

Leslie Norcross BOL oral histo...n (2024-01-18 13_05 GMT-7) (1)

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All right. I'd love for you to introduce start out just by introducing yourself and sharing a little bit more about your background. Okay,

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great. My name is Leslie Norcross and I was the former community engagement director for garden to table. And I had been a volunteer there when my son was in kindergarten, which was way back in 2013. And garden to table has been partnering with emerald since then. And I actually had a one year old daughter who is now a fifth grader at Emerald. So I've seen her go through the entire program as well. But garden to table was founded in 2006 by Bryce Brown, and it started in Boulder, Colorado, and they currently partner with 17 different schools. Emerald, being the only Broomfield school. And it's just a fabulous program. I was a mom with a young baby and a kindergartener and I saw opportunity to volunteer at the school, they really needed some parent and guardian help to support the teachers when they came out for the lessons. So it was an opportunity for me to meet other parents to be outdoors to introduce my really young one to gardening and insects and connecting with food and nature, as well as being present for my son's class meeting his teacher and all of his friends, seeing how the school worked as a new parent with an elementary child, and also just building community in Broomfield. Yeah.

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So tell me a little bit more about that aspect of kind of like just getting to know people and having people come on board as far as like working in the garden and supporting and laying it out. And all of those pieces like how did that sort of come together. And

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so what happens is, its its principal lead. And so the principal really has to sign on with garden to table and say, this is something that myself and my staff want to be part of. And then the teachers and the principal, Samara Williams have been extremely supportive at Emerald. And so what happens is the teachers bring the kids out in the spring, and they bring them out in the fall. And they each have at least one garden lesson. And so it correlates to the core curriculum and the standards. And so what happens is, feedback that we've received from teachers is some of the kids who may be struggling in the

classroom with learning and concentration, ended up being just awe inspired. And their attention span, you know, is really, really great when they're in the garden, their connection with nature, their team building, team building abilities with other students improves. So the teachers are seeing kids that maybe, you know, really struggle in the classroom just sort of come to life and have these aha moments in the garden. So that's been one of the joys, personally as a volunteer that I've seen with the students. And so what happens is, the students start out, it's pre K through fifth. And we try to be equity based, so it's during the school day, and kids can come out, you know, when they have those lessons scheduled for the school day. It's not an after school program, we don't charge parents or guardians any fees at all. And so we try to keep it really equitable so that all students can come out into the garden and enjoy. One of the things that I've enjoyed the most as a volunteer is just seeing the program from the little little kids in preschool, and they're planting pumpkin seeds, all the way through fifth grade, when they're doing climate study can control and more of the technical lessons and so forth. And just the progress and in their connection to the garden, their ownership of that's my garden, and that's my lettuce that I planted. I remember tasting that cherry tomato, oh, you're the garden lady. And they're just, it's something stable and something positive and something that they can have control over in their lives, no matter you know, where they come from. Emerald has been traditionally a title one school, so there's a lot of free and reduced lunch students there. A lot of the students there are apartment dwellers, they might not have a lot of access to space to plant their own food to see how food is grown. So to see them making healthy food choices is also something that's been really just positive. And the studies have shown that if you kind of teach kids this information and connect them at this age, they're more likely to be lifelong healthy eaters and making healthy food choices. So that's something that's really positive. And I've seen that with both of my kids going through the program.

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So can you tell me a little bit more about you know, if you can think back to when kind of the program started, were there any obstacles or difficulties, that sort of thing to getting it off the ground and getting things going? Or maybe in the ground is the right way to say? Yes,

