



RE:GEN-ERATION PODCAST

EPISODE: INTRODUCTION TO THE RE:GEN-ERATION PODCAST

A: Hello, my name is Alexa Smith.

S: and I'm Sharon Silbermann.

A: Welcome to the RE:GEN-eration podcast, where we'll be having conversations about the circular economy from an intergenerational perspective. Before we dive in too deep about how we met, why we're here and the importance of what we're saying, we wanted to give you a little introduction about how our podcast will work.

S: Each season, we'll explore a different industry, talking with experts driving forth circularity in their respective fields. We'll also discuss relevant terminology and the differences between sustainability, circularity and regeneration. Our topics will cover climate change, behavior change, and the systemic barriers that need our strategic collaboration. One of our goals is to unify the experience of older generations and the energy of younger ones.

A: We each have unique assets, perspectives, and life experiences to address the challenges before us. And we will be kicking off the series by discussing the fashion industry, which makes sense, given that Sharon has over 30 years of experience in apparel design and manufacturing. This podcast will cover some pretty complex topics that illustrate the multifaceted problems and practical solutions to creating circularity. We hope that by producing this series, we can inspire more people to join our movement and reach an audience of all ages and backgrounds. So whether you're an industry professional or an individual completely new to these issues, we welcome you as an active part of our community to embrace the changes we're seeking. Your input is essential to shape our conversations, whether that's positive or critical.

S: Addressing our consumption habits is at the core of mitigating climate change, as well as the ethical treatment of global labor forces. We'd like to challenge you to start thinking about how your own choices influence designers, manufacturers, retailers, and everyone along the value chain. Before we get into how we can create these mindset shifts, we want to share who we are and why we decided to come together to create this podcast.

A: Right. So, as I mentioned earlier, my name's Alexa and I am a senior at the University of Illinois studying environmental policy, economics, and corporate sustainability. But beyond my studies, I identify myself as an author because in April of this year, I published my first book *An Economic Eclipse: Shifting Toward a Sustainable Future by Eliminating Waste*. So researching and writing the book was part of a very long journey and it was so exciting, but the opportunities and the activism that have stemmed from my authorship have been overwhelmingly positive. Basically the book is about the circular economy, sustainable business, and zero waste consumerism. The lessons I learned while writing the book kick-started my interest in educating the public about these sustainability initiatives, and it's been really inspiring to see all of the wonderful people in my life who have consciously begun reducing waste and re-evaluating their individual impact on the environment. So I really see this podcast as my next challenge to spreading awareness about the circular economy and the zero waste lifestyle.

S: Alexa, what inspired you to actually write the book?

A: Yeah. This is a question that I get a lot. I began writing my book during the pandemic when my internship over the summer was canceled, and I suddenly had a lot of extra time on my hands to pursue a passion project. During the summer of 2020, I was reflecting on some of my career goals and contemplating how I could actually make an impact in sustainability and how I could learn more about my passion for sustainable business. I started doing some research and was fascinated by the circular economy because it empowers individual consumers to make tangible impacts. And this is something that I've experimented with a lot as an environmental studies student. The scale of climate change and the need to reduce greenhouse gases can seem insurmountable. It can also be quite disheartening making choices as an individual, like purchasing an electric car, because you can't necessarily see the tangible environmental benefits. But when it comes to zero waste, you can literally see that your trash bin is filling up less and less, and you can see the additional savings in your bank balance as the result of purchasing less. These are environmental benefits that we as individual consumers can conceptualize, and quickly achieve. So Sharon enough about me and my thoughts, I'm curious about where your journey in sustainability and circularity all started.

S: Well, first, I just want to applaud you for doing all of that and taking that inspiration to the individual level, because I do think it really makes a difference when people see how they can impact just in their own lives and seeing the amount of trash that they throw out, reduce by an incredible percentage. You were asking where my journey in sustainability started. I would say in childhood, really, my mom was a department store buyer and my dad was an engineer and my uncle, a chemist working in natural resource preservation. So I grew up immersed in conversations about fashion, engineering and the environment. I've been a designer now for 30 years, and I love the creativity and seeing my work dress other people's lives.

