**Podcast interview \_ Hanken School of Economics-20240228\_180322**

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 **Julija Vuletic** 0:09
So hey everyone and welcome to our podcast.
I'm Julija and today with me I have Eva, Pia and Kajsa.
And today we have a special guest joining us, Billimarie Robinson.
She's here to tell us more about her dessert garden project, For every Star, A Tree.
So thank you, Billimarie, for taking your time to come and join our podcast.

I wanted to ask you a little bit about yourself and your path to buying a degraded land in the desert and to restore it. How did it start? What where your reasons?
Like a little timeline? Yeah. So that's for the beginning.

 **Billimarie** 0:52
Great question and thanks for having me.
Essentially, I wanted to shift during the pandemic. Like most people, I completely didn't wanna 80. I was working in tech at the time the pandemic happened.
Lockdowns happened. I always knew that nature was a value and important to me, but it wasn't until not having access to going to different cities and other places with lots of buildings and structures when we lost that access, I realized I didn't really miss it, which was funny. So, but what I did miss was the ability to pick fruit from a tree or to just look out at a lake or to just climb up a mountain.
Right.
I missed those little, tiny simple moments, and by accessing my ability to say, OK, well, let me spin this into a creative project. What can I do that will help me mentally get to a place where I'm able to do that and also physically and emotionally get to a place to do that? I realized that at the time, this is actually no longer true, but at the time I really connected with the idea of healing degraded land because I was in a state where I was feeling mentally, mentally off or spiritually off, and I wanted to connect with nature in that way as a form of healing. And it actually did work.
And so I'm.
I'm no longer at a place where I'm thinking of that the Land is degraded. Now I think of it as like potential and a lot of fertileness that's just sleeping or waiting to be awakened. But at the time it was very much like, OK, submit all of lockdowns. This is unprecedented in my lifetime. What can I do to keep myself anchored and the answer was always going to be OK, let's reconnect with nature, even on a simple level.

 **Julija Vuletic** 2:47
OK, great. Thank you. So there was like a shift between the reasoning.

 **Billimarie** 2:53
Yes, yes, yes, yes. Yeah.
Which I guess makes sense.

 **Julija Vuletic** 2:56
Yeah. So a more positive note. So how many of you are working actively in this organization?

 **Billimarie** 3:04
Mm-hmm. So essentially it is myself, as the executive director and founder, we have a couple different volunteers who are steadfast.
So let's see. We've got about 3 to 5 volunteers who we rely on, including my own family members, like my mother. My mother plays a big role in helping get the land established and planting because she comes from a farming background. We have other individuals who also have farming background that is more so than me.
It was really important that I surround myself with people who know more about gardening and farming than I did because I wanted the project to succeed. And then outside of all our volunteer base, we have a lot of different online community members who are part of our little, our little community, which we're forming into an app.
We want to be able to showcase this forest and its growth to everyone in the world because just like we drink the same water, we breathe the same air. This forest is not just for our little desert community, it's for the entire earth, and it plays a very tiny drop in a big ocean. I'm aware of that, but it's still contributing in a positive way, so I want someone, for instance, in Switzerland or in Japan or in Australia, to be able to say, hey, there is this organization that is trying to make the world a greener and more breathable place. Let me see what they're doing. Let me see how I can help.
So there's a whole bunch of different online community members. I'd say it's more than 100, but we have maybe about 50 active people, so 50% are super active and engaged. And then outside of that, we also have our advisory partners and our sponsors who I count as part of our organization just because they help with creating the micro forest, creating the pollinator gardens. And then finally, we have the awesome people who rent out our tiny house school bus, which 100% of the bookings go towards planting and watering on the land.
I definitely count them as part of our community because without them, you know, the land would not be funded in the same way. So, it's kind of you can kind of see now all the different ecosystem pieces for little community that's trying to bring this forest into the world.

 **Julija Vuletic** 5:32
Yeah, everybody is supporting in their own way.

 **Billimarie** 5:34
Yeah. Nice. Nicely said.

 **Julija Vuletic** 5:37
OK.
And this is going to be the last question from me. I saw on your LinkedIn page about your education.

