

Swell AI Transcript: EIT Green Our Planet Podcast V2.mp3

Matt Eastland:

I am excited to share that Green Our Planet is offering a one-time opportunity for the first 50 schools interested in participating in their Garden Connect program to get it free by signing up at greenourplanet.org. This is awesome, since the program normally costs \$3,500. So this is actually a \$175,000 giveaway, which is incredible. If you're interested again, please go to greenourplanet.org. Then you can click on Apply for our program and then click on Garden Connect. Again, this is only available for the first 50 applications. Thank you massively to the Green Our Planet team for making this possible for our listeners. Thanks for watching! Earlier this season we spoke with our guest farmer Will about encouraging the next generations of food growers and today we're returning to this important topic with concrete steps on how best to get young people outside discovering and cultivating their own food. What does it take to get students growing and how do we widen the access of fresh and healthy food to everyone? I'm Matt Eastland. Welcome to the Food Fight podcast from EIT Food, exploring the greatest challenges facing the food system and the innovations and entrepreneurs looking to solve them. This week, I'm delighted to welcome Ciara Byrne, the founder and co-CEO of Green Our Planet, an organization dedicated to empower students to grow their own food and connect with nature. Welcome, Ciara.

Ciara Byrne:

Thanks so much. So excited to be here. Thanks, Matt.

Matt Eastland:

Lovely to have you on the show. I'm really interested in your backstory. So what's the story of Greenark Planet and what inspired you to set up the organization?

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, so that's a great question, Matt. So as I said, my name is Irish, so I am from Dublin, Ireland. And I emigrated to America in 93 by myself, \$1,000 in my pocket. And I headed over to the United States with a dream to become a documentary filmmaker. And I'm very happy to say that that dream did come true. And I ended up becoming a documentary filmmaker and actually worked for a British company called Lion Television. And I set up and ran their American office. So we had offices in New York and LA. And myself and my partner, Kim, he's actually originally from Las Vegas. The two of us worked at Lion Television and created all these shows, about 60 to 80 hours a year for like Discovery Channel and PBS and the BBC and we traveled all over the world and made these really fun, amazing films. And so that's kind of chapter one of Ciara's story in the United States. But you know TV really changed in around 2005-2006 when we really started getting into reality shows and you know, we had a staff of 60 people that I had to keep employed and so we had to make a lot of reality shows. Not that there's anything wrong with them, they are fun and I had a blast making them. But I think, you know, for both myself and Kim, we had become filmmakers because we

really wanted to tell important stories that we felt would impact people and the planet in some way. And Kim was lucky enough, he got to, he's a natural history filmmaker, and got to make films in the Amazon rainforest and Siberia and, you know, tell, you know, show people beautiful parts of the world. But myself, you know, I felt like I had kind of strayed away from that goal. And we were thinking about what could we do? Like, how could we really impact our community? And Kim, as I said, he grew up here in Las Vegas. You know, I'm not sure people know the glitzy, glamorous Las Vegas, which is three miles of the Strip. But behind the Strip is a very, very interesting city. And to be honest with you, quite a lot of poverty. So we have a lot of new immigrants who come to Las Vegas. You know, the people who clean your hotel rooms and the valleys and so on and so forth. are often coming from, you know, difficult challenges in other countries, they come here so we have a high population of new immigrants. And actually, the city is considered the future of America in that 30% of our cities white and 70% is black and brown. And so we have a very interesting mix here of people and a very interesting school system. You know, we're the fifth largest school district in the United States with over 350 schools and 375,000 kids. So that's kind of just setting, yeah, setting the stage for you. And so here we were thinking, okay, how can we, we're filmmakers, like what can we do for this community? It was 2011 and we were in Africa working on a film with a gentleman called Dr. Richard Leakey. I'm not sure if you've heard of him. These are quite a famous paleoanthropologist and conservationist, and he basically saved the elephants from going extinct in the 90s by really, yeah, by really kind of coming up with ways of really reducing the ivory trade. And so anyway, so he's a very interesting character and we're working with him on a film about the sixth extinction. So the mass extinction on the planet. And I always remember, because I feel like this was like the birth of Greener Planet. And it's so interesting. We were sitting in his backyard, overlooking the Rift Valley, which is essentially where humans began, right? And we were talking about conservation and we were talking about the future of the planet. And we were all in agreement. And our agreement was everybody had to get involved. We all had to have a role in this. And so we didn't have any solutions, mind you, but we were like, OK, so how are we going to do that? And then suddenly we're back in Las Vegas pondering and thinking about this. And we had an idea. And our idea was, why don't we set up a crowd funder, kind of like Kickstarter, but a green one? And we'll call it Green Our Planet. And we shared this idea with a friend of ours called Jeff Newbern. And Jeff was head of the website called Zappos, the big, huge retail company online. And we told Jeff this idea and Jeff said, okay, yeah, I can help build the website. And that was that. And then we were back working on our film stuff. But three months later, Jeff called us and he said, hey, Kira, hey, Kim, I finished the website. And we were like, what do you mean? He said, yeah, I finished the website. You know, the one you said, Greener Planet, it's a crowdfunding platform. And Kim and I were like, oh, wow, OK, I guess we've got to do something.

