

## Episode 8: "Micro-Stories Leading to Climate Action"

Jean Eells, Stephanie Enloe, and Linda Shenk

The Art of Climate Dialogue

Vivian:

Welcome to the Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa. Produced by myself, Vivian M. Cook and The EcoTheatre Lab. And welcome to today's conversation with Jean Eells, Stephanie Enloe and Linda Shenk, facilitators for recent storytelling based climate projects through the Women, Food and Agriculture Network projects, which we'll learn more about in today's episode. But first, Jean, Stephanie and Linda will start us off by reading some of the micro stories shared by women landowners who participated in these climate initiatives.

Jean:

Ties between mothers and daughters: "I was also fortunate that along the way my daughter was very much interested in farming and food. It is now her chosen profession. As I was taking farm related seminars, she was doing her coursework. She had years of me sharing the stories of my family and its agricultural history, as well as including her and my love of the environment. I also learned from her, not only about what she was studying, but also how she's able to speak out and express her ideas and concerns. I'm still learning how to speak out. Something that has been important to both of us is exploring the thread of strong women and farmer who came before us in our family, a lineage that extends back five generations. This discovery fascinated us because these women were long-term farm widows and landowners who successfully managed the farm operations and supported their families even during the Great Depression. But ironically, none of them would've identified themselves as farmers and their contributions to our family agricultural history have gone unrecognized. Even we women in the family hadn't given our mothers the credit they were due."

Linda:

And this is a story from Sonya about her relationship with her tenants: "I make time to ride in the tractors and combines. I'm lucky to have this opportunity to do this with my renters, and it is the conversation during these times it gives me credibility when I work with them. It's like the old saying, 'I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care.' These conversations and the questions I ask are the ways my renters know I care. I try to interact with my renters throughout the growing season and at a year-end meeting. I usually start the meeting with, I believe in continuous improvement. I then ask these four questions, what needs to be done to improve the farm? How should we prioritize improvements? How do we budget for those improvements? What is something new you would like to try? These questions and the time it takes to talk through them, sometimes several times, really show not only how much I care about what they're doing, but also how much I want them to own the decision too. It becomes about how I am supporting them."

Stephanie:

And this is a quote from another landowner named Irene. "Ultimately, I know that the land needs a voice not just to be extracted from, it's an ecosystem of which the human is a part. This is what I need to be doing for the land and the climate crisis."

Vivian:

Addressing climate change is urgent, but in order to move toward action, we first have to find ways to talk about climate change with one another. The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa is a podcast series featuring 13 conversations with artists, farmers, community engaged researchers and community organizers and activists, who have all used arts and storytelling strategies to talk about climate change

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and agriculture. Through this podcast, they generously share these strategies so that listeners can implement them in their own communities. I'm Vivian and I invite you to explore the Art of Climate Dialogue with me. As we enter into these conversations around climate action, sustainable agriculture and community engaged arts in Iowa, The EcoTheatre Lab and I want to first recognize that Indigenous nations have been leaders in such conversations for centuries and continue to be today. Iowa now occupies the homelands of Native American nations to whom we owe our commitment and dedication.

Iowa is now situated on the homelands and trading routes of the Ioway, Meskwaki and Sauk, Otoe, Omaha, Ihanktonwan and Santee. And because history is complex and time goes far back beyond memory, we also acknowledge the ancient connections of many other Indigenous peoples here. The history of broken treaties and forced removal that dispossess Indigenous peoples of their homelands was and is an act of colonization and genocide that we cannot erase. And as a result, Indigenous ecosystems within Iowa have suffered from extraction, degradation, and unsustainable agricultural practices, contributing to the ongoing climate crisis. Understanding and addressing these injustices is critical as we work toward climate dialogue, action, and justice in our communities. My thanks to podcast interviewees, Shelley Buffalo, enrolled member of the Meskwaki Tribe, Lance Foster, enrolled member and tribal historian of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, and Sikowis Nobiss, Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation for their collaboration in developing this acknowledgement.

