we contract with MP Strategies to do our marketing. We contract with First Tuesday to do our, it's not lobbying, it's more like helping us make good decisions when we interact with lawmakers. Make sure we're in front of the right people and with the right message.

Taylor Krenzke

So how does your organization measure y'all's effectiveness of your sustainability Initiatives?

Cynthia Davis

Oh, that's a good question. So looking at metrics and accountability and reaching our goals, and things like that. Well, I told you that this is a new organization. It's only three years old. We had a founder that worked for a decade trying to get it launched. And so she just stepped back. She's now, she was CEO. She's now founder. We have a new CEO that has been on board since February. So she's very new. She and I are kind of taking a baseline year this year and looking at what we're doing at each one of the accelerators. And then from there in 2025 will be more of a, did we see a 10% increase in membership? Did we, you know, how many connections did we make or how many new contracts or new sales occurred with our members? You know, how many were we able to do lifecycle assessments with how many companies or, you know, so it's kind of being so new, it's kind of hard to say, you know, we've done this metric and that metric. All I can say is that I know that in terms of attracting new membership, it continues to grow. How many that is from 2023 to 2024, we don't know yet. Right. You know, we want to have a very small amount of attrition. So we don't want people to leave from 23, 24. And then we want to try to retain and then recruit. So yeah, it's a little too early for us to have some hard, you know, specific metrics. We know things that we want to do, you know, but like I said, this really is a baseline year with a new CEO, new SVP, me. Yeah. So juries fill out on that one. Hopefully we'll be successful. Yeah, for sure. Not suck and have to close.

Taylor Krenzke

No it's interesting. It's interesting to hear it from a new, from a new organization's point of view, because most of the companies that we're looking at have art, like their baseline years are like 2019, 20, 2018 around that area. So it's interesting to see how you guys are kind of managing everything without that baseline year as of right now. So yeah. With that, you, you guys are a nonprofit. So how do you balance the economic goals of your organization with your sustainability goals?

Cynthia Davis

That's a good question. So our funding stream is public and private. So public means we get dollars from South Carolina Department of Commerce. We have funding from South Carolina Office of Resilience. And then we have foundations out there like the Donnelly Foundation is a very, it's a fantastic one for conservation and preservation of land. So we receive funds from them. But then there are members such as those existing industries that I was talking about that pay a membership fee. And we have different levels of membership that have different benefits to it. So there are other non-profits that we want to, you know, join us and they, you know, pay a small fee of \$1,500. And then the next level would be the \$5,000 member, the associate member. And so that's usually a small to medium-sized company that is trying to do things like be that go-to resource consultant when a company is looking at measuring their carbon emissions. And then we have the \$10,000 level, which are our corporate members, and they can be \$10,000 or \$20,000, but typically in that range. And these are the ones that are the household names that you're familiar with so BMW, Train Technologies, ZF, Boeing, those bigger larger corporations are at the corporate membership level so that's that's how we you know literally keep the lights on is through both the public funds, the state dollars, and then the private dollars that we get. All of that goes into a budget. And then we have to budget out. When we do events, we have to pay for venue, of course, food and beverage. If we have speakers, we have to pay. Sometimes they're free. Sometimes there's a per diem travel cost. There's any number of things like that. And then like materials, swag, giveaways, our travel costs. So we just put it into those different buckets and then budget it out that way. And then make sure that every year we don't run out of money because the worst thing that could happen is that we promise people that we're going to do a big event for them or that we're going to do something to help them further their business or further their sustainability goals and then we don't come through. Right. And that's the worst thing you can do in business is to over-promise and under-deliver. We try to watch our budget each month. Of course, we financial meetings at the end of each month to tally and look and see, here was our budget, here was our actual. We do have a board that oversees all of the spending, our strategic plan, the events. So they are meeting every other month and looking at all of the, you know, all of our evidence of the things that we've done and the documents of who was there. How many participants did we have? You know, all of those sort of things.

Taylor Krenzke

Gotcha. And so what does your company or organization do since it is a nonprofit? If you guys are over and you have extra money at the end, you know, what do you do with it?

Cynthia Davis

Yeah, that's a great question. So then it will go into a fund, the Land and Water Action Fund. So it actually goes into like a, if you can think of it like a money market account so that we can invest in things like last year, our founder was able to put in some money to help purchase of Waties island, Waties s island is the barrier island that protects North Myrtle beach. So any kind of left over funding like that goes to that land and water action fund so that we are, you know, living up to that goal of trying to conserve 50 percent of South Carolina.

Taylor Krenzke

That's awesome. So what like what motivates you to like, to continue with sustainability? I know that I can, like, I know that there's got to be some challenges in there. So what motivates you to just like push through on those hard days?