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absolutely. Yeah, it definitely was challenging. I'm just to get buy in from from teachers and principals. When it started, there were a couple of parents that had a really big stake in it. And they really helped get the garden program off the ground. Sharon Tessie being one of them on our council, and Tara Lenihan being the other. And so they really were instrumental and helping it get started. They also had children that were, you know, leaving elementary school, and they went on to different things. So I was, you know, the next in line as a volunteer there, like you'd be great as the parent lead. And that eventually led into me being on the staff, with garden to table. So I guess the biggest challenges were getting parents to support and to help volunteer, a lot of parents were like, Why don't have a green thumb, and I don't grow anything. And I didn't know anything about gardening when I first started volunteering. And now I can grow just about anything in Colorado, which is amazing with our short, growing season. But once the parents do start helping, we're finding repeat volunteers. It's something that they can do for an hour of the school day, especially post COVID. It's outdoors. So it's a safer setting. It's something that can come in help the teachers get to know their kids, classroom, build community, make some friends be outside, and then you know, go back to work, or maybe they have you know, littles at home that they need. We also encourage parents to come with their smaller

Children and Toddlers and just bring them along for the lessons for sure. Yeah, so that's been that's been really fun as well. We did have the bond construction built out in I believe, that was 2018, Emerald 2.0 came around. So we had quite a bit of manual labor and work to do to get the garden beds, you know, up and running and moving the soil on moving all of our equipment, and, you know, doing a brand new irrigation system build out and things like that. The first year that we did that there were a couple of pipes that weren't connected correctly underneath the garden. And so I came out once and it was about, you know, a foot underwater and the beds were kind of going back and forth.

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You don't necessarily want a Cranberry Bog, no.

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So when I walked in, I was like, oh, it looks like something's seeping from underneath. So we had to go in and do some pretty major irrigation repairs. And there's always challenges within the seasons. You know, we live in an area where there's a lot of hail. And we also have to plant all of our summer crops by, you know, May 20, or whenever that last day of school is. And so what happens is, that's not the ideal time. Normal gardening planting would happen like at least the first or second week of June, but we're doing it in the middle of May. And so we start we have most of our product is with seeds. And then we have plant starts for the tomatoes and for the peppers, which we grow in a greenhouse at the BVSD Arapaho location. And so we have to be really creative when it comes to buckets and hail and storms and things like that. But we've been pretty lucky the last few years. Specifically in Broomfield boulder got some crazy storms, we got some rough weather. Yeah. And since garden to table partners with 17 other schools, it's a small lean staff, small nonprofit. So we do rely on volunteers and parent volunteers at those schools to help out in situations like

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that. Yeah, yeah. What are some of the benefits? I know, you talked to kind of generally about some of the you know, how young children when they're able to have that opportunity to be in gardens and seeing, you know, using making healthy choices, they're more likely to do that when they're older, and that those habits are really important. What are some other maybe success stories from the program and maybe specific individuals or families or, you know, either or maybe just bigger picture like, what's the trajectory of the organization in the future? That sort of? Sure.

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Well, emerald is lucky. So we were the recipients of a USDA grant. And we were able to have a dedicated garden educator, come in and actually teach the garden lessons in 2023. So what that did was it alleviated a lot of extra work for the teachers. They just basically had to bring out their classes at a specified time, help with classroom management, and so forth. And we had a garden edge garden educator who was also a garden curriculum writer who rewrote all of our curriculum and updated it with the current science and core curriculum standards. And so she was able to roll out this really succinct, beautiful curriculum as well as increase the touch points by having three lessons per grade level instead of one. And so she rolled that out in 2023. And her USDA grant doesn't end until July. So emerald will also have her. Charlotte is her name Charlotte sand cooler, come out for the 2024 spring lessons. And so she's been utilizing brownfields teachers, like Amber Billington, who's a longtime

proponent of garden to table. She was at fireside before she was at Emerald. And she's the teacher liaison there at Emerald as well as Laurie, Skidmore are longtime emerald teacher. And they've been giving us feedback on what works, what doesn't work. Some things that maybe could be, you know, more aligned with what with what they're learning in the classroom and how to mirror that in the garden. certain ways of learning that might be better approach. So we've really had this great partnership with the teachers of emerald, and really nailing this new curriculum so that when we roll it out to the rest of the schools, and we continue it and finesse it over the next year, emerald had a big stake in that and how that is going to be for hopefully years to come, at least until the science standards change again.