Matt Eastland:

You were forced into it by website designers.

Ciara Byrne:

We were forced into it. We always say it's the accidental school garden program. So then things got even more interesting. Because we were like, oh yeah, we're going to save lions in Africa. And Jeff was like, hang on a minute. We're in Las Vegas. Let's do something in Las Vegas. So if anything goes wrong, I can fix it, right? Fixing the website. And so we're like, OK. And a friend of ours had said, hey, I know a principal who wants to build a school garden, but she doesn't have the money. And we were like, oh, OK. Maybe we can help her. So anyway, we reached out to her. And we said, we'll come to your school. And we, as filmmakers, will make this short little film that you put on the website. So we went out and we got the kids and the kids were like, I want to garden because whatever. And so we made that little film and that was the first project on our website. And we had honestly, like we'd no business, you know, setting up a crowd funder. We didn't know anything about tech at all. But what did happen was very interesting. Within three weeks, all the parents and community members had funded the school garden. And so, you know, they had raised \$8,000, something like that. And so that was Grant, right? And then the next thing this principal told other principals and teachers, and suddenly within, you know, a year or so, there were a lot of school garden projects on this platform from Las Vegas. And we were, meanwhile, continuing with our own jobs, but we thought that was very interesting. And we remembered what we talked about with Richard Leakey, that to really impact the planet in a profound way, that we need to get everybody involved. And that's when the penny dropped to us. Schools is the way to get everybody involved, everybody involved in changing the food system, everybody involved in impacting the planet in a profound way. And so we started to kind of look at what was happening, and principals and teachers started reaching out to us, Matt, and they were like, hey, we need curriculum. And Kim and I were like, listen, we know nothing about curriculum. We're filmmakers, but we'll see what we can do to help you. So I applied for a grant with a local food bank called Three Square. to Honda and it was funded and it was enough money to hire about 30 teachers and these teachers actually wrote a kindergarten through grade 5 STEM nutrition curriculum for the garden, right? And then the teacher said to us, one teacher I remember in particular, Kat Caveney, she called me, she's like, hey listen, I've got loads of food, like it's just, we're pulling out hundreds pounds of food out of the garden, what are we going to do? And I was like, I don't know, have a farmer's market. And in November 2014, we had the very first farmer's market ever held at a school in our school district. And it was run by fifth graders and they sold out in 20 minutes. And the place is jammed with all the parents. And some of the kids had posters and they were out front, the loud kids, you know, getting their parents to go around the back and do the market. And the posters were in Spanish and English, right? It was predominantly Spanish speaking school. And then there were other kids out the back doing tours of the garden for the parents in English and Spanish. And then other kids were cashiers and all the things. And they loved it so much that this teacher Kat

said to me, this is the fifth grade curriculum. We're going to create farmpreneurs. They're going to be young entrepreneurs and they're going to do it through farming. And so now we have a fifth grade farmpreneur curriculum. We have over 200 farmers markets just in our school district. And every year, twice a year, we have giant farmers markets. We just had one in October where we have hundreds of kids coming together in the community to host a farmers market, all with food from their gardens and hydroponic systems. So yeah, that was the beginning of Greener Planet, the accidental school garden program.

Matt Eastland:

That is what an amazing story. So literally from starting a crowd funder for one school garden that broadened out through literally through word of mouth to all these other schools, then you've started school run farmers markets. And, you know, I'm fascinated to hear what's coming next, but that is really incredible. So is and is this is food, you know, always been something that you and your partner have been very passionate about? Or is it more that you really kind of found that need from the community? They're reaching out to you like we've got to go after this.

Ciara Byrne:

Oh, that's a great question. So I would say that Kim and I are extremely passionate about conservation and education and food is a huge part of that like I've always been super interested in healthy living and eating healthy and. I think you know what Matt is so fascinating to me on this journey is that how it's all interconnected, right? There's no healthy food without a healthy planet. There are no healthy people without a healthy planet. And, you know, when we talk about our mission, like if you look at our website, it's to build a movement to create joy and equity in communities by empowering people to grow food and to connect them to the magic and majesty of the universe. Because it's by connecting kids to the seed that they plant and seeing that grow is a miracle for them. Like you'll see the kids are like, oh my god, oh my god, I just grew a carrot and like they're pulling the carrot out and like they're freaking amazed. that this little seed turned into a carrot or a broccoli or a cauliflower, whatever. And then they want to know, and now what, now what do I do with it? Well, then we have our nutrition classes, right? And we show the kids how to prepare healthy food, but it all goes back to the planet, right? It all goes back to the planet being able to grow the food and the kids, kids that see that whole seed to, and I say, table, and I mean food, actually preparing the food, when they're part of that whole process, all the studies show that those kids improve their nutritional habits. Now they have to do it all the way from planting to the eating part, right? It's not enough to just plant the food and grow it and even sell us, they have to do that whole process. And when they do that, they change how they live.

Matt Eastland:

Amazing. Yeah. And we we talk about similar things at EIT Food. This is very much about sort of food systems thinking, you know, it's

everything's impacted, which is really, really interesting. And in terms of, you know, can you paint a picture for our listeners? So, you know, a school garden, what does it look like? How, you know, are the kids out there every day? How do they learn? Can you talk us through a little bit about that?