 **Billimarie** 5:44
Yes.

 **Julija Vuletic** 5:47
And it's like art writing and poetry.

 **Billimarie** 5:47
Nice.

 **Julija Vuletic** 5:50
So how did it come to this area of interest? Like, how did it go from there to this?

 **Billimarie** 5:54
Umm.
That is such a good question and I can walk you through it. That's a really good question.
In university as an undergrad, I studied both film and poetry. A lot of people didn't understand why I was double majoring in that in the States. It's just you can do this thing where you double major in two different departments. For me personally, I've always been interested as an artist in the cohesion of two vastly different worlds.
So for me, I was very interested, even though I couldn't articulate this as an 18-year-old. Right.
I was extremely interested in the idea of OK how do visuals communicate poetry and then how does poetry communicate visuals? And then in what ways could we bring those two things together. So, graduating from there, I realized that I really wanted to take an opportunity to take poetry. Ah, into a public arena and the best way for me to do that was to travel around the world and type free poems for strangers on my typewriter. That means that in some ways I left film behind, but in other ways I kept it with me because now, fast forward, after traveling and going to lots of different cities, meeting lots of different amazing people visiting awesome forests.
Right, I had the chance to start making videos for our online audience and I think a big key reason why For Every Star Shree is, is gaining a lot of popularity is because of my background in video editing, right. And then also my background and poetry.
So in some ways I'm challenging myself to do what I learned in university, which is how do you concisely tell a story, and how do you tell it in a visually and interesting manner? So, that's how we got to this point, which is me being at the land is an extension of that and the expression of the story is through visuals and through short form telly storytelling, specifically video. But the land itself is kind of like I would say, the project. That's the canvas. That's the medium currently, but the expression is through writing or through film, or through poetry or through video.

 **Julija Vuletic** 8:16
OK. Thank you.

 **Billimarie** 8:17
Of course.Thank you. It's Chris. Great questions.

 **Pia Mery** 8:20
That was amazing.
Going a bit back to your organization, could you please tell our listeners where the name comes from?

 **Billimarie** 8:26
Mm-hmm.

 **Pia Mery** 8:31
It's a beautiful name.

 **Billimarie** 8:31
Ah, that is good.

 **Pia Mery** 8:32
It's so great: For Every Star, A Tree.

 **Billimarie** 8:37
Umm, that is such a good one. And this actually ties in perfectly with the last question.
For Every Star, a Tree is actually in line that I heard while in the desert. And when I say heard, obviously nobody said it, but I was. I was at the desert at night.
I remember this so vividly because I was also filming and I wasn't sure what to film.
So I ended up looking down at our dog, who we rescued in the desert actually, and I remember looking up at the night sky seeing this gorgeous full moon. And then taking a video of it looking down and seeing just how the moonlight was reflecting on the trees. And I realized, ohh, right now I can't see the as many stars because the moon is so bright and vivid, but normally it's blanketed in this entire abundance of stars. And that actually is reflecting the abundance of trees that I'm hoping for that I'm wishing and that I'm dreaming and that I'm not alone in dreaming anymore.
And it suddenly just hit me For Every Star A tree that is such a beautiful goal as a concrete idea. For those of us who don't like to play with metaphors, but for those of us who do, that's such a beautiful image. That's such a beautiful symbolism, the idea that you could look up at a desert night sky, which if you're unaware, there's you can see the entire Milky Way, all the constellations. There's no light pollution. It's just the most gorgeous night sky, so I highly recommend it. And there's just this, this, this overwhelming abundance of, like anything is possible because I'm looking up at this glorious guy, and I wanted to capture that feeling because I think it's so easy to lose that, especially for those of us who live in places where there's not access to this vivid night sky. Right. I live in Los Angeles part time with my daughter. So it's easy for us to lose access to the sky because there's not as many stars, and even my daughter, who's four years old just last week was saying, well, why aren't there stars in the city?
Why do we have to go to the desert to see stars? She didn't understand the concept of light pollution yet, so I had to explain that. And I think it's so important for us anchor to the fact that I know that trees feel very much like it's just an earth planetary thing. But I really do on a spiritual and artistic level believe that there is a tie in with the greater cosmic reality. However you wanna call it and whatever you want to think about or believe there is something to be said about Stardust and the beauty of life and connecting with nature and growing the trees and the microbes and the soil and the fractals in the universe, there's something that's threaded and connecting us all and we're all producing, you know, this beautiful expression of life and how best can I capture that. So For Every A Star Tree is a tribute to all of that.

 **Pia Mery** 11:39
What a lovely story behind the name, that's so beautiful.

 **Billimarie** 11:42
I'm glad you asked. That's a really good question.

 **Pia Mery** 11:44
It's so beautiful. Amazing, have to say.

You mentioned about the goals of the project.

 **Pia Mery** 11:53
Do you want to plant a tree for every Star literally? So, could you please tell more about the goals and the core values with this project?