Cynthia Davis

Hard days, overwhelmed, you know, for me, I told you I majored in psychology right back to the people i think people are fascinating i do they are they are just how that they're thinking and how their behavior matches with their thinking or doesn't or you know i just i just find them fascinating and i love to meet people from different cultures that have different beliefs. And, you know, just just constantly researching that thought of, you know, humans on this planet, how we're humans on the same, you know, on the same planet together. And so that that's constantly interesting to me. And I meet new people every single day, every day I meet new people. So that is why, you know, on those hard days when it's raining, don't get out of bed. That keeps me going is the connection to people. And then this is our whole platform is about helping others, you know, helping people, helping the planet. Oh, and by the way, if you do these things, your business will make more money too. It's a win win with what we are trying to encourage others to join the sustainability movement, really. We do have opposition in South Carolina. People in let me just say, it seems like an older generation of people thinks that when you do things for the environment, that makes you, quote, woke, or they envision, you know, people attacking a whaling ship with Greenpeace. You know, they have a negative connotation in their mind. That's not what a lot of folks that are my age think about and certainly not what my children. I have a daughter, 23, and a son, 20. They're both in college. One's getting ready to graduate. But that's not how they think. They think that the environment is something that you're supposed to protect and something that you love and enjoy and the animals that you you know try to take care of the plants and yeah so they it's like i don't know i don't know what happened right we have five

generations in the workforce right now. And for some reason, because of their experience when they were younger and growing up and starting their career, they didn't get a good taste in their mouth for environmental causes. And that's that's unfortunate. I do think that that's changing. And we hear it. I we hear people say mean, you joining a company that has got a fantastic culture, that cares about the planet and the people, those things are more important to your generation going into the workforce than necessarily making an extra, you know, \$5 an hour or \$1,000 a year. You know, you want to work in a place that's nice and fun and does outdoor activities and does, you know, produces a product or provides a service that helps people in the world that is not a negative.

Taylor Krenzke

So, yeah, I think we're on the right track. I would agree. I would agree. I think we've made a lot of strides in the past, especially in the past couple of years, we've seen a big difference. So I do think we are on the right track right now. You've already talked about sustainable practices in your own life. So the last question that I have for you is that if you were to give one piece of advice to students looking to have an impact in sustainability in their career, what would it be?

Cynthia Davis

So, I would say get a major, get a degree in something that has a skill to it, and then broaden your sustainability knowledge and experience and those skills. So if you're a finance major or an accounting major or in your case, a marketing major. So those are very specific skills that you're going to go and get a job with. But then you're going to wrap that around with an understanding of sustainability and the ability to sit at the table and know more about sustainable development goals and things that that company can do than anybody else in the room. So that's going to give you that competitive advantage, that extra edge. So do well in your studies, you whatever know, it may be in business. Find a good company you that's that, a great interview know, question. What does your sustainability report look like? Or do you have sustainable development goals? What are they? If there is, you know, one thing that your company could contribute to the ecosystem, what would it be? You know, any, so that shows that you have a knowledge and that you're interested in it. And then the other thing I would say is if you're really interested in sustainability, look for what clubs or volunteer activities that you can do that also builds your resume. There are a number of places like Low Country Land Trust or there's Upstate Forever. There are a number of conservation preservation. SC7 is another one. They're very active. And then go and do those field trips, you know, go and do the litter pickup or, you know, and then that way you're meeting other people that are in the sustainability ecosystem. And I tell you, networking, my mother told me a long time ago, It's not what you know, it's who you know. And in South Carolina, but any of the southern states, the people you know can help connect you to where you want to go. So real important to network and to not be in that rut doing the same thing over and over and over again. You know, getting out there, Googling, you know, what is something near you that you might be interested in? I mentioned SC7 because that's a group that

during the entire month of April, April, May, I think it starts on Earth Day and ends the end of May. They are doing field trips that anybody can come and show up, go to Congaree National Forest is one of them. And they're going to be doing hikes and they're going to be, you know, doing river floats and they're going to be doing all sorts of fun things. And it's all ages. Just register, sign up. So, yeah, I would I would look at things like that. But, you know, it's like you have to make new friends but keep the old you know you have to you have both right and it's building out your network.

Taylor Krenzke

Awesome yeah no i i hear you it my mom has raised me on the it's not what she knows who you know for like my entire life.

Cynthia Davis

So meeting people is important. So sustainability is something you really want to pursue as you get that business degree, go check out those clubs. And I'm sure that like Carolina has ecology club or, I mean, I'm sure they have things like that. Right. And they have activities. Right. I know that USC has the, the litter getter behind one of the streams. Yeah. A big contraption and stuff.

Taylor Krenzke

Yes. Yes. Well, miss Cynthia, it has been great talking to you. Great. Great having you. I hope you have a great rest of your day.

Cynthia Davis

Go out in the world and do amazing things Taylor, I know you will.

Outro

Thanks for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed learning about Cynthia and Sustain SC's impactful work in South Carolina. Their approach to integrating sustainability into business practices is commendable and needed for our future. However, that's all the time we have today. Now, this is our final episode of this season and I'd like to thank you for listening and hearing what South Carolina's voices of sustainability have to offer. I hope this series was just as insightful in your life as it was in mine. Thank you and goodbye.

Tag

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