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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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I'm excited to be speaking with Shelley Dinehart, the Chief Human Resources and Culture Officer at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Shelley has a rich professional background and leadership roles and human resources, communications in public relations, and customer practices. Prior to working at Longwood, she worked at JPMorgan Chase and its predecessors for over 20 years, and then ran her own human resources consultation business.

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Shelley's experience, combined with the efforts of the remarkable team she leads, is focused on culture and employee engagement at Longwood Gardens.

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A key part of Longwood's 2030 strategic plan as its commitment to prioritizing and investing in its workforce talent.

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Hi, Shelley. Good morning. It's wonderful to have you here, and I'm thrilled to be having this conversation with you because you have been my mentor this year.

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I've been a fellow and we've had so many interesting conversations. Even prior to me knowing that I'd be interviewing you for this podcast about employee engagement and about workforce development. So I'm very excited to be engaging in this conversation with you. Well, I'm excited to be here, and it's been such a pleasure to be your mentor

throughout the last year.

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Oh. Thank you. So I'm going to start with, well, the first thing I would like to do is to start with, just defining what how we've been looking at social sustainability for this podcast and for our workshop, which is focusing on enhancing the well-being and the quality of life for people and communities, both for current and generations.

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And I just want to clarify that. So we're all on the same page. Understanding what that definition is for us.

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So for our listeners, will you talk about how long would gardens came to prioritize people and culture as a core strategic objective in its 2030 plan?

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Sure. Well, I guess I would I'd start by saying Longwood has always prioritized our people. It's our incredibly talented staff and volunteers that really enable us to deliver on our mission, and create the memorable experience is that our guests have when they come to visit the gardens.

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So when it came time for our 2030 plan, it was very, very intentional that we put that focus front and center. So, so for folks and I know Yvette that you've seen it. For folks who haven't seen our, 2030 plan, the very first, goal and priority is our people. And what that allowed us to do is really, start to articulate the specific strategies that we wanted to focus on.

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The initiatives that we were going to focus on over the next ten years that are very reflective of our staff today. Right? Because our staff is continually evolving. The world around us is evolving. So we need to stay on top of what demands and needs our staff have, and adapt our strategies and our approaches and, and, that strategic plan really starts to articulate what those initiatives are, right.

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And some of our past conversations, Shelly, you and I have also talked about, looking at the history of Longwood and what the culture has been since Pierre, has, you know, founded Longwood and his relationship with his employees and will you talk a little bit about that? Because I think that is really important and how it feeds into where Longwood is today.

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Yeah.

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There are just so many, elements, that are connected back to our history and the great example that Pierre established that flow through Longwood today. So whether it is, his creativity, his innovation, his commitment to conservation, his forward thinking, his, desire to create a place that is welcoming, and inclusive to everyone.

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He was very much on the forefront of that. I, I, you know, one of the pieces that I found so fascinating is, the attorney that he hired who was his business attorney, was actually the first woman, to receive her, legal degree. Right. In this area. Yeah. Which was so progressive for that period of time.

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And I think that's just one example. And you can't go without saying the important role that his his wife Alice played, right? Yes, absolutely. So, so when we think about the culture that we want to create, right, one that is welcoming and one that is engaging, one that gives every single individual the opportunity to achieve whatever their personal goals are.

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Right? Because they're different for each and every one of us. Right. But providing that, the tools and the resources and the environment where you can make those choices and, and you can strive for those things, I think really ties back, to our history and can access to our history in that way.

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already. So thank you. I, thank you for mentioning peer's wife, too, because I think she's

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She had an impact on his or their decisions and how they, engage with their employees and and visitors and, so will you talk a little bit about some of the programs and initiatives that have been the most impactful here at Longwood, and how you've decided to choose those initiatives to move forward with?

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Sure, sure. So, as I think about, the last couple of years and programs, that I think have been most impactful as we think about how are we providing the support and tools and resources to our staff? I think I would start with, our benefit strategy. So two years ago, we embarked upon a three year strategy, that was really focused on enhancing the benefit offerings, that are available to our staff.