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That's always the thing. Yeah. Changing standards. But no, that's really neat. Yeah,

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so she's been really great. And we we do a lot of teachers surveys and student surveys, to get feedback on, you know, what's working and what's not. And it was just overwhelmingly positive with having that garden educator so on a trajectory, I really would like that to happen at all of the schools. Of course, that's a budget issue, and that we're really trying to do more funding and grants large and small, as well as taking over a large event called the boulder garden tour each summer, which is a large fundraiser, the largest fundraiser for garden to table. And so we're hoping to have that model where we have a dedicated garden educator, you know, maybe they have four schools, so we'd have about three of them. And they're on a schedule where they rotate through and, you know, go and teach at all those schools. It's a little bit tricky with scheduling. But we definitely made it work. And we look forward to having it happen again in 2024.

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Nice. That's super cool. So I want to just take a maybe a small step back in time again, and thinking about did you mention like, kind of how you originally came to Broomfield or what brought you to this area, that sort of thing.

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So I came here in 2007. And I actually was working at a place called pharmaco integrative pharmacy. And there were stores. It was a boulder based company. It's it's recently gone under but there was a store in California where I was working at and the store manager there wanted to move back and I wanted to move to Boulder. So we kind of did an old switcheroo. And I was there at the South Boulder store. And then in Boulder, I met my husband, Brian. And we decided to move to Broomfield as his sister lived here and said, Hey, this is a great town. Remember, this is back in 2008 or so? Yeah. So it was still kind of like, oh, what's Broomfield? Oh, wait, there's Boulder and Denver. And it just wasn't quite a town that people were looking at. And she said that she thought it would be a great family town to raise, you know, kids in and there was a lot of open space. And folks were nice, and it was conveniently located. And we were like, You know what, let's buy a house because where we were living in Boulder. It was not sustainable to raise a family on our salaries. And we decided that with the housing prices in Broomfield, we were just going to go for it. So we ended up buying one of the houses in Broomfield heights. And so I'm actually wanting to kind of see in the historical archives if there's any information on that because it was built in 58. So it has to be one of the first one so we're longtime

Broomfield residents and we just absolutely love this town, and everything that it has to offer. And Brian sister Laurie, she's also one of the teachers in Emerald. So we have that kind of tie in with a cool, she said emerald is a great school and, you know, if I had kids, I would send them there. And we're like, let's do it. So that's kind of how we got started in Broomfield. And from there we when I was starting to volunteer at Emerald, there were so many other great moms and parents that were in the garden that just wanted to help out and saw a need to, you know, help the teachers out and just see how we could support the community. So it was a great way to meet friends and just build community and have fun and get a lot of exercise gardening is actually a very rigorous activity. You can do as much as you want but I remember you know, days just coming home covered in soil and just feeling like so good and connected to the earth and very, you know, it's it's a before and after transformation especially when you're doing things like you know tearing the garden down or winterizing it for the winter and getting the irrigation coiled up and working the soil and planting cover crops and doing all of the things that requires healthy soil for an organic garden, which is what garden to table also does is all organic gardening, no pesticides, no herbicides, and teaching students the importance of that and tying in the environmental stewardship piece to it. And just their connection to growing their own food and seeing where food comes from.

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It's amazing, super cool. So how have you seen you've been improved field? Since 2007? You said

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2007.

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Have you seen your field change over that time? What are some some things you've noticed? So

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we have seen a lot of changes, of course in the growth of Broomfield but somehow it still has retained this like small town charm. And that's something that we're really proud of. We have so many memories of going down to the Broomfield Broomfield Days Parade with our kids marching with emerald for the parade and just you know, living right on the other side of Midway, just you know, seeing it go from Midway being this kind of sleepy road to now it feels almost like a little Highway coming through, but we see why people are drawn to an our initial connection to Broomfield and why we wanted to, you know, be here and raise a family here. So we understand why people are kind of flocking here and want to make it a welcoming place. And I think there's a lot of room for growth for Broomfield. I think the future is really bright for Broomfield seeing just my kids go through BVSD and through emerald, and all of the wonderful teachers and support staff and mentors that my kids have had and in sports. It's just it's a great town. I mean, if I had to move anywhere on the world, and someone could say, where would you go? I'd say I'd stay here. I would stay in Broomfield. So, and I grew up in a small town in in northern Indiana and my husband grew up in New York, and we love where we grew up. But we wouldn't trade Broomfield for anything. So we've seen you know, emerald goat grow from the original school building to this beautiful kind of state of the art. Gorgeous building, beautiful building with a lot of great, you know, after school programs, and, you know, a lot of grant funded or dragon school programs, their arts, their backstory, theater, all the involvement with a lot of the Broomfield nonprofits. So it's just,