 **Billimarie** 12:04
Of course. Nice nice.
I love that question because it's a good way to bring it back down to reality.
So For Every Star a Tree, uh, I guess I'll start over. As an organization, our core mission is to cultivate biodiversity for people, place and planet. Ohh my gosh.
Yeah. No, it's hard for me to transition from the abstract and ideal to the literal, so I'm gonna try one more time.
Hmm.
For Every Star a Tree is our idealistic mantra that is sort of like shooting for the moon, right? You wanna shoot for the moon? So you land somewhere among the stars.
Our actual goal is to cultivate 10 acres of land into self-sustaining a green oasis.
And the reason why it needs to be self-sustaining is because of something that one of my mentors should then do, Sharma told me. When we were planting one of the first micro forests, he said that in order for a forest to be a forest, it needs to be self-sustaining. Otherwise, it's just humans watering a really big garden because we're where the input, so we need to be able to make sure that independent of humans, this ecosystem is able to continue on. So, our goal is to create is this in this tiny oasis starting of course with one Tree, it's now expanded to around 200 to 300 square feet, or over 100 different types of trees and plants. But our goal essentially is to reach that 10 acre delineation and it's 10 acres because that's how much the land is. And there's also something very interesting about saying, OK, can we cultivate 10 acres and 10 years? Yes or no. It's very simple, practical question and then the only problem becomes mathematics. How do we find the resources and the people and the community to fund a project like this? And then how do we get people involved to help plant it and help maintain it for a year before it becomes this self-actualized forest, independent of human activity?

 **Pia Mery** 14:27
Yeah, sounds like a very, very challenging goal

 **Billimarie** 14:32
Yeah. That's true. I figure it's one of those things where even if we fail, we didn't really fail. That's why I I've made the go.

 **Pia Mery** 14:39
It's OK.

 **Billimarie** 14:40
Yeah, that's why I made the goal that big, because it's even if we only planted an acre like ohh only an acre, you know.

 **Pia Mery** 14:46
Yeah.

 **Billimarie** 14:48
Yeah, exactly. So, the hope is that with at least one tree survives.

 **Pia Mery** 14:50
Yeah. Of course.

 **Billimarie** 14:55
Yeah, but should has, which is good.

 **Pia Mery** 14:58
So we read that you created a two-year permaculture plan for this land.

 **Billimarie** 15:03
Yes, yes.

 **Pia Mery** 15:05
So it's this permaculture method, the method that you use. Or do you have any other methods?

 **Billimarie** 15:10
Umm. Oh, that's so good. Uh, I just wanna pause for a second.
Someone is using a lawn blower. Can you hear it?

 **Pia Mery** 15:21
No.

 **Billimarie** 15:21
OK, great. OK.
I'll continue so with permaculture, that's actually a very funny story and this is relevant because AI is blowing up like mad. Now I wanted to think of a fun way to engage with chat GPT. I thought it would be interesting to see what the AI was programmed to say whenever someone asked it very specific questions about permaculture. So, what I did was I created a chat and would visit that chat over and over and over again throughout the series of couple days. And I would say, you know, hey, we're creating this organization where our mission is to plant regenerative agriculture in the desert, specifically the Antelope Valley region and the Western Mojave. So being as specific as possible, and I would ask it the same kind of questions over and over and over again to get a sense of, OK, well from my experience as a as an individual who has gone through the process of figuring this out, I already know the answer is a little bit you know, just as an amateur, I already know the answer. So let me see what chat GPT knows and then compile it into an ebook. So, I did that, I would ask it very specifically.
OK.
How are you gonna handle water? It would tell me it's ideas for handling water, which actually it didn't come up with our idea, which our idea was to pay our neighbour who has access to four wells, the ability to haul water to us. And then we just store it in different tiny tanks around the gardens. It came up with different ideas which I require a lots of funding like digging your own well. Well, I then asked it about. OK, well, now that we have the water source established because that's the number one important thing for established, establishing a for us, how are we going to choose the plants? And I would ask it over and over again, different questions, trying to kind of like guide it in a way which I'll be honest, I was biased. I wanted it to succeed in some capacity because then other people could use it as a resource, so I had asked it very guided questions like hey, in this particular season, I read that this plant does good. What other plants can we plant that does well like this? What are other different varieties we can do? OK, now that we did the spring season, can you help us with summer? Can you help us with winter? Can you help us with fall?
OK, great. Now tell me about the rainfall in the area. What is the average precipitation over a 50-year span, which is something that you can't just easily look up, unfortunately, because our desert town is so remote and isolated, so was able to calculate all of this mathematical stuff, and I will say that when it came down to, I started asking it questions about financing.
So our entire model is based on the Miyawaki model of afforestation and that model was taught to us by an institute called the Afforestt Institute and it was helped implement.
We helped.
We got a lot of help implementing it from EcoSikh, another international organization. Miyawaki, was a Japanese botanist that a lot of permaculture experts know, but not a lot of everyday people know, and Miyawaki essentially coined this method, which said we can create forest if we follow a few basic rules. So I asked chat GPT about all of those rules and trying to figure out, OK, well, if we have 10 acres in order to get to 1 acre in order to get to 100 square feet in order to get to, you know whatever amount, how are we going to space it out. So that way we can grow this in the allotted time period. And I think that's where it started to fail, because as humans, you know, you were able to quickly understand, OK, there is a method one then there is a time structure two then there are the diversity of plants three and then finally four what's the best way of organizing that? And maybe we're not able to come up with the answer, but at least we can understand the problem. So, chat GPT wasn't able to understand that much. It would fail when it came to like figuring that out, especially when assigning it numbers with financing and all that other stuff.
I don't wanna get too lost in the technical stuff because that's my day job interest, but it was fascinating to see that. OK, I was able to quickly, I mean, within the span of a week throw together this ebook, this permaculture ebook that yes Chat GPT wrote, quote unquote, but I was the one who was guiding it with, like, very guided questions in order to produce content that could help someone else in the future.
I did get a lot of backlash for that. A lot of people, a lot of farmers, a lot of agriculture people, did not like it. They were so upset and so angry, so I didn't push it because I didn't want to upset anyone, and that wasn't my intention. But I do still have it.
Just, you know, sitting on my server and occasionally I'll get people who are interested in it, but for the most part, people hate it. People hate the idea of AI helping in any capacity with and I get it, but I was shocked to see the amount of just dissatisfaction people had with even the concept of a permaculture book that was assisted with AI.

