

## Green Home Expert - Brett Little | Transcript

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*Introduction:* Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cichetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a LEED Fellow. Each week, Charlie welcomes green building professionals from around the globe to share their war stories, advice and unique insight into how sustained ability is shaping the built environment. Settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why green building matters.

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*Charlie:* Welcome to the next episode, the Green Building Matters Podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti, in Atlanta, Georgia, but today we have a long time education partner with GBES. That's our education company, Brent Little's with us. He's with the Green Green Institute up in Grand Rapids, Michigan. We've been in touch for many years. You've got quite a bit of on the home side, LEED for home early adopters of that. I can't wait to learn a little bit more of what you and the institute are doing. Brett, take us back. Where do you grow up and go to school?

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*Brett:* I am from Muskegon, Michigan. For those that you don't know, Muskegon, for those of you who might know Grand Rapids, we are on the Lake shore, 40 minutes from Grand Rapids. If you take your hand out and you get the thumb on the right side and the pink on the left side. I know you can't see me right now, but I kind of point to that. You know the middle lower spot. That's where I'm from. That's where I grew up in Michigan and have stayed around West Michigan as well.

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*Charlie:* Fantastic! Did you go to school in the area? Tell us a little bit about growing up there, school, and an early career.

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*Brett:* I went to school there. We have a small business college called Baker College and I started going for my associates degree in business because that's what you do. You go for your associates degree in business when you don't know what you want to do. I was in a band I thought that might go somewhere. I worked at Starbucks for a very long time and thought , maybe I was going to rise up in that company for a while. A little bit of my education, work background there. I still play base and I can play you some guitar, but it's relaxing.

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*Charlie:* You knew you wanted to go on for the bachelors, as I understand it, still business but sustainable business. Tell us, how and why you wanted to get into that?

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*Brett:* That's a great question. When I was working at Starbucks I saw the organic milk. I didn't even know what organic was. I saw soy based milk and it had Wind turbines on the back. It said: this is powered by Wind terBinds. I saw a Fairtrade stickers and organic coffee and I was like: what does this mean? Who cares? I went on Wikipedia and started going down the rabbit hole, reading that stuff. You're reading about climate change, which, I'll be honest with you, I had never heard. If I was 21 years old, I'd never heard the term and if I did, it washed right over me. I didn't grow up talk about it in the family. Nobody told me about it. School didn't talk about it, also partially my faith in church, I was transitioning to the series on God is green and you're like "Wow." I went back to my college as I was wrapping up my degree and I said: how can I keep learning about business but also include the environment? Or what do you have for me? They looked at me like I was a complete crazy person. They're like, "I don't know what you're

talking about." I got lucky and ran into some friends who went to the clinic college program in Grand Rapids and they were one of the first in the nation to launch a sustainable business degree. Bachelors there had been masters but bachelors, and so I was like: I don't know what all that means or what clients, but that's what I know I have to do. I had my father telling me: I've got to get a bachelors. You have to do it, you can't give up. I feel like I have some meaning and some purpose to go to it so that it's and now there's more, but that 10 or 12 years later.

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*Charlie:* It's pretty cool that opportunity, because that is one of my questions. You told us about sustainable business, what about buildings and homes? When did that come into the picture?

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*Brett:* When I started going to school, somebody who also went through that degree had volunteered at the organization. Work at now under our former name, the Alliance for Environmental Sustainability, which can be an absolute mouthful, and she's like: look, go volunteer, they're like show up, knock on their door and tell them that you want to volunteer, and I was like: okay, that's a good idea. I should get out there, and so I did. I was going to school up here, I walked in the door, I said "I don't know what you do. Your name sounds really cool. Tell me what to do, I'll do it for free." We don't have that luxury any more, unfortunately, our students don't but I was lucky to have that and sort of learn about green building because like climate change, I had no idea on what construction was remodeling. You wouldn't want me to get involved in that. I didn't grow up and didn't really work with my hands too often. I learned about it more from the educational and consulting side. One cool thing too is I started volunteering on Habitat for Humanity projects, who were committed to LEED certification in Kent County, Michigan. I got to see hands-on while I was volunteering what made a home green versus not? I learned about what a green home was before I learned about what not green home was. It was normal for me.

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*Charlie:* Tell-all of our listeners here, Brett about the Green Home Institute, where you've been for 13 and half years now.

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*Brett:* I showed up as a volunteer and they let me fail upwards and employed me. Our mission we're nonprofit. We. We've existed for 20 years, people asked me: Did I start that? I was in high school when it started. I didn't know anything about this stuff, but for the other half of its life, I've been there and our mission is to empower people to make healthier and more sustainable choices in the places we live. We do that through education, training, awareness on green building practices for new and existing homes. Ultimately we help certify the homes and multifamily buildings either to LEED standards or Enterprise Green or our own internal Green Star program.

