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Welcome to Rooted in People. The human side of public gardens. Public gardens are more than beautiful views and carefully curated plants. They enrich communities and the lives of their employees. In this podcast series, we, the 2024 2025 cohort of the Longwood Gardens Fellows Program, will engage in conversations with leaders of public gardens. We will explore how their garden has cultivated these communities.

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We invite you to grab your headphones and listen in to this series full of inspiration, insight, and reflection that may transform your perspective on the garden world around you.

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Hello I'm Vania Pereira with Longwood Gardens Fellows Program. Today I have the pleasure of speaking with Melissa Burdick, the executive director of the Brentwood Arboretum. The Brentwood Arboretum is located in the center area in the Des Moines metropolitan area, including an ever expanding collection of more than 4000 trees and shrubs representing 500 species, hybrids and codewords. The Arboretum's mission is to inspire joy through the beauty and knowledge of the natural world of trees.

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It is deeply committed to dedication, conservation and community engagement, making it a welcoming space for all.

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Melissa is in her 10th year at the Brentwood Arboretum. She has an undergraduate degree in horticulture and landscape design from Auburn University, and a master's of science in the Fellows program from the University of Bel-Air.

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Melissa's passion to create gardens for everyone,

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Welcome to the podcast, Melissa. The last time we spoke, you told me about the connections with the community and how they are essential for the Brenton Arboretum. Could you please share a little bit more about those, how those connections started? Oh, sure. And thanks for having me. This is a real pleasure.

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So yeah, when I first got to the Brenton Arboretum about ten years ago, I was not from Iowa. Brand spanking new. I didn't have any connections here. No family, no friends, anything like that. So it was really important to try and weave myself into the fabric of the community as quickly as possible to get to know who's coming to the arboretum, who our neighbors are, who our constituents are, and honestly, one of the best ways for me to do that was by joining the local Rotary Club.

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I don't know, are you familiar with Rotary and Rotarians? Yeah, a little bit, but if you want to share. So it's it's a global organization. It's a service organization. And, was started in the, oh, like early 1900s, I think. And it's been around for a very long time. And it's a really great, method to get to know a lot of people in the business community and a lot of people I've met who may have retired from the local business community.

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And, you know, big cities have great big rotary clubs with hundreds of people that can get very large. Dallas center, the town of Dallas Center, where the arboretum is, is very, very small. We have about 25 people in our club, maybe 30, 25 to 30 people. And so it's really easy to get to know everybody. And we meet weekly.

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We have lunch and the the lunch usually has a program of something interesting going on in the community or just a fun topic, but it's a great way to start building those friendships and kind of to keep your ear to the ground on the local goings on and the community. What's happening? What's the local nursing home doing? What is what are the schools up to?

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What are the Parks and Rec departments working on in the in the towns nearby? And just by kind of being there and present and aware, I found many opportunities to jump in and say, hey, the arboretum can help with that. Or, hey, if you need space for something, we're open for that. And just making those little connections.

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It's also given me a really great opportunity not just to go to my own

Rotary Club, but to give presentations as a speaker at Rotary Clubs all around the area. So people, Rotarians are always looking for a speaker to come to their weekly program. And I have 1 or 2 different programs. The favorite one is usually my about the Arboretum program, and I'll just go to those, those, different clubs maybe once a year every other year and just give kind of an update on what we're doing and making sure that people are aware of the institution, what we're doing, the fact that we're right next door, right and right in everybody's own backyards, and

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that just kind of propels even more networking with those rotary clubs and individuals. Because when you're in rotary, usually you're a part of other service activities or volunteer programs or activities, and you can kind of just start working that network and growing it that way. So that's one of the, you know, I would say, hands down, one of the best things that I have done when it comes to building that community engagement network, right here in my local community.

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Yeah. Thank you for sharing. That's that's pretty amazing. And just kind of tying to when you're saying about like having these space at the home and making those connections to see what are the needs from the community. How do you leverage that, those resources that the Brenton can provide for the community. So one thing for listeners to know is that the Brenton Arboretum is very, very small.

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Our annual budget is just about \$400,000 a year, operating, so teeny tiny, minuscule. Our staff is very small. We have two full time staffers, myself and my direct, our director of horticulture. I've got a half time educator, half time membership, and a half time rental coordinator. So we don't have a large education department to put on all of the programs that we can dream up and we can dream up a lot.

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Right? We're very creative people. Most people in our institutions are just our wheels are always turning about the fun things we could do. Or, it wouldn't it be great if we could do this or that? And frankly, our resource, our human resources are so small we just can't do it. We can't afford to do it or we don't have the skills.