 **Pia Mery** 21:18
Wow. Interesting. Thank you.

 **Billimarie** 21:23
Yeah, that was a bit of a wormhole because it has to do with AI.
So, I apologize, but yeah, that was that was definitely an interesting journey.
I did forget to say that I didn't actually use too much from it. I used it as a guide but I didn't use it as an instruction manual so I used it to match what I knew for my research and what other people were advising. But I did not use it as a guide or a an instruction manual.

 **Kajsa Olson** 21:56
Umm, what has been your main challenge and greatest achievements during this project and what are some lessons that you have learned?

 **Billimarie** 22:07
oh, that's a good one. Let's see.
One of the biggest challenges was understanding. Let's see, was understanding this is a little bit of a weird one. One of the greatest challenges was understanding how time and space feel very different in the desert. So it feels very much like your by their you're just out there by yourself. You're alone. There's nobody else, so it's very easy to fall under the assumption that, hey, no one is really paying attention.
You know, I'm just gonna plant this, and I'm gonna leave my camping supplies here.
Because who's gonna find it? We're in the middle of the desert, right?
And then the next day you're camping supplies are gone because someone has found them. That was such a shocker to me, but I learned from my neighbors that, you know, you have to be cognizant because the type of people who are out in the desert is gonna be one of two types. Either it's gonna be people like me and I'm assuming like you and like are you listeners were out there to experience nature.
We're out there to experience a different type of nature or it's gonna be someone who is specifically looking to not be found, but to also scavenge the area. So there, there. That was a hard lesson to learn because I had to learn that over and over again until finally I realized, you know what, I need to figure out how to be more protective of the land so that way this project can grow and thankfully I learned that in the early days. I'm being vague on purpose because I don't wanna say the specific things that happened, but maybe I should. Someone or a group of people destroyed our first garden. That was heartbreaking. I was there one day. I planted, watered left, came back, found that they had not just stepped on all of our potted plants. That one of our volunteers, Amanda in the Lancaster community, she had gifted us.
They also uprooted the tree that I had planted with my brother and my mother and watered with my friend. I mean, they literally pulled up the tree and then just threw it on the ground. They destroyed the little fencing that I created from pallets, wooden pallets, and then they stole my camping supplies. They stole the fire pit that we had.
I would have my friends over for bonfires and we would water the plants and you know all this stuff and it was so heartbreaking. I remember just breaking down in tears, crying, and I had called the police. Nobody showed up.I mean, they were not taking me serious at all, so I was just there for six hours, you know, digging and crying and throwing seeds into the ground. And then filling it back up and thinking well, why am I doing any of this? And it actually took me months to go back because of course, a violation of that magnitude was like devastating, especially in the first year. And it wasn't until one of my close friends, Eddie, came with me, actually to the land and we started the first attempt at installing a fence. So he hammered into the ground, you know, some metal tea posts. And we started the outline of it and that gave me enough strength to say, OK, I can go back, and I can do this over and over and over again. But this time I'm going to make it stronger.

The second biggest challenge was someone had stolen our 5000 gallon water tank in the middle of the night and that one, I didn't, it wasn't as heartbreaking. It was more like a financial loss, right? It was like, OK, well that's you know, that much money invested down the drain, but it in some ways the first, the first violation was more heartbreaking because the second one I could understand, you know, someone trying to feed their family and they saw this opportunity. It sucks that we are the victim and I need to be smarter about protecting this, but at the very least I could understand that the first one I still to this day, I'm like, well, why did this person find this random garden in the middle of the desert and destroy? I still don't understand whothat was or who that had to be. But yeah.

And then I'd say the third challenge was essentially saying and if you notice, these are all homesteading challenges. These are not, these are not technical challenges.
These are not farming challenges. These are just like OK, how do I yeah.

 **Julija Vuletic** 26:38
Yeah.

 **Billimarie** 26:40
How do I act? Yeah.

 **Julija Vuletic** 26:40
I wanted to say like it's so sad that the challenges are not technical cause I've expecting you to be dead.