there's Broomfield just has a way of connecting the schools and the people that live and work here with a lot of different opportunities and choices for just a rich and educational life. There's just there's always something to do. There's always something to discover. The event HQ, all of this here, the library, the programs, the summer concerts, like we're just really blessed to have people that really care about their community and want it to be a great place to live. So yeah, we're just honored to be part of it. And, you know, to have been a part of emerald for so long and part of the garden program and sometimes I'll go to King Soopers, or go to the grocery store, and there'll be kids that have gone through the program, and they're like, Hey, you're the garden, Mama, and they'll come up to me and they'll tell me a story about like, I remember when we were harvesting and we found those potatoes from the you know, from the whole year before that, just way down in there and they were you know, pulling him out two or three feet down. That's awesome. And so it just you know, stories about we found a praying mantis once in the garden. It was just like, the kids thought it was like an alien they had ever seen one before. So they all flocked over and they were like, wow, and you know, turns its little head and the kids are just doing an ironing and, you know, the insects are definitely a big draw the Rolie polies the bees, the praying mantis like it's not it's a whole ecosystem. With a garden. It's not just the fruits and veggies, it's the soil and all of the microbes and all of the insects that make it so fun for the kids to discover. Yeah,

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I love the potato story to dig in potatoes is like a treasure hunt.

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It's a treasure hunt. Oh, fun. Yes. And the kids we try to make it we have a crop rotation system. So in the nine beds that are there, each year, it rotates through on the garden maps like what should be planted where, and we try to keep it things that are really fun and interesting to harvest like carrots. Some of the big winners, of course, would be like cherry tomatoes, because, you know, kids can just eat those right off the vine. Corn is a fun one for the kids, as well. And then we do a lot of the root vegetables, so they can see how those vegetables grow on the ground. And, you know, it's a tactile sensory thing for some of the kids to get their hands in the soil. They've never done that before. And some kids are ill, this is gross. And then after a couple minutes are like, This is so fun. And, you know, we're like there's microbes in there that make you happy, increase your serotonin, they're like what you know, it's so they just, they just light up in the garden. And so that's what kept me coming back for so many years as a 10 year volunteer was just seeing their faces and just their absolute awe at everything that was happening in the garden. And sometimes when you walk in there, especially during the fall lessons, it's almost like a jungle because you have 15 foot tall sunflowers. You know, you've got five feet, corn stalks, you've got giant, they almost look like giant trees of tomato. Plants and emerald has this little micro microclimate where the garden sits. And there's the school building wall. And so we think there's something with the way the sun is against the wall. But things just grow exponentially better there than at any of the other schools that the garden table partners with. So it's just this amazing, you know, aesthetically beautiful thing. So when the kids come back to school, in August, the garden is situated right at the front of the school. So it's right on the path that you walk by. And so it's a place for kids and parents when they're dropping their kids off to school to say goodbye. And like, you know, stand and look at the garden. There's a big, permanent sign there in English and in Spanish that talks about why garden to table is there, what happens with the lessons, everyone's welcome. Here's how you can find out more information and so forth. So it's kind of this, you know, just place where kids can

go before and after school, a lot of kids set their bags around the garden area because it's right near the playground. And they can just pop in there and see like their particular bed that they planted vegetables in, they can see it grow each day, they can come check on it, they can see if the Roly Poly they put there last night is still there. So it's just this great, just ever present thing for the kids to connect to and come back to, you know, every morning when they're dropped off. So that's been one of the things we've heard about is that people love coming back after the summer is over and seeing how the gardens grown and seeing what's going on. Yeah,

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well transformation. That's super cool. Sure. Well, what else did we talk about? What did we miss?