But about 10 years ago, I began dreading that I was just adding to the meaningless pile of clothing at the center of the textile waste problem. Then I started exploring how I could do better and make a positive impact. So I launched an upcycling program with retired seniors that use Eileen Fisher sweaters from their take-back program, but realized I wasn't making a dent in the exploding apparel waste issue. So I went back to school for a Master's in Sustainability, focusing on fashion. I wrote my thesis on creating a circular textile recycling and innovation industry in New York City from the 400 million pounds of post-consumer apparel and textile waste residents here throw into the garbage annually. Building this new circular business model is my mission and part of that is having conversations just like this, raising awareness and helping people of all ages, bring their knowledge, technological savvy, and passion to the table and begin solving the problem through collaboration.

A: Yeah. I remember when we first met Sharon and hearing about your story in the fashion industry. I was immediately admiring this awakening that you had and you continuously re-evaluated your impact in sustainability and challenged the status quo in fashion, which I think is really what brought us together as change-makers, but I've also come to realize through our conversations that the circular economy and zero waste isn't necessarily a novel movement, right?

S: Exactly. We already have a lot of cumulative experience in preserving things, including clothing from a time when industry wasn't focused on built in obsolescence. While in school, especially as an older student, I realized that what younger generations call recycling, resale and retro had originated, in practice, with my grandparents and even older generations back when wars created scarcity. In those times, the economic necessity of buying quality, keeping things in use through repairing patching, darning, and handing down wearable clothing and bedding from one child to the next or one generation to the next was the absolute norm, not a sustainable trend or retro chic. Even the making of quilts kept the fabric from spent clothing in use sometimes for centuries beyond its first life as a shirt or a pair of pants. And this is why I think many of our future solutions exist in the know-how and necessity of the past when the option of consuming constant newness didn't even exist. So Alexa, what else have you pursued since discovering circularity and writing your book?

A: In the process of writing my book, I was very eager to begin practicing what I was preaching. And I was writing a lot about zero waste and circularity as an academic, but didn't really have experience. So like you alluded to Sharon, there's a lot of work to be done in bridging these circularity gaps between generations and between industries, so my junior year I joined a social entrepreneurship organization called Enactus, and Enactus is an international nonprofit hosting a portfolio of projects in each chapter. In my chapter at the University of Illinois, many of these projects were actually aimed at circularity.

I joined the organization for a project called Grounds for Growth, and essentially what they do is repurpose used coffee grounds from local coffee shops and turn them into soaps and scrubs. It's a really cool program because it also simultaneously employed formerly-incarcerated individuals and was really working towards solving these hyper-local social and environmental issues.

S: I love it!

A: It's a really cool program. But currently I'm involved in a project called Phoenix, which is a little bit more tailored to our conversations on circular textiles and the fashion industry. Essentially Phoenix is a fashion up-cycling project for high school students and we have weekly workshops where we teach the students how to mend, embroider, and otherwise revamp clothing pieces that are excess from a local clothing swap. By doing this, we are preventing clothing from being sent to the landfill and giving it a new life, but we're also actively engaging with young people in circular fashion and engaging them in sustainability.

S: That sounds terrific! It makes me want to pick up a needle and thread and say, I'm here, let me volunteer. I think it's great when young people are so involved in changing things. So just quickly, can you comment about working with younger people?

A: Oh yes, of course. So working with high school students, especially those that are identifying themselves as artists and fashion designers, I have consistently found myself awestruck by the amount of ingenuity and the fearlessness that they exhibit. When we first envisioned the program, we suspected that students might be most interested in doing smaller upcycling techniques like painting on jeans or using fabric markers that require a lot less technical skills, but every single one of the students in our program immediately went for the gusto and they decided to start cutting up pieces, mixing and matching different sleeves using sewing machines right out the gate, even though they had no prior fashion design experience. I could really see the passion and the drive that these students had in joining our program, but I've also had the experience of working with older generations, just kind of playing on that intergenerationality component that's so important to our podcast. Although it is in a very different setting. I work for the sustainability advisory team on our campus, which includes a group of faculty, staff, and community members along with students, and we create different recommendations in specialized areas of campus sustainability to achieve our ultimate goal of carbon neutrality. I have especially noticed that the older individuals I work with and the faculty and staff members that have been at the university for a long time, they have been abundantly strategic and a lot more systemic in their approach to pushing forth sustainability initiatives and a lot of the times utilizing their connections to advance our collective agenda. So both of these experiences are very different, but they've allowed me to collaborate with passionate individuals, both younger and older than myself.