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You know, we have a lot of people ask us, oh, you should do yoga. You should do yoga or tai chi out in the arboretum. It's such a beautiful

place. Well, yes, I am not going to teach yoga because that would be hilarious. So what? What we can do, though, is, you know, what you and I have talked about is kind of have that open doors policy.

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We can't do it. I'm not a yoga instructor. Who do we know? Who can? Can we find them and invite them? And how do we set up mutually beneficial arrangements so that we can offer programming at the arboretum? Hosted it here. Where? And also the teacher, gets a good crowd, gets paid for their work, or gets a percentage of the membership, or if they're receiving all of the, the, the registration funds, we can give them a discount on renting the space to host their class here.

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And we'll say, well, okay, so if we give you a 30% discount to rent the space for the yoga class, will you give our members a 30% discount to participate in your program, your class? So we have a lot of different ways. We're very flexible and able to kind of work with different people on how how we like to do, different partnerships.

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Other things we do is, we pay attention to and try and make space for organizations that are aligned with us, especially those nonprofit organizations. So let's say the Scouts, the Boy Scouts, or the Girl Scouts need to come and do a program, or they just need space. They don't necessarily need us to teach a program, but they need the space for it.

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Well, they're they're a nonprofit. They're aligned with what we're doing. There's no reason to say no. You have to pay for this. If if we can make it work so that I'm the staffer here and we don't need to bring a staffer in specifically to man an event, let's just let them use our space. That's perfectly fine. One of the local community foundations often needs a meeting place.

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Well, they do so much good in our local community, and sometimes we go to them for grants. That let's just open that they can use the meeting space. It's not a big deal. So what we have is room, basically just room to let people use our space and, and take advantage of the resources that we have.

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And, number one, that builds great friendships and connections in the community. And number two, it lets us amplify our offerings to the public. What we can't do, others can. So let them in. Yeah, yeah, it's pretty amazing because I feel like that was when you you answered a survey was what got me very inspired hearing from you is this open door policy?

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Because I feel like sometimes it's kind of easy to go like, oh my, maybe we don't have all the resources, we don't have the capacity. But like the the building partnership, it's it's important enough. Like what resources you have, what I have and what can we one of the phrases you share with us, what can we grow together?

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What can we build? That's very, very inspiring. It is. We just recently. Well, the past may let's say maybe a year or two, we have been working with, with our Open Doors policy, an organization that's based in Des Moines. It's a fellow leads guided meditation. And his downtown program in Des Moines is called, meditation around town.

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That's what it's called. And he's the most wonderful fellow, and he's got lots of time on his hands. He's retired and he's a, meditation and Reiki healer type, type person. And he wanted to come out here and do guided meditation. And so we started up, meditation in or excuse me, it's called Nature's Healing is the name of our program, Nature's Healing.

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It's meditation here at the arboretum. And we don't charge him and he doesn't charge anybody else, but we put it on our website. It's a program we can offer. Just come out. It's every Wednesday. And it's a really wonderful opportunity to offer the, the kind of programing that we really do. We in addition to tree education and environmental education, it's the mental health aspect.

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So we can offer that without having to be a meditation leader or guider, that, that kind of a thing. So that has been going really well. They've also been doing yoga and interestingly, it's kind of wrapped up with another institution, an institution called Nature Sacred, which is based in Annapolis, Maryland. And just this past weekend we had like a multi, multi entity kind of group project for

World Labyrinth Day.

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I don't know if you've ever heard of World Labyrinth Day. But a labyrinth is those, you know, kind of they look like mazes on the ground and you walk them and you meditate. So the arboretum here, we have a labyrinth for meditation, and there's a World Labyrinth day. It's a worldwide celebration. And Nature's Healing is an institution that really, invests in and tries to foster garden spaces in very urban areas for people to get the benefits of, being in nature, the mental health benefits.

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And so we have been partnering with them on various things in the past. Well, this labyrinth day came around. We have a labyrinth. Nature's healing, has money to fund events. World, world Labyrinth Day events. And then we have our meditation group who was willing and eager to take on the entire project and the event and really make it a wonderful success.

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So no money outlay at all. Just time, you know, I manned a table there selling memberships at the event, and we had a really great turnout of people, and it was made possible by this multi community engagement. And even one of the community members was not local there from the eastern seaboard, but they're still able to partner with things.

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So really really can be the sky's the limit if you're just willing to hear out an idea and say yes, you can't always say yes. Sometimes you have to put on some guardrails and say no. But lots of times there's a lot you can do if you've got the bandwidth for it. Yeah. For sure. And that when you're talking about it, I was thinking like how much also like of network of reach other communities and other people within your community but also outside.