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, the program. Exactly. Yeah, the school garden program. So, yeah, we have two programs. One is called Garden Connect and the other is Hydro Connect. So Garden Connect is an outdoor school garden program. And essentially, when we used to build the gardens, but now that we're working across the country, you know, we built them here in Vegas, but we show teachers how to build them in other states. But essentially, a starter garden consists of six eight by four beds, like long beds, and then a fruit orchard, and that's usually 12 to 15 fruit trees, and then a classroom. So it's very important that you have benches and a board outside for teaching. And then usually there's some kind of composting system, right? So, and then we have a whole, we've hundreds, over 400 videos that are attached to lessons that teachers then can use to teach in the garden. And part of the teaching the teachers is showing them how you use the garden as a classroom. You know, so you start out in the benches, kids sitting down, looking at the board and they have a goal or they have a question. What is photosynthesis? Or show me biomimicry in the garden. What is biomimicry? And then the teacher will unpack some of that and then the kids go explore and then they come back together and they discuss what their findings were. So it's very hands on project based learning. And our goal Because we don't teach the kids, right? We empower the teachers to teach the students. So our goal is to give teachers every single thing they could possibly need. The garden, right? So we say the content. So the garden, all the lessons that they need to next-gen science standards here in the States, because that's our national standards. And then the coaching. So we have Greener Planet coaches and they do one-on-one sessions with teachers. But we also have webinars every day of the week, all year long. every kind of webinar, from how to build a hydroponic system, to how to create an effective composter at your school, how to run a farmer's market, and so on. And then we have a community. So we have a learning management platform that's online, and we have thousands of teachers on there, and they're all sharing their ideas, right? They're like, oh my God, this didn't work, but this did work, or I solved this problem by doing this, or whatever, you know, here's the best recipe I made at my fifth graders, You can't even imagine. And then the teachers take our curriculum and then they build their own offshoots. You know, they expand on it and they share that with each other. So the content, the coaching and the community are the key things that we provide to create a successful outdoor garden program. Our goal is for teachers to teach outdoors at least one hour a week. Right. Because when you look at our studies, because we do we study and we look at the impact that we're having and even national studies, What you find is, in order for students to change their nutritional behavior, in order for them to become engaged in science and to improve academically in science or math, they have to be outdoors at least

one hour a week. And then the other program is our hydroponics program called HydroConnect, and it's the same thing. Teachers have to use it at least an hour a week to see these benefits, right? You know, and we have a lot of teachers that start out at 20 minutes a week, and we always say, that's fantastic. Start with 20 minutes, build it up, you know, because this is a long term program to integrate into a school. We see schools really taking off in year three. Year one, they're kind of wrapping their heads and they're honestly a little bit wiggled out, the teachers, right? Because they're like, oh, my God, how do I do this? Year two, they're really diving into the curriculum and year three, they're up and they're rolling. So that's kind of what we see. So that's where you really start seeing an hour, an hour plus a week from the teachers. So the hydroponics program, we send 20 hydroponic systems to a school. So a large commercial system and then 19 smaller systems. And again, we've a different, we've a K through 12, very comprehensive, 170 lessons with videos for the teachers to use. So. you know, teachers don't have to figure out anything. The videos are the background information, or they can show them to their kids. We do avatar technology, kind of like the movie avatar, where we have an Albert Einstein, who's actually teaching all the lessons for the hydroponics program. Really? That's amazing. Yeah, it's right. You said it's so funny, when you see our team filming, they, they have all the, you know, the electronic things on their bodies, and they're doing all the movements. And They're saying, and the scripts, you know, we work with teachers, teachers write the scripts. Well, the teachers write the lessons and then our film team writes scripts from the lessons. So yeah, that's Greener Plant Studios. That's our sister company. So yeah, so we provide teachers everything. We provide them all the content again, the hydroponics, all the curriculum, the coaching, right? How do you build a hydroponic system? And then once you get it up and running, how do you teach the lessons and so on? And then the community. So teachers are online. and they're sharing best practices and so on. But the hydroponics is very interesting, Matt, because what happened was in 2018, 2019, we got a lot of requests from Northern Nevada, like Reno, Carson City, the Lake Tahoe area. And they were like, oh, we want to do the garden program. But what we discovered was the growing season up there is only from mid-May to mid-October.

Matt Eastland:

I see, because I was going to ask you about what was your motivation for hydroponics. Sorry, carry on. I see where this is going.

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, and so we were like, well, that's not going. I mean, the kids are out of school June, July, August. So they've only got like a month of growing seasons. That's not going to work. So and we had had requests from teachers saying, oh, you know, we're really interested in hydroponics. And we had always said, like, maybe start in 2016, 2017. Oh, we don't do hydroponics. We're an outdoor garden program. And then it was Kim, you know, my partner and co-founder. He said, listen, You know, when you go back and think about like our conversation with Dr. Leakey and then setting up the garden program,

it was all about listening to the teachers and that when they said what they wanted, a garden, they want a curriculum, they want to farmers markets like we just help them. You know, it wasn't like we had a grand strategy for a great school garden program. We were all about just helping teachers do what they knew they needed to do for their kids. And Kim said, hey, listen, they're asking for hydroponics. And they've asked us for two years now, I think we should pay attention. And then we had these schools in northern Nevada and we were like. Yeah, we got to listen to the teachers. OK, let's look at this hydroponics thing. And and then we started working with the teachers and figuring out what they needed, what kind is. So we had we work with a Chinese manufacturing company, but they adapted systems so that teachers could use it in their schools. And the same thing, they needed curriculum. So we went about developing that with the teachers. And then, you know, the farmers markets just get bigger and better because of the hydroponics.