S: And I find that always very interesting. There's a definite skillset and sense of, I guess, power and connections that an older generation usually has that sometimes befuddle younger folks that haven't established as many connections yet in life. And so they draw on a different sense of experience and younger people just go for it, which is a great combination when you put them together. You need people that are thought leaders and you need people that are action leaders.

A: I completely agree, Sharon. I'd love to know a little bit more about your experience collaborating with people of different ages in the sustainability and circularity space.

S: Of course! So as I was searching for my next career move, I began attending dozens of networking events and pandemic-inspired online sustainability and circularity conferences. I learned an incredible amount about this wildly complex topic, and also used these webinars to meet the speakers, thought leaders and passionate fellow attendees by inviting them to connect on LinkedIn. I met dozens of students, young people entering the sustainability field, brilliant textile recycling and innovation chemists, policy writers, researchers and creatives exploring advanced chemical recycling and textile innovation, repair, creative reuse, swapping, and resale, from both younger and older generations, like you mentioned. I interviewed dozens of these new connections for my Master's thesis on circular textiles and the possibility of building this industry in NYC. You know, you and I met that same way, and just look how it's led us into collaborating on this podcast and drawing on our individual strengths! And of course, it started with me trying to utilize the skillset of seniors, repurposing end-of-life garments to make patchwork quilts. There's a connection between old and new that draws me in, perhaps because I always loved the fascinating stories my aunt told me of growing up during the Depression and the imaginative ways they invented useful new things from old ones. Alexa, I found your energy and, quite frankly, your authorship at such a young age incredibly inspiring, and I recognized there would be much to gain from us working together to make a positive impact, which is where we are now.

A: Yeah and as you mentioned earlier, we came together right, through Circularity21, the conference.

S: You're Right. Our paths crossed at a fashion focused online conference called Circularity21. There were so many speakers on a huge number of sustainability, circularity and regenerative topics. I got great information, exciting examples of developing technologies and a handful of companies now using them, and a handful of governments setting up the needed programs to put this transformation in motion. There were so many impressive people I wanted to meet and bring to a place where we actually tested our theories together. Alexa answered my invitation in the event chat space. We began zooming and realized how much we had in common.

A: Right, so at first we just sort of met to talk about circular fashion and things that we learned about at the conference, but we soon realized that both of us are from different generations, although we have similar values, but at the same time, varying skill sets and experiences to add our contributions to circularity. And coincidentally, around this time, I was also thinking about making a podcast related to my book. It was just around the time that I was publishing, and after a couple of calls, we realized that this could be a perfect opportunity for Sharon and I to collaborate and to push forward this mission of intergenerationality and circularity.

S: It was sort of kismet. The idea of a podcast also intrigued me because I realized my broader mission requires spreading awareness by educating the public, legislators, investors and various governmental departments, even brands themselves, about these issues-- using this platform to corral an army of supporters. We have great plans for this series and see this helping listeners of all ages understand this new landscape and feel inspired to help engineer changes to build new, better systems arm in arm.