 **Billimarie** 26:44
I know.

 **Julija Vuletic** 26:45
It's it comes from, like human like ok or like it's so sad.

 **Billimarie** 26:48
I know, I know. That still kills me.

 **Julija Vuletic** 26:51
I'm sorry that happened to you.

 **Billimarie** 26:52

I appreciate that.

 **Pia Mery** 26:54
Horrible.

 **Billimarie** 26:54
I'm glad you can understand.
Yeah, that was so sad that so that happened in November. No October of the first year that was October. In 2021, it took me until January or February 2022 to, you know, Umm, go back. So, I appreciate your empathy, because that was that was really hard.
But again, I liked the difference in challenges because one was like, OK, I can understand that on a human level, I wouldn't do it personally, but I can understand it.
And then the other ones, like, I don't understand this at all. I would never do this.
I don't get it, like, I still am trying to grapple my head around why someone would specifically uproot, you know, a very new garden and then purposely step on them.
I mean, when I say they stepped on all the plans, I mean they crushed the pots completely like these were not even plants that had been potted yet because they were gifted to us as like, hey, you know, we're hoping you're going to succeed.
The good news is from those challenges, birth right resilience. And I think that's the important lesson I want to share with your listeners, right. I was very lucky that I had a close friend who was able to help me get to a place of even conceiving it again.
Right. I was very lucky that I had the network for any of my family and my friends, even random people on the Internet. I had some core system that was that was asking about the project in a curious way. That was that was rooting for me.
That was saying, OK, I want to visit one day. You know, how is it due going?
How is it? How are the plans? What's the weather like? I had that so I was constantly connected to it and I think that's the one thing that our project is trying to do For Every Star A Tree is a mantra for climate resiliency and it's a message to send to future generations as well as our current generation that, hey, no matter how life gets, because life is gonna do it, life does. Don't you know there's a way to anchor yourself to the things that are important and to keep going in spite of it?

 **Pia Mery** 29:03
So there is always hope.

 **Billimarie** 29:05
Yeah, it's nice to say there's always hope you got it.

 **Pia Mery** 29:09
Even in the bad.

 **Billimarie** 29:10
Yeah. Yeah, especially in the bad, especially in the darkest night.

 **Pia Mery** 29:13
Umm.

 **Billimarie** 29:14
So that's when you need it the most, right?

 **Kajsa Olson** 29:16
Umm, how do you connect to nature and do you have any recommendations for our listeners how to feel more connected to nature?

 **Billimarie** 29:25
Ooh, I just did this yesterday and it's such a simple. It's such a simple thing, so I'll recommend two ways. One is a way my daughter actually taught me. And then one is what I just did yesterday. I told the story about just looking up at the vastness of the stars and feeling the on overwhelming. Just beauty right from looking up at that.
But again, not everyone has access to that to that view. So with that being said, yesterday I was in the micro forest. I was doing something called de-weeding.
That's when you take all the little, tiny new plants that are popping up that you did not plant and you take them, and then you just lay them down as mulch, which is called chop and drop, or you throw them out of the garden. It depends on the person. I just mulch it back in because I don't mind them at all, but there was something about the act of doing something repetitive in soil or in dirt. Whether that was scooping up, you know, little bits of dirt with my hand or just digging it a little bit with my fingers, right, I wasn't using any tools. I was just using my hands. It kind of like, you know, on my knees, down in the dirt. So there's something to be said about getting close to the ground and acting as though you were a child, right. Which are just repetitive motions with your hands and the soil, and I know it sounds so silly, but when I tell you I had the sense of calm where all of my thoughts kind of stopped and one thought was to prevail it. And the thought was, you know, I don't really need much, and I don't, I don't know if anybody needs more than this.
But it was like such a moment that, of course, quickly disappeared. And then all my anxieties come rushing back. And then you know it, it all comes back eventually.
But just the fact that for a moment I was able to reach this meditative state of peace just by getting down and on the ground, like doing this little tiny finger motions with the soil and just digging a little bit and like, looking through the mulch. Just, just by doing that, I was able to reach something which was very beautiful, and I think that's an easy way for people to access. The second way I want to. The second way I want to express, is actually thanks to my daughter, she on New Year's Day one year she said that she wanted a soil bath, and I said what is a soil bath like? I have never heard of this and we've never talked about this, but yeah, OK, let's go ahead. We'll go to the garden. So we went to my mother's garden since we were staying at my mother's house for the New Year and we sat down in the garden on the dirt and I just had her put her hand on the ground, and I sprinkled soil, you know, over her hand was like we were having a soil bath. And I found out much later that she was actually trying to say stroller, you know, she wants to go for a stroller walk. But the fact that I interpreted it as a soil bath, that you know, she was a maybe two or three years old at the time, so it was just so beautiful to me. And I think there is something very beautiful about, you know, taking these soil baths, even if it's just putting your hand down on the ground or the dirt or wherever you can find it and just stopping for a moment to sprinkle a little bit on you and say, hmm, I'm taking my soil bath for the for the year, for the day. This is my little, tiny, this is my little tiny dance with the microbes.