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I don't have any more like other benefits you would like to share that came out from those partnerships and the they reach out to community. Well, one of the things that we've been working on recently, the past year or so, is kind of looking at our youth education programing, with the original goal of increasing the number of students who participate in field trips to the arboretum.

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We figure, why have kids sit in classrooms all day long, bring them out to the arboretum so they can be in nature and get all the benefits and the education. And we had noticed our field trip numbers remaining very, very static or dropping a little bit. And we said, okay, what's going on here? So my educator and I, we reached out to a handful of different, teachers and principals in the three local school districts that are all right around us, and we set up some meetings with them and had conversations and how basically trying to find out how do we increase our our field trips.

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What gets you to bring your students out here? How do we do? We need to tailor it. Do we need to find a sponsor to donate the funds for school bussing? What are what are the obstacles and how can we overcome them and so what was interesting is, is just through those conversations, we learned that bussing wasn't the issue.

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It was the time that the schools had to devote to science education. They have to have a certain number of hours every week, a certain number for math, certain number for reading, certain number for science. And if you take one entire day of school day and make it all science, then that you have to make up for that with the others, other curricula, the rest of the week.

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And that became really difficult. So schools aren't going to be able to come out more than once. In a school year. Another obstacle we found was that looking at the specific curriculum for each school district, environmental science or earth science, botany, biology did not often actually pop up in a grades curriculum. It might hit one grade in that in that student's entire school career.

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And so that was the one grade that we could expect to get out at the Arboretum. We're not going to get them in third grade and in sixth grade, and in eighth grade we got fifth grade. That's what you get, you know, take what can. The rest is chemistry or, you know, geology or other kinds of science.

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So we learned, a handful of things that, that were not problems that we could fix because they were not just they were simply not something that we were able to address. Right. But we did learn that it is

vastly easier for us to go to the schools with programing because you don't have to get the school bus, you don't have to take an entire day for it.

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Our educator can set up in the library and do 15 minute rotations through all the grade, the, the, the grade, the classes in the grade and he had a lot of kids that had a lot of kids. That sounds terrible, but reach like a lot of targets, spongy little brains to soak up our messaging and learn a little bit about the arboretum, learn about the importance of protecting trees and our habitats.

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And so that's kind of how that communication and partnering and conversations, that community engagement with the schools, has helped us find new avenues to achieve our mission. We just had to change our thinking because we weren't thinking. We weren't we weren't doing the right thing. We had we had the wrong idea. And so that's kind of an interesting thing to watch that relationship change over time and responding to it and hopefully a very successful way.

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Yeah, yeah. And I remember from our first conversation you mentioned that sometimes like also we think what other people need instead who heard it. I thought that was such a good point to make. When you're thinking about challenges, what do you perceive as a challenge may not be what it's actually happening or what they are perceiving? Yeah, one of the things kind of having to understand what people actually need, one of the things that's also come about in our conversations and more research, is a lot of the teachers in our schools don't have a comfort level in talking about environmental science.

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Maybe their their favorite thing is math. Maybe it's literacy. They just don't feel comfortable talking about soil erosion or tree morphology or good. The carbon cycle and things like that. And so we're now starting to look at how can we amplify our input, our messaging, our mission in the most reasonable, logical way. And so we're starting to think about, well, maybe we need to be teaching the teachers and making sure that they feel comfortable talking about these different facets of environmental education, so that when they're in the classroom and we can't be there, they don't gloss over like they don't really know about about natural resources.

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We're just going to talk about corn and soybeans, and that's natural resources. That's our that's our environmental natural resources education. Well, let's give them a little bit more confidence and oomph to talk about that, which is very important to Iowa. Obviously corn and soybeans very important. But how can we talk about how can they expand that conversation?

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And, and, you know, just enrich the conversation that they can have confidently with their students. So but then, of course, teaching the teachers comes with its own, you know, ball of wax when it, when it comes to accreditation and then finding the time to have those training classes and how would we do it. So it's, it's an ongoing adventure and an ongoing conversation on how we can reach minds, which is the ultimate goal.

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Yeah. That's amazing. And that came to mind also like what are other challenges you, you encounter when you were building those partnerships with the schools but also with the community in general? So like I said, sometimes you have to know when to say no. And that can be really difficult sometimes. You know, we we love everybody, right?

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We want everybody to come to the arboretum and have a really good time. But sometimes if an organization just doesn't exactly align with what we're doing or might put us in jeopardy with our 500 and C3 certification or, yeah, accreditation, we might say, no, that's not a good fit for us or that could be a rental, but not a publicity event.