Matt Eastland:

And can I just just pausing on hydroponics just for a second that I mean, that's that's quite like a high tech solution. And, you know, obviously, gardening is, you know, very kind of manual and earthy. Have you found that you've had any kind of resistance from any of the teachers or the students, they find it too complicated? Or actually, is everyone just fully embracing this as just a normal part of kind of gardening in its widest sense?

Ciara Byrne:

I will tell you so we will be in 1000 schools by January. So just like put this in context for you, we said greener plant 2013 10 years later, we're working at 600 schools, 300 outdoor gardens 300 hydroponics. and by June we'll be in 1200 schools and 600 will be hydroponics and hydroponics is exploding. Our waiting list of schools is not about the garden, outdoor gardens. Now I will say there's, you know, strong interest in outdoor gardens. The huge interest from teachers, from principals and from kids is hydroponics. I'll share a story with you and then maybe this will make more sense. When it comes to impacting the food system, it's very, very interesting. So we're a conservation education organization, right? So we see gardens and hydroponics as tools for teaching kids STEM, you know, science, technology and engineering, math, nutrition, obviously healthy eating, conservation, so on. But the game changer happened, it was around just before COVID, it was 2019. And this is a small little thing that happened that's just kind of really grown. And that was a principal called Bob Pim, who worked in a small village called Vini Tai, 70 miles north of the Arctic Circle, right? He reached out and he said, we have no access to fresh food. We're basically a Native American community, 200 people in our community. It's \$8 for a head of lettuce. And we have very little access to fresh food. And he said, but I've been reading about your hydroponics program. And I have a question. Do you think you could get those systems up here to the Arctic Circle? And if you could, could you then train my kids and me? You know, because he there was two teachers in the schools, 58 kids total, him and another teacher. So he was the principal and a teacher. He said,

could you get them to us and then train us how to use them? And our team was like so fired up. They were like, we're gonna do it. We can make this happen. They were so excited about the idea. Do you know what I mean? Like actually helping feed the community. So it was not easy the first time, but we did figure out how to get the systems up to Vinitae. We trained Bob and his students and another teacher how to grow all the food. And for the entire COVID and even today, that school is growing all the food for that community. All the fresh food they have access to.

Matt Eastland:

Oh, huge congrats. That is an amazing achievement. Funnily enough, we've actually had somebody from Svalbard in Norway. It's like the northernmost town towards the Arctic. And he's doing a similar thing, but for his whole community out there. So he's growing hydroponics on a huge scale. Because like you say, actually importing, they're importing 100% of their food. So having this kind of locally produced food is a massive achievement, massive.

Ciara Byrne:

It's a game changer and also Matt the quality I'm sure he'll tell you because this community was getting some greens in but they were desperate quality because they're coming in on a bush plane and they're all kind of soggy and burnt and you know what I mean and so suddenly they're in the school growing these beautiful glowing heads of lettuce and chard and all the things. And then, you know, I think one of my favorite moments was probably our nutrition chef was online, right? And I could see, and the kids from the school were online and they were there and they had their masks on, it was COVID, and they had their masks and they had all their ingredients and they had all their food from their hydroponic system and they were doing a class. And I was just thinking, that is so bananas. This small nonprofit in the middle of the Mojave desert, you know, is teaching this community in Vinitai, Alaska, how to make healthy food with the food they've grown in their hydroponic system.

Matt Eastland:

That is wild. That is wild. But the thing is, Keira, I'm listening to you and I'm thinking, you make this sound all so easy, and I am assuming that it hasn't been easy. So can I just sort of quickly take you back? I mean, when you started this, What kind of challenges did you face when you kind of kicked this off? And then obviously you've gone through all sorts of growth. I mean, you talk about suddenly being able to ship like a hydroponic, you know, towards the Arctic Circle. But, you know, what are the big sort of challenges that you faced in getting this off the ground and getting it to the place that it is today?

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, so there's a few key challenges. The first one, Because we started out very much a local organization here in Las Vegas serving our schools, right? We're like the second worst performing school district in the nation, in the whole of the United States, because of what I mentioned, like a lot of poverty here in Las Vegas and the

fifth largest. So we like if we can make it here, our thought was we can't get anywhere. We can do it anywhere. Yeah. Right. So our biggest challenge, definitely without question, initially was a lack of buy in from the school district. And that was just initially that was 10 years ago. And it was just hard, because, and listen, I don't blame the school district in any way they're under a ton of pressure to increase, you know, academic achievement to get kids reading all the things right they're under tremendous pressure. And so they see school gardens as this nice extra thing. And that was the hardest thing. How do we change the culture to help people understand that school gardens, there's nothing nice and small and gentle about them. They are powerful. And connecting kids to the planet can change everything from them academically, for their health, for their mental health. It can do so much for kids. But that was our biggest task initially. And let me tell you, 10 years later, where we are with our school district anyway, every single new school that's built now has a school garden built with it.