 **Kajsa Olson** 33:00
Yeah. Here in Finland, we do this forest bathing when we it was the trend a few years ago where we go lay in the forest.

 **Billimarie** 33:04
Ohh I've heard of that. So can you tell me a little bit about? I've heard of it, but I've never done it. I'm super curious.

 **Kajsa Olson** 33:13
Like I tried just to go lay in the bush and some forests and just closing your eyes

 **Billimarie** 33:17
Oh, I love it.

 **Kajsa Olson** 33:19
Yeah.

 **Billimarie** 33:19
Umm, that's so good.

 **Kajsa Olson** 33:20
So that was a trend.

 **Billimarie** 33:21
Umm, I believe it. I have a feeling that's like an ancient thing that, you know, we all can do.

 **Kajsa Olson** 33:29
It's just very, very relaxing, yeah.

 **Billimarie** 33:33
Yeah, that feels right.

 **Kajsa Olson** 33:35
It's great that you also offer visitors to come and visit. Uh, what inspired your idea with the skoolie vacation rental and what can visitors expect from this experience?

 **Billimarie** 33:44
Ohh. That's nice. OK, So what can they expect? And then also what inspired it?
That's a good question.
I mentioned earlier how I did a lot of traveling in my 20s and I always knew that I wanted to repay the kindness that I received on some level. A lot of times when I was typing free poems, I would meet someone who would either give me a home meal or they would give me a, you know, a safe place to stay. Or they would introduce me to people who would later become some of my closest friends. So I always knew that,
OK, I want to be part of that community. I wanna be able to when I'm when I do have the resources to do this I wanna be able to host travelers. I wanna be able to host visitors and say hey, even in the midst of life happening like here is a small little tiny sanctuary where you can rest for the night and not have to worry and you can connect with nature. You can be in this cozy environment.
So I went into it with the intention of creating, again, talking about aiming for the moon. Right. I wanted to create this very friendly, hospitable sanctuary where someone could feel like they could rest and put their bags down and go to sleep after a long, long day. That was that was the initial inspiration. The skoolie itself actually came at that was completely by accident. I had seen a posting in a tiny house community forum. I reached out to them.
I went to go see the the skoolie with my daughter. It was about, I'd say 30 to 50% done. And at the time, I didn't know that because I had assumed it was, you know, 80 to 100% done. But when I got it, I actually drove it to the land on my daughter's birthday. I think she was turning. Yeah. Wow, she was turning 2 years old, so that was that was kind of a very special, a special transaction.
So I drove it to the land and I spent the entire spring and summer renovating it and figuring out how I'm gonna get it ready for guests. And I think the expectation that guests now have is a little bit different from in the beginning. In the beginning, I was still trying to figure out what was needed and guests we're able to tell me, you know, like ohh, you know, you're such a nice host, but we're gonna tell you exactly what we needed, and maybe you can update it for the next person. So, I got really lucky that everybody who came through in the early days was super kind to say, hey, Billimarie privately, here's what the skoolie needs. And here's what we would have liked.
So now fast forward two years, it operates just kind of automatically and I think the expectation that guests have because they're able to just go up to the land themselves, they have a special guidebook that they're able to view on their phones or in person at the skoolie. We have like a hardcover book that they can read.
They're able to look at everybody's memories. Who wrote things on the wall?
Who left pictures behind? Who left books? Who left notes? who left food right?
We're really trying to cultivate this community of Skoolie guests or starry night Skoolie guests who understand what they're doing and understand the role they're playing, which is the reason that they're there might be for healing or for escaping the city, or for just getting closer to nature with their family, their loved ones, whoever it is. But by doing that, by taking that self-care, by going on this adventure, they are also funding this forest. Right. And I think that that inspires a very different type of guest than the average Airbnb or the average hip camp or whatever it's going to be that inspires a person who is so eco-conscious and like, so connected to the fact that, hey, no matter what I'm going through in life, I know that this action is going to net in some ways a positive reaction right outside of, outside of my journey.
So, those are those are the type of people who come and they're the types of people who are looking for that, I think. And I think now you know it's pretty hands off. They come to the land. They'll text me if they need anything. I tried to meet people when I get there, but for the most part people are completely OK to just hang out by themselves. You know the skoolie has everything they need. They get to walk around the land to see all the different plants and they get to do some watering if they want even. So, there's something beautiful about the fact that I'm able to host travelers now that I'm in my 30s, whereas in my 20s I was only able to be a traveler, right?
So I feel very grateful to have the opportunity to create this unique experience for other travelers who are, who are looking for a place like this.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 38:54
Yeah, it sounds very, very nice to visit you. Uh.
And when we talk about the Skoolie Vacation Rental, this is one way of funding your work.