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*Charlie:* I'm here in Atlanta. We've got the South Face of Earth Craft. Obviously, we've got LEED for homes and it sounds like you're working a lot of programs, but you also have your own. In your region, tell us a little bit about some of the homes. Is it a single family, is it a multi family as well, and who do you see applying these programs?

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*Brett:* I'm glad you brought up South Face. They're in my sort of top five or top three. If someone's quick, tell me who you are? Who are you similar to? South Face is like, I could say, we're like a very small version of them. They're much larger than we are and some kind of deal. We get involved in. Single family, multi family housing, consulting and review, whether it be through LEED or other green building programs. We help low income housing tax credits. If you aren't aware of this, in order to entice developers to build low income housing. That's for people in the lower area, median income bracket who can't get into traditional housing. They have tax credits

for them and part of that tax credit is meeting green standards and I'm very thankful to be in the state of Michigan who continues to receive the highest rating of their green program for their low income housing tax credit. Out of all the 50 states they have the most sustainable one I hear. We're always excited to help and we've got grant funding in West Michigan to move the needle on low income and supportive housing. Homeless, veteran, youth, homeless, maybe climate refugee workforce housing, ensuring that people who don't have the means to access a green home is very important to us because we think everybody deserves a green home.

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*Charlie:* I can tell that is a passion, purpose there? It sounds like you guys know what you're showing up to work for every day. That's really cool. Tell us about your Region, Green Homes. What's the hardest thing to do in the area? Is it energy efficient because you get more heating months than cooling months? Finding certain materials? What is it?

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*Brett:* You look around the country right and I hate to throw Middle America under the bus here. But this is a most difficult place to do anything like this, whatever that means. The heartland, it's hard here in West Michigan and the Midwest. We're the second hardest place to convince people to do these things, especially if you're outside of the more metro areas. It's very difficult. People want an immediate return on investment for anything that they're going to do, and that's what it's all about. We want to build whatever bare minimum standard we have to do and if we don't get a payback on something else from an energy efficiency standpoint within three years, usually we can't do it, even if it saves carbon emissions or benefits us long term. So that's always been our hardest sell here and thankfully we've got a good code, one of the best codes in the country, I think in the state of Michigan. We're starting from a higher point. But that's energy efficiency. Green incorporates the five pillars of green energy: health materials, water in place. The other aspects of green, the ventilation side,

the water conservation side. That's difficult. Water conservation. We've got the great lakes here, so people look at that and go well. We have all the water in the world So I'll waste as much of it as we can, right? Trying to talk to people about low flow toilets and shower heads, we kind of get laughed at because it's like what's the point. So that's difficult as well and then also , looking at renewables. People in Michigan assume that it's too cold here, which actually cold weather helps solar power generation, believe it or not. There's some education that we have to unwind in our region and I could go on complaining about the challenges. But for me it's fun. I could move to California and do this all day and it'd be easy. But here in West Michigan I kind of like the challenge.

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*Charlie:* Your roots are there, you're like "We're going to figure it out. We're doing it and you are doing it". Career wise, influences and mentors. You said the time at Starbucks introduced you to these sustainability labels. That's really pretty amazing. Did you have any other mentors or someone you looked up to along the way?

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*Brett:* I would say at Starbucks, it was like the anti mentor. It was like I started putting the sustainability plan and they were like: "No, go sell coffee, don't worry about this." It's like "Okay, I know I need to move on." I mean, and that's fair. You know them. They want you to focus where they want you to focus, and now they're doing a lot of great work in that field. It's almost like the anti right. It convinced me too. My teacher at Aquinas College, Doctor: Tourist, very inspirational. Sort of the head in the clouds. To keep remembering what the ultimate goal is, which is always helpful, is difficult for some people because what he's talking about is not going to happen for 50 and 60 years. But where do we need to be going? And that's what always inspired me to think further on and not let the immediate barriers. Our board chair and president who hired me and ventured me and let me make so many mistakes. He should have fired me and he didn't. I

don't know why, but being someone who didn't necessarily care about climate change or even think it was real, actually, in my opinion, did more to the ball rolling, to stop it by actually engaging with people where they're at and trying to figure out how do we solve the problem and increase energy efficiency in green building. Mike Holcomemeir has always been like a mentor to me. We may not have agreed on a lot of things. We agreed on sort of the approach and I appreciated his knowledge and education and quite frankly, his ability to let me know, discover and fail.