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And this has been led expertly by our vice president of human resources, Julianne Creevy, who has done a phenomenal job. But this gets back to, that earlier point of recognizing that the needs of our staff are continually changing. And we have to be mindful of that. So, as a part of that strategy, we've done a couple of things.

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And I'll just call out a few of the changes, not all of them. I'd say first we've enhanced our, medical insurance offerings, providing choice to our staff. So they have the option to choose between two different, medical plans, recognizing that the needs of individuals might be different. We've enhanced our EAP offerings or employee assistance, offerings.

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We've, added to our, PTO bank, which is our paid time off bank for, folks who might not be familiar with the lingo, two wellness days and two cultural days. And that's really to acknowledge, that we have a diverse workforce. And the days that you might want to celebrate might be very different than the days that are important to me.

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So our cultural days recognize that. And then our wellness days recognize that it's just important for people to have time to take time for themselves or their family, their children, you know, their, extended support network. And it gives them a bit more flexibility in that way. This year we also introduced partner wealthy, which we are very, very excited about.

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They are a firm that provides support, caregiver support to our staff. So whether that's in child care or that's elder care. They are consultative service. They help you navigate all the complexities and the things that you, you know, you have to learn about and think through, and have been a phenomenal resource, from that perspective. So that I think is one example.

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On the engagement front, we have, a fantastic internal employee idea committee, and internal employee activities committee, who are constantly thinking, and planning, educational events for our staff engagement events where we can just to get together and celebrate, cultural recognition events, that I think really, help to build a community here at Longwood as well.

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That's wonderful. Thank you. How and thinking about this, the diversity of the staff and it being multi-generational and this Longwood has how many employees? There's.

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I love to say that, it takes more than 1700. Yeah. So, like, now that's a broad range, right? Right. It's our part time, our full time, our students, our volunteers are phenomenal partners with Restaurant Associates.

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So yes, our educators, are all a part of that, that mix

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and having different needs. How how are you identifying, what those needs are, how to address some of these different initiatives to be able to, attract the talent pool and be able to retain folks. What what are different ways that you're looking?

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Yeah,

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It's a number of different ways. So, so for any initiative or program or policy that we put in place or process that we put in place, we

start with research. Right? So that's internal research. So that may be looking at data, regarding our workforce. It may include focus groups. It may include surveys.

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It may include, feedback that we've gotten informally, you know, or formally, and then it's also looking externally. Right. So what are we seeing in the external community? That includes benchmarking studies, looking at best practices. What have other organizations, both within our industry and outside of our industry have been doing? So we start there.

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And then from there we start to build out and kind of zero in on what are going to be our focus areas. Okay. And develop a plan. Right. Or a process, whatever the case may be. And that's very much an iterative and collaborative process. We get feedback along the way, from individuals internally.

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And then once we've captured kind of that feedback, we turn our attention to how do you introduce that particular initiative or process? And a lot of that is thinking through your communication strategy and thinking through your training strategy, before you go live. Okay. And then you have to monitor it right after the fact. Which is incredibly important because I think, even with the best planning, you're going to learn things as you introduce things.

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And we've got to be willing to adapt. Right. And, and adjust, to make sure that it meets the needs of our, of our staff.

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Right. That isn't our guess. And I interact with us. I definitely want to get to kind of addressing, you know, where those where things are successful. Or maybe we're seeing adjustments, may need to be made, but I first want to ask a little bit more about what the focus areas are and how you decided to prioritize.



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If you could share a little bit about that. Sure. So we think about, we think about our HR and culture related initiatives in the context of our workforce.

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Right. And the workplace. So we use those to, kind of buckets as our frame. So our workforce is all about who are we attracting, who are we retaining? To Longwood. Okay. So those efforts, when we think about workforce are all related to our recruitment strategy. Marketing strategy, our selection processes, and, and, and kind of that, that side of the, employee experience and then workforce is all about once you are here with us.