 **Billimarie** 39:05
Umm.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 39:06
But in which other ways do you fund your work?

 **Billimarie** 39:09
Nice, good question. So we get, as of last year. Let me think about the numbers.
Last year we funded around, I think it was 40% of all of the micro forests and pollinator gardens through the starry night Skoolie bookings.
The additional 60% we got through donations, the majority of that we got from an angel donation from KG Ventures. I'm hoping to attract more Angel investors who are able to fund and sponsor an entire micro forest, right. And in exchange they get to name their little tiny micro forest. We plant it, we maintain it, we send them pictures and updates and that gets to be their part of the story. I think it's really important for people, regardless of financial status, to be able to be part of the forest in some way, so I try to spotlight as much as possible our online community that is very active in supporting our story online. They're a huge part of it, right? They're kind of like the pollinators who are spreading our story. Right.
You wouldn't have heard of us if, you know, your professor didn't reach out and was looking for stories like this. So, there's something to be said about the active storytelling and pollination. Uh, I think going forward, we're hoping for other additional channels of funding the forest. One program we're trialing, we're trying it out right now, is a compost pickup service where we give residents in the community a bucket, a 5 gallon bucket, and they put their food scraps in. We pick it up every week for $25.00 a month. That means that they get the privilege of donating to the micro forest and the pollinator garden. We get the privilege of handling their food scraps so that way instead of it going to the landfill or becoming what is often called bio slurry, which is not compose, you know, it gets to actually go back to the soil instead of going to a factory or, going straight to the landfill, which is what happens most of the time. Most of the time and most most cities and states, they are not handling their compost at all. It does not even touch the soil, which is very sad, but we're able to say, hey, you know, it's going to this eco farm. You are diverting your waste from the landfill. That means you are being an active participant in making a better eco conscious decision for the future. It's a very positive feedback loop, so we're trialing that and we're trying to see if anybody is interested and we've gotten, we've got in a couple people. So, we're probably going to keep it going.

I think an additional source of revenue that we're considering, is throwing a crowdfunding campaign. A lot of people have told me over and over again you need to create some sort of crowdfunding campaign so people can learn about what we're doing and actively participate on some level. I'm still a little bit iffy about it, so I don't know when that will happen, but at some point I think it would be really, really fun to make it sort of a game where different types of teams or people will specifically make their own micro forest. That's the idea. If we can tap into the greater population and say, hey, if there are any and if there are any, I don't know, let me think of something silly. If there is a baseball fan who wants to create a baseball micro forest, and it's gonna be named after the best baseball player in history, then let's get all the baseball enthusiasts in the world to like, donate to this micro forest and we will plant it in, like, update them and keep them posted and that will go in challenge against over here on the other side of the property there is the, I don't know, the movie fan. Hey, here's all of the film and movie people who love art films, and we're gonna make our own art micro forest. Alright and the hope is that by creating these little clusters of, silly, but like very playfully silly. Just silly playful micro forests that are based off of themes.
You know that will inspire huge network of people who want to contribute in some capacity and I'm actually, I'm actually gonna try all this because OK, very, very long story short, last night there was a fire maybe around 10 acres away from us.
I saw it with my daughter and I called my neighbours, who are maybe about 20 acres away from us. We both have families, so we're both watching this fire and we saw the guy drive away in a white pickup truck. My neighbor was a little bit sceptical. He didn't wanna call the cops, and I understand that. So I ended up calling the fire department and they came really quickly. 20 minutes. I was super grateful for them, right. I was able to point them in the direction of the fire. They quickly put it out. So at some point in time I'm going to approach this fire station and say, hey, I really want to plant this micro forest like in dedication to the firefighters of this community because that, like, I saw for myself how quick you guys were to respond like, how mediate you were, how professionally you were. I would love to and that's just me as a person, right? I would love to be able to say that, hey, there is this little, tiny micro forest that's dedicated to the firefighters of this community because we now have a story of being helped by the firefighters. So, I think we're trying to find revenue paths in ways like that, like how do we connect it on a heart level and then also a personal level without making it this weird, you know? Hey Ohh $25 for a tree like I don't wanna. I don't wanna play that game. I wanna be engaged with people in a level that's like, OK, we all know that we need forest for reasons that have to do with survival. So, let's figure out a interesting, fun and delightful way to cultivate forest mindfully with each other, that will help not just us, but generations and generations beyond us. That's the intention and that's survive.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 45:46
So wow, you have you have many interesting ideas.

 **Billimarie** 45:49
Yeah, you could say that.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 45:53
OK. And but what are your future plans for your organization?