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So let's see here. We could talk about probably more of the educational piece, like what happens when the kids go out to the garden? What are some of the examples of the lessons that they learned? Absolutely. So I'll give an example of second grade. Second grade comes out in May, and they harvest the lettuce that the first grade plants in March. And you might be thinking, well, how, how do you plant lettuce in March because that's when we get a lot of snow and kind of crazy weather. So what we do is we have three of the beds at Emerald usually three at all the other schools as well. But they are hoop houses. And so on the sides of the beds, there's large clamps, and we have pvc piping and plastic that we put over like a caterpillar tunnel to protect the lettuce to keep it warmer to increase the amount that it grows each day. And to protect it from the crazy winds and giant snowstorms that we usually have. So first graders come out and we actually start planting seeds in the BVSD greenhouse starting now for the first graders to come. We send all of those little lettuce starts for about two inches tall, hundreds of them out to all the schools. And so the first grade classes come out and they split them up so that each child has at least one that they can plan and dig a hole in and actually do it themselves. And they have the little trials doing that. And then they have to use math because they're spacing them out so that they have room to grow. And then also connecting like why plants need water. So they're doing that and then we have spring stewards and that would be children and parents that sign up to hand water lettuce because irrigation systems are not on at that point. And so they they use the hose they hook it up, they unhook it each time detach it, so there's no freezes and that's another way for kids and families to take ownership of the garden is to do the spring steward. ship, the same sort of thing happens in the summer for summer stewardship, but it's automatic irrigation. And it's more on checking for insect damage and harvesting things that are ready and taking it to food banks and so forth. So when second grade comes out, the lettuce will have gone from two inches or so to about the size of a human head. And so they come out and they get to choose whether they are going to use it in the school cafeteria. And that's in conjunction with the School Food Project. And a thing called Rainbow Days where the kids make a rainbow of colors on their plate. Or, and this is what emerald has done often in the past is to donate it to a food bank. And so the last few years, they've donated like several giant coolers to Community Food share. Yeah, and we've worked with a lot of other local food banks as well. But they wanted to do that and you know, give something back to the community. So they kind of vote on it as a class. And then oftentimes, they'll say, You know what, let's all eat it, and then the school food, cafeteria staff will wash it again, they do a like a three time wash, and then they'll have it in the cafeteria, and everybody that's at the school can have the opportunity to have that lettuce, whether they bring their lunch from home, or whether they purchase lunch at school, it's free for everybody to just try it. So that's