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What is the experience that you have? Right, right. So, the benefits piece. Right. What support are you getting? But it is also, what kind of leadership and professional development is available to you? Do you feel like you have the opportunity to share your opinion? Do you feel like you have, the opportunity to connect with your peers?

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Right. And get to know the individuals across the organization. So it's all of the efforts that really relate to the experience that you're having every single day, right? And then to your point about, you know, how do we prioritize that? You can't do everything all at once. Right. So going back to that earlier point around kind of really looking at what, the data is telling us as well as the informal, feedback is, is showing us.

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We use that information to really help prioritize, in tandem with our organizational objectives. Right. Because we always have to keep that in context. So our strategic plan. Always sets the framework for us and helps us in prioritizing what are the initiatives that we'll take for this year versus what are the things that we'll take for next year and three years down the line.

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Right.

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I with you talking about this, I one of the things that comes to me is

also in some of our past conversations is talking about how the experience of the employee will then touch the experience of the visitors and just how and you know, that, and truly, I get to see that every day here, that joy that people, the employees here are all carrying.

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And it gets shared, you know, amongst the visitors and really what that dedication is to, people coming into the garden and what their experiences here.

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Yeah. We I, I feel that we are so fortunate to have the staff and the volunteers and the students that I have here at Longwood, because they are, such a dedicated, and passionate group of people.

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Very, very diverse in their skill sets, very, very diverse in their area of expertise. But you can see it when they bring, to, you know, to work with them every single day. And to your point, when you have individuals, that are, working for an organization that are that passionate, that just show, that shows through and every single interaction that they have, like.

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Yes. And I do think that's one of the things that makes this such a special, special place.

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Absolutely. Absolutely. So speaking of successes, how are you measuring success for these initiatives and.

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Yeah. So we have established a, set of metrics that we measure quarterly. And they've been in place now for about two and a half years.

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Okay. And it runs the gamut. They are all measures that are indicators of engagement, indicators of satisfaction, indicators of, retention and all of those, those topics. And what that allows us to do, is it allows us to identify where we're making progress. Okay. And it allows us to identify where we still have opportunities.



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And that's really important. So getting back to that, you know, earlier point that we have to constantly be evolving, right. That information can help us to focus and prioritize, where we put and where we spend our time and where we invest our resources.

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Yeah. Where have you found any places where there have been, like, real challenges or roadblocks and implementing initiatives?

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I, I,

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I tend not to think about things in the context of roadblocks. Okay. I would say whenever you are introducing something new. Yes. Right. It's change. Right? So there is always a period of time. There is always an adjustment. Okay. And the best way is to mitigate that. Right. To really be thoughtful about your communications.

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Yeah. Think through where needed. How do you have, what do you need to do to supplement with training. Okay. And again as, as we said before and then monitor. Right. And be willing to adjust and flex. Yeah. Where needed. And then you have to give it time. Okay. Yes. Because we are all human.

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Okay. Right. And, you need to give folks time to kind of settle in, and get comfortable, okay. With, new initiatives. Right. Right.

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I think that's, And I guess, really, it's building on what I think we spoke about opportunities and really and with that communication and just, I guess, implementation, really finding the spaces to be able to make the changes and make adjustments as, as moving forward with new initiatives and new implementation.

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I know being on the receiving side of it always feels better when that communication is, is, is there and just knowing and right. Exactly.

So,

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Shelly, in the past, you and I have spoken about balancing mission driven goals with realistic resource constraints. How do you approach prioritization when budgets or staff capacity is limited?

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Yeah, I think that's an excellent question. And, I think it's it's just the reality that everywhere organization right, has, some limitations to their resources and budgets. Right. Even personally. Right. We all have kind of our write home budget, whatever that is.

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And, we have to make decisions. Yeah. Where we can make expenditures, where we can invest our time. Single year. So, so as we think about kind of our, our HR and culture priorities. Again it starts with, what are we seeing in the data. What are we hearing from our staff. What are we hearing from our leaders.