Matt Eastland:
Wow. Really?

Ciara Byrne:
Every single school. In our school district, all across Vegas and Clark County, every single school that is now built, they build a school garden because, you know, we have 200 school gardens already built. They see how popular the program is. Now, I'm not going to go so far and tell you as they fully believe. But I will tell you that we have moved from teachers hiding the fact that they're bringing their kids outside to their principal to principals coming to us and saying, I need a school garden. I see the impact. And so that's a big shift in 10 years in the culture. But that was our first biggest hurdle for sure.

Matt Eastland:
Yeah, and I imagine hearing things like that, where these things are basically being built, embedded into the DNA of any new school being built, is an incredible success measure. But given that you've now impacted the lives, I think I was reading, of over 200,000 students, how do you measure the success and impact of the programs that you're delivering? So other than these kind of big moments that you've just said, do you have things that you say, we absolutely have to achieve this in every single school, or is every school different?

Ciara Byrne:
Well, both of those things. So yeah, every school is different in that we provide kind of the programming that I shared with you, and then every school will have a spin on it, right? So what I see, the patterns that I see is that schools that are in lower income communities, which is over 70% of our schools, there'll be quite a heavy focus on community engagement. Like academic achievement is part of us, but a lot of times principals in these communities understand that getting parents engaged ultimately is the number one way to get to academic achievement for the kids, you know. And in

communities where parents don't speak English as their first language, that can be a challenge. And the gardens are brilliant for that. Right. So the gardens come in and help us in the gardens. Please help us paint murals in the gardens. And hey, we're having a farmer's market in the garden. And it's just a lovely, gentle way of inviting people into a beautiful space and engaging the parents so so that's like some schools we didn't that then we work with you know very serious stem academies, you know where it's all about you know stem and you know we have to do the science and. It's less about community engagement and they'll use the gardens and hydroponics program for that. But getting back to the measures. So we have two ways that we measure impact. And the first way is internal surveys. So we have a quarterly survey that goes out to teachers and the main goal of that is how can we improve like what's working teachers. what's not working. And then we also measure, and this is our holy grail, because we talked about this a bit earlier, how many minutes are the teachers teaching in the gardens or using the hydroponics? That's the holy grail for us, right? Because if a teacher says, last year I taught an hour of STEM, now I'm teaching two hours and 40 minutes of it every week is with the garden or the hydroponics program, that's a huge win, right? Because we know from all the other studies that have been done, the more minutes that we can get the kids exposed to the school garden or the hydroponics program, all the other things will just happen, right? They'll get excited about school. They may want to be a scientist or a conservationist or a farmer or a chef or what have you. you know, because they'll get engaged and all those other things. So that's a holy grail. And then the other thing is, last year, we started a five-year evidence-based program study. So this is to, you know, actually interview the students, like, and what kind of impact we're having with them. So last year, we had an, it's an independent study, not carried out by us, and was carried out by Dr. Justin Gardner. And they interviewed, the teachers implemented it, but he designed the questions and over 3,000 students across the country answered, you know, the questions. There were two surveys. The first one is academic. So we asked students science-y math questions before they did the program and then after a year after the program. and then behavioral questions like I want to be a scientist when I grow up, you know, before they did the program and then after I love the planet or I want to help the planet, those kind of questions. So they were they were academic and behavioral. And the the results were really, really encouraging. I mean, 93% of students saw improvement in academic achievement, anywhere from eight to 20% improvement. And then in the behavioral side, 83% of kids saw improvement in behavior, so an increase in engagement in school or whatever the questions were. So overall, it was very encouraging.

Matt Eastland:

That's fascinating. So just by going through these programs, being outside, connecting with nature, growing your own food, you've been able to prove that this does improve educational outcomes, it improves ambitions in the students that you're teaching, and it also improves their behaviors.

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, yeah. And I can send you, we have a summary of the study on a PowerPoint. It's very, like, we interviewed teachers and parents as well. And that was super, like, things that really surprised me, and I'm not gonna remember the exact numbers here, but, you know, teachers and parents both said it was over 60% of kids were more interested in nature. You know, and that's like, wow, that's a lot. Like, to do a year program, and then to see that, something like, 5% of parents said their kids talked about their garden every day. Now, over 60% said they talked about their garden once or twice a month. But I was amazed that 5% talked about it every day. Because my thought was, that 5% are going to do something incredible. That's right.

Matt Eastland:

And if you can get that 5% to then speak to all the others, and you have that domino effect, right?

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah. So anyway, a lot of very interesting things.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah, well, again, like I say, congratulations, amazing work here. And can we sort of move on to talking about the learnings that you've accumulated over this fascinating journey? So before we kind of talk about the steps we can take to encourage students to do more, I'm interested in what you've learned about working with students across the US. So, you know, and what's the response that you've received and how they've engaged? I mean, from what you're saying, it seems that universally the response is great. But I mean, from your perspective, you know, what have you personally picked up on this journey from interacting with students and teachers?