I am excited to be talking with Jean Eells, Stephanie Enloe and Linda Shenk in today's episode. Jean operates E Resources Group, LLC from Webster City, Iowa. She grew up on an Iowa farm where there were no cockle birds. She conducts research and conservation programs with Women, Food and Agriculture Network and other partners.

Stephanie is the director of programming for the Women, Food and Agriculture Network, or WFAN, and a PhD candidate at Cornell University. She recently returned to her home state of Iowa after living for several years at Ithaca, New York. In her role as a graduate student, Stephanie works with a Malawian farming organization called Soils, Food and Healthy Communities to support their ongoing efforts to advance agroecology. She brings her interest in sustainable food systems, social justice and participatory learning models to her work coordinating WFANs' Women Caring for the Land and Harvesting Our Potential programs.

Linda is an Associate Professor of English at Iowa State University. In her research, she applies her background in storytelling and performance to how researchers and community members can co-create narratives that foster relationship building, action and resilience. She teaches courses that bring together Shakespeare, Climate Change Theatre Action, community empowerment and science communication.

Hello, Jean, Linda and Stephanie. Thank you so much for joining the podcast today. To start us off, can each of y'all introduce yourselves briefly so that the podcast listeners can recognize your voices during our conversation today?

Jean:

I'm Jean Eells.

Linda:

I'm Linda Shenk.

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Stephanie:

Hi, I'm Stephanie Enloe.

Vivian:

Wonderful. So at the beginning of this episode, y'all read for us several micro stories shared by women landowners who participated in a climate action project you facilitated through the Women, Food and Agriculture Network. I know you are currently in the second iteration of this exciting initiative. So can y'all describe for us the history and goals of this project?

Jean:

Sure. This is Jean, I'll start. Women, Food and Ag Network had been doing Women Caring for the Land meetings for a long time, and they were generally one day meetings. So we'd come in, do the meeting and go on to the next place where we had funding to do another meeting. And we really wanted to be able to work with women on a repeat basis. So the idea was to work within a watershed, a smaller boundary, and work with women three times, was the original, then the pandemic hit, and we had to pivot to four times and we had to do it virtually. So we had to change some things, but it was the idea that they could bond and get to know each other and learn from each other that we knew was going to be an important component.

Stephanie:

And this is Stephanie. I just want to pick up on the point that Jean just made about the importance of this program giving landowners an opportunity to build relationships with each other. I came on board to WFAN about a year ago, and so Jean and Linda and WFAN had already moved toward this idea of essentially having cohorts of women who would continue to meet together, build relationships, learn from one another. And it's clear to me that these relationships are spurring the landowners on to continue to feel inspired, continue to learn about new ideas for what they can be doing for their land. And as you might have picked up from some of those quotes, it's often a gradual process, especially for these women to perhaps talk with their farmers about some gradual changes that they'd like to see on the land.

And so there's also that social support network who can help the landowners' problem solve each step of the way over the years as they continue to make improvements to their land. And so that's something that has to be done in more than just a one-off meeting, something that has to be done over time.

Linda:

And this is Linda, and some of the things I found really powerful when I heard about this project from Jean and from WFAN. I was really interested in how there was this focus on working with a group of women over time to let ideas evolve and change, and particularly with this idea of building relationships and learning from one another. And that's something that in the research, I'm a researcher at Iowa State University. There's a big interest right now in research in climate adaptation and resilience that we co-produce knowledge with communities. That we don't just focus on producing information for them, but we actually work with community partners with actual people and learn from each other in collaboration. And I just found really powerful, the emphasis on relationship building, as well as the kind of environmental focus. And so bringing to this then a real emphasis on storytelling was just a really powerful mix for me.

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One of the things that I've really loved about this is how much we've all learned from each other. And I feel that as a researcher, I've learned as much from these women as I'd like to think they might have learned from all three of us. It's really been a sense of us all collaborating together.

Vivian:

That's really wonderful to hear. And I know y'all have talked about this collaboration, like you said, not only with the women who join the project, but with each other bringing different strengths to the project, different backgrounds. So can you tell us a little bit about what role each of you have played in this project and how that's contributed to these climate dialogues?