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And what are the external dynamics that we need to be aware of? The external market dynamics that we need to be aware of that could be impacting our staff. Right. So we start there. Okay. And then we think about kind of our, organizational priorities. Yeah. Right. Okay. What are the, what are the most significant priorities for the organization, and how is that going to impact your staff populations, along with reimagined was a great example of that as we were opening Longwood Reimagined.

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There were, yeah. Huge, huge, responsibilities. Placed on our staff to get to that opening event. So we had to be very mindful of that and then think about our future and culture priorities in the context. Yeah. Of the work and what they were being asked to do. Okay. And so we look at all of those pieces and then from there determine what are the most critical priorities, and what are the things that we can do given our budget and capacity and what are the things that we can't do this year?

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Right. And that's okay. That doesn't mean that they're not important. It just means that we're going to stage them for a future year. Right. Because the items that are going to have the most significant impact

and add the most value this year are these items. So it's something that you're constantly looking at. Yeah. Right. And you're constantly adapting.

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Yeah. And you may find that, you know, something pops up and you have to be able to address that, and something else falls off to be able to address that, you know, okay. More important priority, right?

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Right. I really, I appreciate and I think that the not being stagnant, but always reevaluating and moving forward and rethinking and recreating is such an important piece.

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There's not a final and it's always moving forward. Right?

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And that's what I, and I really appreciate about, our culture here. We talk about, having a culture of planning. Right. So there is always this view of not just the short term, but there's the short term, the mid term, the long term. And our strategic plan is a fantastic example of that.

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Right. So you have that roadmap that you can always go back. Right. But you can you can flex within that roadmap.

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As we wrap up our conversation, Shelly, are there any key learnings or insights you would like to share with other garden leaders about employee engagement strategies?

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Yeah, I think, Beyond what we've talked about already. I think the thing that is really important to remember is, regardless of all of the programs and processes and tools you put in place, research continually shows that, the biggest driver of engagement, is the relationship that every staff member has with their direct manager.

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Which to me is always on the one hand it's

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It's kind of a humbling. You know. Yeah. Recognition. But I also think it's such an impactful, point. Right. Because, while the environment, can be fantastic. Right. Or in some scenarios you have some organizations that maybe don't have the same resources, you know, or don't have the level of programing as others.

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That does not mean you can't have a highly engaged workforce. Right. Because at the end of the day it's all about how you feel when you're doing the work that you're doing every single day. And that person that you report to has the most control over what that feels like every single day. So for me, it's when you think about that, it puts everything else back in context and says, okay, so what makes an individual feel good when they come to work?

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And it's really the really simple things. It's are they feeling like they have the opportunity to share their opinion. So are you asking them for input. Are you asking them for feedback. Do they feel valued. So are you thinking them right in a genuine way. Right. You know are you paying attention to the little details and calling out when they've done a fantastic job?

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Are you doing things that bring your entire team together? And giving them, you know, that space just to get to know one another. And are you checking in? And do you really understand what's important to each individual and your team, so that they feel like you really know them and they really know you?

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So that that to me, at the end of the day, when we really think about engagement. Right. Focusing on those couple of things. Yeah. Listening and recognizing people and being genuinely curious about them, you know, and creating that human connection. Yes. Probably does more right than absolutely everything else. Right. So that's, that's that's where I would.

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That's. Yeah. Well,

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I think thank you. And I'm sure that probably, you know, folks who are out there doing that. And I think hearing hearing that and being reinforced is just really probably wonderful to hear. Thank you so much for sitting with me today. It's a pleasure. It's really it's lovely. Yeah, I know, it's really great. And for sharing, for sharing your answers and for sharing all of this with our listeners.

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So, so much. Have a wonderful day. You, too. It has been fun. All righty. Thank you.

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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.

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

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00;29;30;17 – 00;29;32;01

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Anastasia Sallen,

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Clare Shearman, and myself. Yvette Weaver.

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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.

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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.