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, that's a great question. I would say that since COVID, the teachers are under an awful lot of stress, an awful lot of stress, an awful lot of strain. Kids really, that generation that were starting out school or were in some pivotal grade in school, they really did, for the most part, especially in the kind of schools we serve, So, you know, that's lower income communities. So the teachers are struggling to catch up. And, you know, they don't always see that, you know, the hydroponics or the school gardens, it feels like another extra burden for them. But the teachers who kind of just give it a shot, see exponential benefits. And I would say around mental health, right? Just having a hydroponic system growing in a classroom makes kids happier. You know, that's just the bottom line. Seeing things grow, they're excited to talk about their plants, they're excited to take ownership, they're excited to be on the journey with the plants. Just that, like even if you don't teach all the STEM lessons, you know, and the same with the garden. You're outside, there's butterflies, there's bees, there's hummingbirds, there's worms, there's all the things kids love. So I would say that what has struck me is that really the power of what we do is less about the program and more about that connection to the planet. I

think that's what I've learned.

Matt Eastland:

I can really feel that. And for someone who is very into this space, grows his own food, cooks his own food, I know exactly what you mean. That mental health benefit, it's peaceful, it's calming, it connects you, it grounds you as well. So it's great. There's sort of more and more future generations coming through with that experience. OK, then. So the nub of the question, you know, Everyone wants to know how do we get the next generation more interested in learning about growing food, connecting their food? And I think you're obviously the best person to ask this question. So what tangible steps for our listeners can we do to encourage students to get involved in improving our food system from your experience?

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, I think that's a great question. And I would say it's very easy and it's very hard. Both of those things. The very easy bit is We lost track of why kids go to school, right? Suddenly it's all about test scores and this and that, and it's less about preparing them to be happy, functioning adults when they come out the other end, ready to pursue their dreams, whatever they are. So what I try and focus myself on, and this is the easy bit, I would say is, how are we going to increase the joy? for kids, how are we going to keep your eye on that as a teacher, as a principal, as a superintendent, as me, Kira, CEO of greener planet, how can I increase the joy for kids? And so much joy comes from the connection with the planet, growing food, growing plants, growing flowers, all that so much joy, and then so much learning, right? That's so keep your eye on the joy. And I think that's very much because you said you grow your own, you're connected to the planet. Tell me when you've connected the planet in a profound way and it has not been joyful for you.

Matt Eastland:

Oh, it's always joyful. I mean, I'm big into food anyway, but I don't think this is a unique thing. I don't think that, you know, you're just born and you're like, I'm going to be this person who's a big foodie and love food. I think the fact that you expose kids to this at a very young age, you get them connected to that food, you explain to them where their food comes from. Then, like you say, you then get them to cook it and eat it. I think that brings so much joy. Funny enough, small story on my side. I was with my French in-laws over the weekend and they have an enormous garden. They're basically farmers, really. Everything's biodynamic. And the food, the taste, and I know everyone, it sounds like such a cliché, but the taste is so different to what you buy. And, you know, I've just spent three days just with a massive smile on my face because the food is amazing. And it brings, like you say, so much joy.

Ciara Byrne:

You're just eating that cherry tomato that explodes in your mouth. How happy does it make you feel? So happy. So just looking at it growing and kind of sparkling on the vine makes you so happy. And I think, you know, with the phones and the video games and all that

stuff, we've lost that. And bringing that back into schools will transform humanity. That's the bottom line. So staying focused on that is the easy bit. I said there is a hard bit. The really hard bit is to take that, like you want to bring that to kids and bringing it into a system that is not created for that. You know what I'm saying? So we have a system that's set up as what kind of test scores are your kids getting? They have to, you know, do 35 minutes of math every day or whatever it is. So it's a system that's quite rigid and we're trying to bring in this joy and this connection. That's the hard part, right? But it can be done because we're doing it. I mean, I say we're doing it. We're not doing it at all. It's the teachers are doing it. We're helping the teachers to do it, and we're helping thousands of teachers do it. So I know it can be done, but I also know it's hard for teachers. So I just want to acknowledge that.

Matt Eastland:

So is that the fast track to success then in this? Is it recruiting, convincing teachers and engaging with them? Because ultimately, they're the ones who are going to take this on and make it big and great and fantastic.

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, a hundred percent. I mean, you know, we talk about, oh, we're working with a thousand schools. It's not us. It's that the thousands of teachers at the thousand schools that are doing the program. And so if they were not interested and if they didn't care, like, for example, I was at a conference last week where teachers came to learn about, you know, mental health and really impacting the kids in their classroom on a Saturday. And I said to them, I was like, you're here on a Saturday before Thanksgiving. You're giving up your Saturday for your kids. I love you. I will do whatever it takes to help you succeed because you care so much that you're here, you know, for eight hours on a Saturday. And so they're the teachers. Those rock star teachers are the ones we want to connect with and empower to do this kind of work with kids. That's it. Simple.

Matt Eastland:

Give it up for the rockstar teachers. Love it. Love it. And just, you know, over the years, I mean, obviously you've you must have seen things change so much. So how is your personal view and like education, nature and community evolved in that time? Do you think they're all kind of really closely interconnected?