 **Billimarie** 45:57
Umm.
This is a good question. It's actually not as grandiose as most people think. The entire concept is that by planting one tree, eventually a second tree will come it, eventually a third tree will come. So, we don't have any desire to scale or to, you know, quickly ramp up. Honestly, if this takes me until my 80s, that's fine too, because the land will always be there. I'll always be taking care of the land. I think we're always gonna have volunteers who are also of the same mindset, who want to participate in some way. And I think we're always gonna have people who want to visit. So, in a lot of in a in a very small way, this is just a seed and I recognize that. It's just a seed that needs to burst with, you know, these incredible grandiose ideas.
So that's where it's bursting. But in reality, it's actually a very slow growing project.
I don't, I don't foresee us expanding too quickly, but I also do see it happening.
I think very much so that you know it's not a figment of my imagination or 10 acres can be grown into a forest when so many people across the globe have have shown that it's possible so many people throughout time have planted for us without us even knowing, right? We just assume that they're natural forests without actually paying attention to the fact that people took the time to grow them. So, I think that for our place in the story, we don't have too many plans of expanding. It's quite simple. It's how do we attract people to our particular site and then how do we continue to plant trees and if we can do that in a very rapid way that would be great, but if not, we can even just do it very slowly with these tiny micro forests over and over and over and over again.

 **Julija Vuletic** 48:06
Just to continue on what you said. So how do you what are some of the methods you used to like stay visible in the community and like to, yeah, to communicate globally to other people maybe interested in this sort of thing.

 **Billimarie** 48:08
Mm-hmm. Umm. Let's see. That's a good one.
I think the way that I communicate with the local community as well as the online community, those are two different ways of communicating. So, for instance, with the local community, I show up in person. I talked to people, and I don't actually lead with what we're doing. I'm just Billimarie a person who lives on a skoolie, you know, and is taking care of the land, and most people don't know that we're a nonprofit organization, and we're doing this because I don't, I don't like to lead with that, especially it's a rural town, it's a desert town. Uh, so I try to just make myself helpful rather than, you know, pushing our story on to people and trying to get them to engage. But quite organically, people will naturally just be curious, right? They're like, OK, wait, what do you mean you rent out this skoolie? What is the skoolie like?
Ohh and you plant. What does that mean? So, I think that happens on a level that is more organic, right? It's not really about telling your story, it's more just about saying hi, I'm Billimarie. Uh, you know, how can I help? Or hey, I'm here to do this.
How's your day going? It's like a very simple exchange which I personally like a lot because it's just about getting to know people on a very basic level and then revealing your story over time. Whereas online, the messaging is completely the opposite, right? alright. I gotta lead with my story because nobody actually really cares about the personal. How's your day thing? They wanna see a story.
It's an entertainment model, I recognize that, but I also don't want to be the type of entertainment. Uh, that most people are? I just want to be the type of entertainment that is, hey, we are planting trees. Here we are a sanctuary that is a sanctuary for all people, all pollinators, animals, species. That's the vibe that I'm trying to hit and I'm not hitting it as well as I can, and I think that's because I'm so tied to the in-person experience. So, once I'm able to make the leap, if I'm ever able to make this leap, right, I think I'll be able to figure out the online storytelling piece. But until I'm able to leap very quickly from the in-person experience, which I don't wanna leave, to the online experience of, OK, well, let me just quickly tell the story. Let me just quickly nail a brand. Let me just quickly do this. I think those are two different types of engaging and I will be quite honest, I am way better at engaging in person even just this phone call, right? It's easier for me personally and I like it. I don't like online storytelling, but I'm trying to find the beauty in it, and I think I found it over the period of a couple years. I found things that I really like about online storytelling which you can't have in the in person experience, and that's what I'm anchoring too.
So, my hope is that as I get better at the online storytelling, I'm able to quickly shift between both modes of communicating, which I'll be honest, I do admire the people who can tell a story succinctly and creatively online through video because it is hard.
It is very hard. It is a challenge for me to do that, so I admire the people who can.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 51:59
Yeah, Billimarie, sounds that everything you do, it comes from your heart.

 **Billimarie** 52:03
Uh, fair.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 52:04
Everything with passion

 **Billimarie** 52:07
That's a good way to put it. Whether that's good or bad, whether that's foolhardy or not, it's at least earnest, and that's the intention. So I'm OK with playing the fool if it means that I'm true to my heart.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 52:23
Yeah. Well, we would like to thank you for joining us today on our podcast and we hope.

 **Julija Vuletic** 52:30
Yes, thank you very much.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 52:32
Yeah.

 **Billimarie** 52:32
Yeah, this is amazing.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 52:32
And we hope you listeners find our conversation with Billimarie from For Every Star, A Tree inspiring.

 **Eva Lillhonga** 52:38
in case you want to learn more about the organization, make sure to check out their website and social media.

 **Billimarie** 52:52
Thank you for having me. This was such a pleasure to speak with you all and I'm looking forward to your continued success.