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So a lot of times, Iowa having the caucuses, they'll, they'll political things are really big every four years, the presidential caucuses. And so we'll sometimes get requests from any political party asking to have a meeting here or have a, you know, a stage or something like that. And we say, no, sorry, no, not you, not this time.

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So we do have to be be careful and mindful of those kinds of things. So that would definitely be one challenge, another one. Another challenge is sometimes, you know, having that bandwidth. But there's so much we can do. Sometimes we just can't wrap our arms around all of it and keep track of everything that's going on. And when that

happens, things can spin out of control a little bit.

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So you can't. Yes, you want to say yes to everything, but sometimes you just got to say, well, let's put a pin in that and maybe we'll come back to it later when we're sure we can do it well and we won't get, you know, carried away down the wrong track. Making sure that we're minding our mission and staying true to what we're doing and not going bananas with completely different good messages, but not part of our core mission.

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And how do we, you know, keep, keep those guardrails on and keep going and, just keep keep ourselves from, like I said, keep ourselves from spinning out. Definitely. I feel like we are all very passionate people that really want to say yes and keep. So that can be good in bed. Yeah. You also have to think about partnerships change over time and, making sure that they change appropriately or if they haven't changed but need to making those changes happen.

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We've we've been working lately with a it's called a forest school and it is a for profit. It's a privately owned franchise and it's basically a school for, I think the ages are maybe, maybe six, five or 6 to 8 maybe. I think they have somebody who's ten. So it's 14 kids in this one group class.

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That whole age range. And they spend all day at the arboretum and they are doing school. They're reading, writing, arithmetic, science, everything. And it's all outdoors the entire time. And, they'll come in for the restroom break and that's about it. They eat lunch outside. In the winter time, they're wearing their snow suits and they're outside in the snow.

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The only time they're inside is when it's dangerous, whether they'll be inside for that. So when we first, you know, made contact, they actually reached out to us. Can we use the arboretum space for this? We thought, well, okay, what are the insurance liability issues? What about, being affiliated with this institution? That is not the arboretum.

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How do we put all that together? Protect the arboretum. Support this really great endeavor. It's not a charity. It's it's a for profit. But, boy, it sure does align with what we're doing. We don't charge admission to come to the Arboretum anyway, so anybody can come and stay at the arboretum as long as they want, as many days in a row as they want.

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So we can't really, you know, restrict that. So how do we make sure that they have a good time, that the arboretum is protected? And the first year we thought, well, what's the likelihood of this actually being a success? Now don't tell them I said this, but I thought it was going to be a huge flop because the only other forest school that I had heard of was out in California.

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And you can have outdoor activities all year round in California, Iowa, not so much. But you know what? Boy was I wrong. They have been an incredible success and they're actually opening up New Forest schools around the state. So great. But the relationship changes over time too. So they've they've had their their first year there, founding year. We just kind of made sure they had their insurance in order.

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Make sure everybody knew that this is not the Brenton Arboretum. This is the Forest School. It just happens to be here. And then the second year they're needing they need some more, resources to be successful. So we're thinking about, well, how can we help them without, you know, gutting our own resources. Right. So can we offer them some indoor space when they occasionally need it?

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And if not, what can we do with in that case? So I think seeing how that relationship changes over time and making sure that it does change appropriately and goes in the right direction and still continues to do what we all want it to do, is important. Yeah. And this is amazing. I feel like there's also ties back with my next question, which I think you have touched upon.

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Like what we guys looking forward, what is next on the horizon? Oh, hearing about like the, farms but also about the teachers. Do you have anything else to share? Yeah. So one of the things that I have been wanting to do with the Arboretum ever since I got here is a program

called strolls for, well, excuse me, strolls for well-being.

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And that's a mental health program. It's basically helping people with PTSD or stress or whatever it whatever they might be dealing with, through nature therapy, basically taking walks in nature. And it's an established program and a lot of different institutions have done at the blo del reserve did it, Morikawa Museum and Garden down in Florida did it.

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And, I have always wanted to do it here just because mental health is such an important part of our mission, right? Our reason for being the problem I have is that kind of like, I can't teach yoga. I'm not a therapist. I cannot handle what the case may be. We can't afford to hire someone to come and do this program.

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It would be cost prohibitive. And I have just recently connected through a rotary friend, with a person who works at a, at a, basically a therapy co-op. And, she and all of her fellow therapists are very excited to take this on and do it. It's the kind of thing where I don't have the bandwidth to do it, but I want to see it.

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So how do we recruit them? And kind of number one, let them loose, but also make sure that they're not going, you know, haywire or anything like that, to make this offering happen. And what does that look like. And, and of course it'll change over time. But that's something that's coming down the pike that I'm really excited about.