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*Charlie:* It is good to give those shutouts to those that have that influence. Thanks for doing that. If you look back, what are some things you're really proud of?

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*Brett:* Looking back now, especially for me, I received Home Energy magazine 30 under 30 award, which was pretty cool. I know that they've been transitioned into another program, but that was pretty cool. Also when I bought my first home, we cut the energy efficiency in half. We cut the water by 30%, we got it green certified. It was an old 1926 home in Grand Rapids. We bought it and we completed the project and we were certified. I couldn't live in a house and promote this if I didn't do it myself and be a hypocrite. I'm super excited because my second home that I'm in now we did the same thing. We're Greenstar Platinum Certified, Pearl, Platinum certified, is the whole project. We hit one year of full electrification as of last week, and so I'm super proud of having some time and effort to be able to do this. Hopefully do it in a way that can be replicable. I hope to be able to tell that story, which I'm behind in telling. I need to get some stuff together for it. As far as our company goes, when I started formally as full-time we were actually in the red. We had run out of money. It was one employee and now we've doubled in size. One to two, not huge, but still. We're doing really well financially and making a lot of impact. I'm excited that I was able to help make that happen with our long

group of board of directors who were there with us. My former mentor and chair, and then also kick-start our webinar series, which has been a huge success. I can't believe it's been seven years since we've been doing it.

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*Charlie:* Those are some great accomplishments, really cool and the house too. That's really good stuff. Let's talk about today. What kind of stuff are you working on, Brett? What's keeping you busy when you show up to work today?

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*Brett:* I still get super excited about our weekly Wednesday webinar series, where we go live and talk to people all over the planet. I had someone calling in from Europe the other day. We talk about green building ideas. Mostly we're related to residential and quite frankly I'm a little bit selfish here because there's usually something that I want to learn. I take an hour out of my day for work to learn something new, but we come to find out there's a lot of other people who actually want to learn about this too and they show up and we get a lot of amazing conversation and great dialogue and help people advance. We're continuing to do that almost every Wednesday throughout the year and it's worth seeing us as well, and we got a lot of great stuff lined up for the rest of this year and next year. Taking it down from the big to the small. We're super excited to be doing a Biggest Loser Home Energy Challenge in the city of Ann Arbor, Michigan. The crux of it is: you look at your energy use in 2021. You compare it to 20 and 22 and the person who loses the most cuts their usage the most is going to get a big \$500 check-in Ann Arbor. We're managing that program. We're doing education, training on it, energy audits and then also there's going to be other prizes, second and third place, and we've even done this before in Holland, Michigan. It's really exciting to be working with another city to do it again. We're bringing indoor air quality and actually trying to challenge people to evaluate their air quality at the beginning and then evaluate it at the end and see who's improved there too. A lot of times we all talk about

energy efficiency, but we quickly forget that we may be poisoning ourselves in our homes as we make our homes more efficient. We don't want to leave that out of the conversation and I was really glad that for the leadership of the city of Ann Arbor to recognize that and say, "We should have that as part of the conversation."

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*Charlie:* Really enjoying the work and to connect the experts to your region, your audience and and help teach too. It's really good. Let's look to the future. What do you think next? What's coming at us in this green building, Green home movement?

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*Brett:* It's real-time information right on the spot when you need it, and so part of that goes to load shifting, right load or peak load shifting. I've heard the term load shimmying something. I need to learn about that a little bit more. The idea is that we need to have this bigger conversation about when we're using energy in our homes and figuring out ways to make sure that it matches when renewables are being produced in our region. A conversation that's going to have to happen at a national level, state, local and right into some one's home. A decision you make, like I make a decision to set my dishwasher to run at 11 o'clock at night when there's more wind than nuclear on the grid and we don't want to get in the nuclear debate. It's carbon free right now and there's less coal, less natural gas right. Having those conversations, when are we running that energy? Real-time data is going to be important where we move beyond net zero and get into something that's pretty popular coming out now, which is called 24/7 zero carbon. How do we work with people in their homes to not be frustrated by this but actually engage and get excited about it? If you tell me not to run my dryer at two o'clock because that's my highest cost, I'm going to be very mad. The average person is like: "Don't tell me what to do." The next conversation and how do we make it work? Back to what I said: with air quality, we need real-time air quality data. I wish I could show you a picture

right now, but I am sitting at a score. This never happens. I'm sitting at a score of a 100% air quality in my house right now and usually I'm in like the eighties or nineties, and that's measuring vocs humidity , which is basically wildfire, smoke, nasty stuff, and so we need to have real-time air quality in our homes, telling us, communicating with us what's going on? Are we being healthy as we work from home and how does that tie in to that load shifting and talking with our ventilation systems? Lastly, I think water quality, I mean Michigan, is the canary in the cold mine. We've got Flint with lead, we've got Benton Harbor with lead, we've got pfos all over here and we're not the only ones. We're the first to have noticed it . We talk about air quality quite a bit, which is good, but I think the next phase of green building is going to be water quality and ensuring that everybody is keeping healthy when they take a drink out of the tap.