A: Yes. So essentially the goal of this podcast is to provide guidance for consumers through the complex world of circularity, which is a term that's utilized a lot in industry without a full understanding of what it actually means. We realize that up until this point, we haven't necessarily defined the circular economy and we'll get a little bit more into this during the first episode, but as a bit of context, our world is currently situated in what's called the linear economy. The linear economy is called so because it describes the treadmill of resources from the land, or maybe the ocean to the landfill. One useful way that I've heard it described as is the take make waste economy. We take resources from the land or the ocean, make them into products that are useful to humans, and then we dispose of them in the landfill or the incinerator. But on the other hand, a circular economy is centered around resource conservation and reuse and eliminating waste, so rather than sending our used goods to the landfill, we try to repurpose them in a way that is both profitable and environmentally sensible. We aim to regenerate, reduce, reuse, and then as a last ditch effort recycle. So the Ellen MacArthur Foundation is a nonprofit organization based out of the UK. And they do a lot of circular economy advocacy work, and they essentially describe this system through three general principles. As we mentioned: eliminating waste, keeping resources in use, and then regenerating the environment.

S: And I'll just add in there, Alexa, that the take- make- waste model wasn't a problem for a long time when the population was smaller and when we weren't consuming at the rate at which we tend to consume now. Like I mentioned, in the built-in obsolescence, we are creating products that have the intention of being obsolete and going to a landfill or incinerator, and with the population growth it's unsupportable. We're ruining our environment by doing that and we're using up our resources without any way to replenish them.

There's so much to achieve now with an incredible limited window of opportunity before climate change reaches a point of no return, and we believe intergenerationality is at the core of addressing solutions that respect our collective knowledge base and the necessity to both contribute and participate. How do you see it, Alexa?

A: Intergenerationality, as you alluded to, is an integral asset to circularity because we need this unified effort to overcome the massive challenges that we're facing with climate change, waste and other environmental issues. We can't achieve these ambitious goals in isolation, and instead we need to encourage collaboration and we need everybody on board. So when it comes to the different generations and the different pieces that we bring to this puzzle, younger generations are generally keen on interdisciplinary studies. In my own experience, topics like environmental justice and sustainability, which is inherently multidimensional and requires input from engineering, law, business, economics, finance, these are all becoming increasingly popular among young people like myself to study and learn about and try to dissect. But besides that, we also grew up with passionate activists, like Greta Thunberg, who is fearlessly demanding change, and given the urgency of the Sustainable Development Goals and the state of our planet, which we as younger people will be left to cope with for an extended future, we are also flexible and eager for change.

S: In my opinion, older generations possess an experienced understanding of how our economy got to where it is today and the key components of the system we must untangle to create new pathways. This requires overcoming the barriers in design and manufacturing by incorporating new technology and policies while still maintaining profit margins.

A: These intergenerational forces are integral to all industries striving towards circularity, but we decided to begin our series by discussing fashion. Besides the fact that Sharon and I are both extremely passionate about this industry in particular, fast fashion has also been highly criticized over the past couple of years, but what many people might not understand is the true extent of environmental impacts related to textile and apparel manufacturing.

S: There are so many visuals we'd love to show you, but here are just some of the hard facts. Textiles have an extreme waste crisis and are the fastest growing waste stream category projected to grow another 63% by 2030--outpacing all other categories by five times. Additionally, textile and fashion tangentially employ one in about every eight people globally and touch energy, agriculture, food, fossil fuels, plastics, labor forces and human rights, chemicals, toxic waste, water and oceans, forests, biodiversity, packaging, and financial stability, just to name some.

A: The impacts of the fashion industry are so vast and we're so excited to begin unpacking these industries and all of the tangential environmental impacts that come from that.

Actually in our first episode, we will start unpacking the reasons why we are in the state that we're in today, and we'll go a little bit into the history of fast fashion and how it's progressed into our current linear model. There are so many things that I personally have learned through conducting research for this episode. And we're so excited to share with you everything that we've learned,

S: Ditto for me, thank you all so much for listening to our first episode. This was mostly meant to serve as an introduction to us and our mission, so stay tuned for more content on circular fashion.

A: Also please follow us on our LinkedIn page, which is @RE:GEN-eration Podcast and visit our website [re-gen-erationpodcast.com](https://re-generationpodcast.com) to learn more and sign up for our newsletter. Please also share this episode with friends, family, colleagues, or anyone you think would be interested in following along our journey. We are looking forward to hearing your comments and we'll catch you in our next episode.