a way to get everybody sort of involved. And depending on how much parents support, we often have the root balls and Little Dixie Cups, I'll hand those out to students who might want to take those root balls home and replant it, and see if they can keep growing that lettuce at home that was really successful the last couple of years. And we even had some parents take pictures from their own garden or just from a pot that they put the lettuce in and they were able to harvest little bits of it all summer. So we're trying to, you know, get that healthy food choice and increased fruit, fruit and veggie consumption happening at home with families with their little brothers or sisters if they have them. And just start them as young as they can with healthy food choices. Let's see another example would be third grade and fourth grade usually do a lot of harvesting. So they'll come out in the fall. And sometimes they'll do a farmers market. And they'll take everything and they'll be you using, you know, their economics, their math with weighing and bagging. And, you know, talking about a consumer and a producer and like they're just tying in all different aspects that they're learning at school. And then they'll set up a farmers market, maybe in conjunction with a Friday bake sale, that has gone off at Emerald several times. And it's been really great. And they've actually made quite a bit of money. And that goes into the PTO pot that can pay for the garden program, which is a really nominal fee, but it still is an annual fee. So that's one way that the kids can help, you know, be a part of that as well. And the kids just love harvesting, that's probably their favorite thing. So we try to have all of the grades do a little bit of that. Even the preschool, pre K students do a pumpkin and squash harvest. And the teachers at the pre K are very involved in the garden program. And they'll even do a little squash bake and their little oven that they have in the classroom. And they'll cut everything up and like serve it and say like, you know, this is what you guys grew in the garden. How fun is it? Yeah. And so they get to like, see it in the classroom and bring in their like cooking skills and their little chef abilities and you know, have it where they can actually taste it and eat it. And so they try to parents try to do this, as well. It's one of the reasons that they have the parent helpers is so that, you know, while the garden educator or the teacher is teaching the lesson, the parents can go around and harvest and wash like the cherry tomatoes or cut up a cucumber fresh, and then go around and serve it to the students while they're out in the garden. And one nice thing about the garden is that, you know, there's no other choices for them to eat. And so if they're presented with something healthy and delicious, like a fresh sliced cucumber or cherry tomato, almost always, every single student will try it. And almost always, every student will say oh my gosh, I really liked that. I didn't think I like it, and I loved it. And so that's one other thing that we see is if they're presented with the choice, they'll usually take it and they usually end up loving it. So that's been really fun. And that's one of the fun things that the parent volunteers can do is just go around and and connect the kids to that and have them actually taste it. Right. It's right there in the garden. Yeah, and there's nothing like a fresh tomato. I just want to be exactly, it's my favorite smell on the planet. In fact, when we have when we're winterizing we have Uh, the tomato, especially the cherry tomato plants end up being, you know, sometimes like five, six feet wide, they just everything grows really great there. So we're taking the tomato cages out and pulling everything out. And they're so deeply entwined with everything that I'm like kids, everybody, we got to, you know, 123 Pull up and everyone get their face in there. And, you know, afterwards, they're like, Oh, I love the smell of the tomato plant. And they're that they're doing that exact same thing, kind of rubbing the leaves and smelling it and just like almost rejoicing and how like, earthy and wonderful everything smell. So there's a definite like olfactory and sensory, tactile thing that happens in the garden, that the kids just really come alive in, because they're able to, like, use their hands and do experiential learning and, you know, not just be sitting in the classroom and trying to be on their best behavior. They're, they're, you know, not running around the

garden, we have certain rules, but they're definitely, you know, using their bodies and getting their hands in the soil and helping and washing and rinsing and, you know, helping their classmates do a certain project in the garden and just contributing, yeah, collaborative work, collaborative work, for sure. And we're finding that a lot of the kids when they're doing this are their team, building abilities, and their, how they treat their classmates is better because of the work that they have to do collaboratively in the garden. So that's been another really cool thing to see some kids that might be really shy, in the classroom, just absolutely come to life in the garden. And if they're given the opportunity, and like, Okay, we need you to do this to get the, you know, squash plants out because we're going to harvest all the squash and you need to lift this and do this, they love that having a task and having a clear direction. And they just shine, and they love it. So that's been another great student benefit.

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Wonderful. I just I love hearing these stories, and it's such a wonderful way to get students motivated, excited, you know, enjoying something that's, you know, outside of what they would normally do. But then also, yeah, something so different than just sitting in classroom and learning something head knowledge, you know, right, so different. It's great. Anything else before we finish up?

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Well, let's see. I know that they are always looking for Guardian parents support. And since I do have a fifth grader, this is my last year helping out. So if anyone's ever interested, they can always contact their teacher at the school, if they have a, you know, a student at Emerald. Samara Williams is a principal, there's been tremendous and supportive through all of the years. And I know that she really wants to have support for the for the garden educator who's coming back. And so she can really, you know, do her job, and the more parents that are out there for the lessons helping with classroom management and helping drug small groups of students, you know, the better their learning experiences. So I think just you know, if you don't have to have green thumb, everything is we have volunteer, you know, educational sheets, everything is online, on garden to table.org. On, you know, every volunteer thing that you need to do and how to do it. So there's no green thumb needed at all. It's a super fun way to get into the community to meet other parents to see your kids class and action. And just to have fun, it's a lot of fun. And there's a lot of joy and energy and the kids are just having a blast out there. So that's the feedback we've heard is that it's a really great time to volunteer. So if you're ever interested in doing that, I think that is something that I encourage everybody to

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do. Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Leslie. I really appreciate your time today. Thank you. Absolutely.