Ciara Byrne:

I do. And I think that COVID was a game changer. It was a game changer for us. I mean, that was the closest. So we were seven years in at that point. We were a local Las Vegas nonprofit. And with COVID, of course, you know, we were working in schools, in gardens, and suddenly COVID happened, and we couldn't go into the schools. And the kids were at home, and the teachers were teaching them from home. And it felt like that was definitely the closest we came to going under. We lost half of our funding in a month. We were about

to lose the rest of the funding, which was from our Department of Ed and Department of Health, except we asked for two weeks. We said, give us two weeks. And they're like, what are you going to do in two weeks?

Matt Eastland:

That was all you asked for. And that was what made the difference.

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, and what we did in two weeks was bananas. But what we did in two weeks is we talked to our team. I always remember this. It was around St. Patrick's Day in 2020. Maybe it was the 17th or 18th of March. And I remember saying to our team, there were 36 people on our team. And we, Kim and I, had spent the whole weekend. And we had our dining room covered in stickies, giant stickies. What can we do? How can we save greener planet? Because we're about to run out of money. And we talked to our staff and we said, OK, listen, we can furlough all of us. I don't know how for how long or we can see what the teachers need, because we've always served the teachers at this time. It's a difficult time for them. What do you want to do? And unanimously they said, we want to serve the teachers, every single person. And I was like, damn. Yeah, I said, damn, that's pretty amazing. I'm not going to let them down. So I said a lot of pressure on you then. Right. And I was like, go find out what do the teachers need and how can we help them? Because like I said to you, we've always listened to the teachers. So our teams, our coordinators, our farmers went and talked to the teachers and they were like, They said they need two things. They need resources, online resources for their kids that are engaging, right? Because suddenly they're finding themselves online. And number two was very interesting, Matt. They said they want to connect their kids back to their school and how can we do that? And so what we did was we gave our farmers, well, they had phones and we trained them how to film themselves in the school gardens doing lessons. And then we had our chef nutritionist set up their kitchens like studios. And we're like, okay, now you're teaching them from your kitchen. And we had our hydroponics team do the same in their homes. And we started creating all these films. Every week we created six films. And they were kind of crappy at first, not filmed very well. And we already had editors on our team because Kim and I, you know, we're filmmakers and we'd always done films at Greener Planet. But we expanded the team and gave birth to a new company now called Greener Plant Studios. And so since then, we've created over 400 videos because the teachers like them so much that they're like, oh, you can't stop now. COVID was over. So, yeah, so that was how we handled it. And when we showed two weeks later, we showed the Department of Ed and the Department of Health. We're like, OK, we created six videos with our farmers and nutritionists. What do you think? We're going to send them out to teachers. And they were like, damn, that was fast. And they said, yeah, we'll continue funding you. And so we survived. Yeah, we survived and teachers became used to being online. Suddenly we were working with Alaska and we're now working with schools all across Alaska. We're in the entire school district in the Arctic Circle. We serve right with hydroponics program. And so, yeah, I mean, Really,

COVID was very dark for a year, very challenging, trying to pivot the company. And we've emerged as an ed tech company serving what will soon be thousands of schools across the country. So it was hard, but I think the pivot, which is really driven by our staff, a passionate team, is what's really going to change the world.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah, so the necessity sort of that's come on through, you know, COVID, you needed to pivot and because your staff are willing to come along with you on the journey and to push it with the teachers is has really actually accelerated your business, which is incredible.

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah. And I couldn't have seen that. Like I wasn't like at no point in any of this was I a wise leader. I just wanted to know. Most of the time, I had no idea what was going on. I was like, OK, the teacher said they want this. Let's do it.

Matt Eastland:

But surely now that wisdom is now kind of built into you and you must have learned so much. So I mean, based on where you are now and looking forward, what are the hopes for the future of green our planet? I mean, you spoke about an educational sort of offspin as well. Is that growing? I'm fascinated to know where are you headed next?

Ciara Byrne:

Yeah, that's a good question. So we had a summit with our team this in the summer 2022, because it was our 23, sorry, 2023, it was our 10th year. And we were like, Okay, this is how far we've come. We looked at that. And we celebrated. And then we're like, So where are we going? And we have come up with a plan. It's very simple that we will be in 10,000 communities by 2033. Wow. 10,000 communities and we can do it, I have no doubt. Like I said, by the summer we'll be in 1,200 and then we're doubling that next year.

Matt Eastland:

So in another 10 years, you go from 1,200 to how many did you say?

Ciara Byrne:

10,000. 10,000, yeah.

Matt Eastland:

Wow, that's quite an ambition. I wish you the best of that. You'll have to come back at some point and check in and see how you're getting on. You'll be like, yeah, we've nailed it. We hit 10,000 in like three years or something. I'm sure it's going to happen.

Ciara Byrne:

Well, I wouldn't be surprised with our team. They're very ambitious, very driven, and they really understand why it's important.

Matt Eastland:

So it's great to have a good team behind you. And, you know, we've spoken kind of around this topic a bit, but just as we're coming to the end of the of the episode, which this is sort of broadening access to people, you know, you've spoken about people in sort of lower economic income communities and making sure that they have access to sort of fresh and nutritious food. So do you sort of more broadly, do you think in the future that we can all look forward to an equitable and sustainable food system or certainly in the areas that you're looking after? Do you think that's possible?