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Yeah. That's amazing. Just kind of a question that sparked my curiosity when you're saying, like, how do you keep track or how do you get to know these different programs around if you have any kind of tips to share with the listeners? Well, it really is networking and just kind of, you know, keeping your ears perked up to what's going on out and around about, you know, something as silly as, I sat next to somebody at, at a luncheon who operates a miniature ranch right here in town in Dallas center.

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And when I say miniature ranch, I don't mean that it's just a big ranch. That's made small. It's a full size ranch full of mini animals,

miniature animals. So, I mean, that's awesome. Obviously you're going to have a conversation with that person, right? Well, it turns out she does birthday parties and she has a little, little trailer wheel.

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She'll trailer her little mini goats and mini horses and mini pigs and mini mini anything, to places like nursing homes for therapy days. And so she does it for profit. We do rentals at the arboretum, so we set up my my rental coordinator. She created a, a miniature petting zoo birthday party package. And so partnering with this person to offer birthday parties where she will bring the little miniature animals to the arboretum and have a birthday party.

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Nobody has done it yet. I really wish somebody would do the petting zoo birthday party, but just those kind of like crazy things where you would first. I mean, if anybody said we should have a petting zoo at the arboretum, I would probably say, you're insane. Get out of my. But if we're not the ones raising the animals, right?

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Or having to keep your goats and things like that, why not just let it let them do it? That's just kind of a blast. And then another one is just kind of, you know, listening to all these programs and, and, when you go to these awards luncheons, which are, you know, always kind of boring or blah, but you hear the people receiving their awards and their, their partners and tangentially just kind of reaching out and saying, hey, I'm at the Brenton Arboretum.

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We're in alignment. If you ever need a meeting space out here, come on out. We would be happy to host you. We wouldn't charge you see, we wouldn't charge you for that or saying, hey, you know, you mentioned that you want to do water quality programing. Well, where we are, we're based and shaped and we drain a lot of different watersheds.

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And we have a classroom space and we're a perfect outdoor classroom for water quality messaging. So if you ever want to come out and just use our space, let us know. We're happy to do that. And so yeah, just, just open doors. Come on out. Come and do it. We don't like I said, since we're don't we don't charge admission.

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We're open every day. You can just come in and do what you want to do. That's one reason we will come check up on you. If you do something we don't want you to do. It's amazing. Yeah. I feel like just hearing from you. Like, your passion about, like, building that network. Be open to opportunities and and embrace it.

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That's very amazing. Do you have any other key learnings, insights you want to share with other garden leaders? Oh, gosh. I just remember to keep that keep the focus on the mission. It can be really easy to go. I mean, honestly, the petting zoo, that's a little far out there, but it's not an educational program.

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It's an event rental. So we're kind of give ourselves a little leeway to have fun there. But you don't want to, really go out there for the sake of a program or chasing a dollar or something like that. So you do have to keep that focus on the mission. And no win, no win, not to cross any lines and just losing sight, losing focus on what you should be doing.

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Yeah. They and Lisa, thank you so much for talking with me today. It was a pleasure to have you on our podcast and learning more about the Brand Arboretum in this beautiful community engagement network. And a lot of fun you're having. It is a lot of fun, and it's fun. It's a little crazy sometimes, but yeah, I love it.

00;30;23;04 – 00;30;42;05

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Yeah. Thank you so much. We really, really appreciate you taking the time. And I hope the listeners got as much inspired as I am. Bye bye. And your guys work and. Well, if any of the listeners have questions, they're welcome to reach out to me. I'm at the Brinton Arboretum, so the Brinton arboretum.org. Just look me up.

00;30;42;05 – 00;30;50;08

Unknown

I'm on the staff page. My name is Melissa. And just reach out with an email or phone call. And I'm happy to chat with you about anything that we talked about today.

00;30;50;08 – 00;30;54;14

Unknown

Sounds good. Bye. I.

00;30;54;14 – 00;31;05;23

Unknown

Thank you so much for tuning in to today's episode. A special thanks to Longwood Gardens for their incredible support and for making this conversation possible.

00;31;05;23 – 00;31;10;10

Unknown

This podcast has been produced by Carol Gross, Mariah Kaltenstein,

00;31;10;10 – 00;31;11;08

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and Yvette Weaver.

00;31;16;19 – 00;31;25;18

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If you're interested in learning more about the 2024 Fellows Project and Workbook, there are links in the show notes with more information.

00;31;25;21 – 00;31;40;07

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The Longwood Fellows Program is a unique leader development program in the fields of public horticulture. Until next time, keep your hands in the soil your heartful and be inspired by gardens.