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*Charlie:* Real-time data, that is in their stability, better decisions even to home, and I love it and you're right, maybe in your area. Something came to light in the press, but there's a lot more of these out there, even in the US. I think sometimes we take for granted, in the US, we've got the best water and the best air, and the best is still got some stuff to work on. Those are really good. Thank you. Let's talk more about you, some rapid fire questions here. What would you say is special to your gift?

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*Brett:* It's really the ability to connect either people together who say, "Hey, I heard you say this and you said this and I think you two need to be talking about this and it's going to work really well" and then also , ideas in the same sense, tying into ideas and and seeing a bigger picture. I've always appreciated that gift.

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*Charlie:* It does sound like a good, good gift to have. Any good habits, any routines or rituals?

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*Brett:* I think the routine in ritual is, to throw out the routine in ritual, especially in today's world where the next day, something completely crazy has happened right and it's you didn't even expect it and instead have the routine and ritual of being flexible and adaptable and being able to realize that what you thought today is now immediately not the case anymore. You have to be able to quickly adapt to it.

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*Charlie:* It's fair to say discipline, to stay all right. It's especially in this industry. It's in the industry, but it sounds universal. Everybody's everyday's different. Talking about the bucket list, I'm a fan of bucket lists. What are one or two things maybe on your bucket list?

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*Brett:* I don't travel too much, especially now, really never. I'm excited to some day visit two states in the Pacific Northwest. Kind of check that whole area. I have some time-out there sounds pretty exciting to me and I'd also like to , maybe create a board game, whether it's sold or for my own internal purposes, with my kid. I think it's something that would be fun:

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*Charlie:* the Pacific Northwest and the board game. Actually my middle brother. He really likes creating games and told him I should put him on Kickstarter or something, but you can get a blank board for a board and color it and make it to do it. Thanks for this. Let's keep going here. How about books? Is there a book you'd recommend?

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*Brett:* I needed to do a better job at reading, but I got really excited after I watched the new Doone. I loved the old Don and then I started reading about what it was about and sort of the stuff around it. I'm like I really need

to read this series, so I guess I'll start reading it and then we'll recommend it based on what I heard.

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*Charlie:* We'll link to that book, and I love it, because it is not about reference material and buildings now. We got to have some fun and we got some fiction in there too. Just a couple of more things here. Is there any advice you'd give someone excuse me, is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

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*Brett:* Yeah, I think tracking every sort of potential data point that's measurable is very important and it's one thing that . As our organization came, went further and further along, I'm like gosh. I wish I hadn't known all of these things before that I could make a meaningful statement like, yeah , like 50% of the homes we get involved in use this much energy or this much water or whatever it might be. It could even be an internal thing. When I'm running a business, there's all sorts of things you can look at financially or based on diversity, equity and inclusion now too. I wish someone would have instilled in me the idea to really capture as much information as you can so you can make better informed decisions rather than make assumptions. Unfortunately I kind of learned about the hard way as I go.

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*Charlie:* I think you're moving up your career quickly here and then taking some strides, and it's little protip, I think, helps our listeners too. Our last question for today I really enjoyed our conversation. Brett, someone's listening to this podcast and hopefully in the future are going to come check out your webinar series and we'll link to that and the podcast show notes. Let's say, someone's listening and they're getting encouraged, they want to jump into the screen building or green home movement. What words of encouragement do you have for them?

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*Brett:* Yeah, I mean this is a great time. We need all the help we can get here in this sector and especially in the construction and trade sectors. We really need a lot of help there. There is a lot of opportunity to stand out above the people who are currently in this sector and , take us to the next level, and so I hope you'll consider getting involved, take a look at your own house, what's going on in it and use it as a starting place to learn about what can be done. I think as we start the transition more to our homes and working from home, this is going to become even more important that we deal with sustainability in our housing.

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*Charlie:* Perfect man! Well, you're the guy. You're the expert up there doing great things in your region and I appreciate our education kind of relationship between your institute and our online education company. So to everybody, connect with Brett Little on LinkedIn. We'll put a link in the podcast show, or keep up the great workman. Thank you so much, thanks.

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*Charlie:* I want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters Podcast. Me and the entire team were stoked and so glad you continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a Green Building professional here in this industry or some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us straight to you.

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