Ciara Byrne:

Matt, I believe that's 100% possible.

Matt Eastland:

Love it.

Ciara Byrne:

I believe it's a hundred percent possible. And because I believe it, and my team believes it, and the teachers we work with believe it, I believe it will happen. I think we need to believe those things to start working on them. Cause if you don't believe it, then you won't do it. Right. So I'll share one thing with you that I would love to come back in a few years, see how it's going. So building on the Alaska story. Here in Las Vegas, we have a very exciting launch in January. It's our first two hydro farms at two schools here in Las Vegas. Both of the schools are in food deserts, so it's five miles to the closest grocery store for, you know, the community. And so we are launching hydro farms. So we're growing 4000 crops every month at the school with the students. The students are doing it and we're just building the model to make it possible. And so the students, they'll be doing two things. Some of the food will be going into their cafeteria. And they're selling it to their school district right so they're making some money. And then some of the food is going out into the local community through a partnership with a nonprofit called the just one project and they have, they have a truck a food truck and they go into food deserts and they bring fresh food and they sell it at super low cost. So that kind of program will do exactly what you said, right, bringing access and equity in the food systems into into these communities. So yeah, I think I and again, it's not us doing it, we're just going to empower the students, show them how to grow the food, you know, build the farm with them, and they'll do it. And I believe that that's going to be successful. We'll see. I mean, we haven't done it yet. But I believe it will be.

Matt Eastland:

Love it. Fighting for the future of food. That's what we're all about. So thanks, Kira. And as we finish the show, we always ask, I guess, a slightly lighter question about a bit of a magic wand thing. So if you had unlimited funding, money is absolutely no object. What what would you invest in to empower young people to connect with nature and food? So would it be double down on a program you do? Would it be a new piece of technology? Would it be something nothing to do with what you're doing, but you've seen

something that you'd love to see more of? What might it be that you would just love to see accelerate?

Ciara Byrne:

I would love to see a truly beautiful garden space in every single school. in the world so that kids, and this is not about our program, but anybody can do it, right? So that kids have a beautiful space where they can really connect to the planet and they can grow food there too. But really, I think it's about that connection and the beauty and understanding their place in the universe. And then from there, magical things happen.

Matt Eastland:

Love it. And it sounds to me, Kira, like you're just the person who's going to make this happen. So well done.

Ciara Byrne:

I'll play a role in it, but we need a lot of people to do that.

Matt Eastland:

Leading the charge. And so where can people go to find out more about you and your work at Green Our Planet?

Ciara Byrne:

So it's very easy. [GreenOurPlanet.org](https://www.GreenOurPlanet.org).

Matt Eastland:

[GreenOurPlanet.org](https://www.GreenOurPlanet.org). And I'm assuming you're across all the socials?

Ciara Byrne:

Yes, yeah, we are. All the socials.

Matt Eastland:

Great stuff. All right, brilliant. Well, Cara Byrne, you are a rock star. I have loved this conversation and everything that you're doing. And thank goodness the world has people like you in it. And thanks for your time today. And yeah, looking forward to seeing you again in a few years. You can tell us how you've taken over the rest of the world.

Ciara Byrne:

Thanks, Matt. Thanks so much for this opportunity. I've loved chatting with you. It's been really fun.

Matt Eastland:

So that was Keira Byrne talking about the organization that she founded, Green Our Planet. What I absolutely loved about this conversation, I mean, there was so much to love in here, but the things that really stood out for me. So first of all, what an amazing story. You know, the highs and lows that Keira and her team have been through and the way that she's been able to pivot all the way through COVID and actually the fact that where this started from is just like a website and a crowdfunding campaign just really kind of exploded on its own. So she'd really tapped into a need that she

had in her community and then across the states and you know and going forwards the world. So what an amazing story. She spoke a lot about the importance of connecting children to nature and to their food, which really resonates with me. And I loved what she said about focus on the joy, about the fact that actually getting these school gardens into every school has had such a positive impact. And the other thing which I was quite amazed about is when she was talking about how they have proven that actually if you have these gardens in schools, the educational attainment of children increases, their behaviours improve, and actually their general ambitions in life also improve. You know, all of that from what they're doing, truly incredible. You know, the fact that 5% of the kids that they have in these gardens are actually speaking about it every day and how Kira thinks that those are going to be the the future rock stars of the food system, which I think is really great. And then finally, I think just the whole positivity that Kira brings to it and the fact that she really sees like a really hopeful future here. I mean, I asked her the question about, do you think that it's possible to have an equitable and fair food system where everyone has access to healthy and fresh food? And she didn't even blink. she really thought this was totally achievable. And I think we need more people and leaders in the world who have that kind of principle at heart. So, yeah, thank you very much. Go to Kira. And like I say, you're a rock star. So thank you everyone for listening. And this has been the Food Fight podcast. As ever, if you'd like to find out more about what we do, head over to the EIT Food website at www.eitfood.eu. Also, please join the conversation via the hashtag EITfoodfight on our X channel, at EITfood. And if you haven't already, please hit the follow button so you never miss an episode. That's it for now. See you all next time.