Jean:

Sure. I'll start again. This is Jean. And part of what I do is I try to connect the conservation and the climate pieces together in ways that the women talk about it, rather than coming at those topics the way scientists might come at it, which might be a whole different language base. So really focusing on the stories and hearing what women are saying and what are they interested in, how are they connecting to those things? It's been really important. The insights from them has really transformed my work with conservation agencies to help them understand that women's timelines to implement things is different. And there can be a lot of different ways that they go about getting the work done. And it's all based on relationships. And so of course, having that first conversation is super important. And so it brings us right back to storytelling and how do you tell how you care about the land?

Linda:

And this is Linda and what I've, I'm a Shakespeare professor at Iowa State, and that background actually is very much connected to storytelling, obviously. But also because Shakespeare's theater, that particular setup, we don't usually think about it this way, but that the way that those actors put plays on was very collaborative, and each one of them was an expert that brought a different type of expertise and each literally brought a piece of the story. So I come with a background in collaborative performance and storytelling.

Stephanie:

And I'm the director of programming for WFAN. And so this is one of many projects that fall under the Women Caring for the Land program umbrella. So I'll speak a little bit to my role as the coordinator for WFAN's Women Caring for the Land programming. A lot of what I bring is the facilitation. WFAN thinks of ourselves as a connector. So we're a small but mighty staff and of course, we all have our various pieces of expertise and background. But where we really are able to help deliver strong programming is in building partnerships with all kinds of experts. And like Linda was saying, and I think Jean hit on this as well, we don't just mean the experts at ISU or the experts like Jean who has decades in education and conservation and working with her own land, but also the landowners themselves, the farmers themselves as experts.

And so I try within the Women Caring for the Land programming as much as possible to find ways that we can bring different experts and different types of experts into conversations with each other around land stewardship and around empowering women to feel like they get to have a say in their land and in making sure that it's well stewarded and that it's being stewarded in a way that's responsive to changing climate. And like Linda, I bring a background, more of a social science background than a humanities, but a background in doing participatory research, which has a lot of strong parallels to this idea of

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collaborative storytelling. And again, goes back to this idea of everybody is an expert in their own lives, lived experiences. And it's when you bring those different voices into conversation with each other, that true learning happens and knowledge is built. And so I kind of bring that perspective to this project.

Vivian:

That's great. And seems like a really wonderful experience for all three of y'all to be able to work together and to bring all of those lenses to this project in addition to all of the women who are participating. So can you also tell us about who does participate in this project? How do you reach out to them? Who has signed up in both the first and second iterations? What are their backgrounds? What kinds of experiences are they bringing to the conversation?

Linda:

I think what's been really interesting about the folks who have participated in the project actually happened when we had to shift from our initial idea of doing this in person to doing it over Zoom. And I had to say, I'll admit it, we came to that decision kicking and screaming, like "no!" But really we were like, "Oh, no." But what was really fascinating when we did that was the diversity of participants who joined. So what's really interesting about what happened with this project is that we had now women who never wouldn't have been able to come to a face-to-face meeting. So we had women coming who lived out of state, but owned their land in Iowa. They were able to participate. We had women who had small children. So maybe taking the time out to not only have balancing work and family, but then also this additional commitment would've been difficult.

And so what's happened is we've had women who own land and do maybe some type of what we would think of as farming. So a real mix of backgrounds have come together and learn from each other. And what's really interesting from a conservation perspective, and certainly Jean and Stephanie can talk about this even more than I can, is that these are usually groups that are often kind of engaged separately as they have different needs, and they do. But by bringing them all together, it's this idea that Stephanie was talking about of everyone has a particular expertise, everyone's bringing knowledge. And when we bring that diversity together, that's when we really create really interesting knowledge. And that's what happened with the diversity of the women who come together that we have found.

Jean:

I can't overstate how different their land circumstances are. As a conservationist, when I heard them talk about what they had that they would be coming to meetings with, I was just kind of flabbergasted how well they hung together. But not only did they hang together, but they loved getting together with each other. And so it was that power of relationship. Again, it's not about the content always. They definitely drove content. They were all eager for content, and I really had to keep popping to keep up with the kinds of needs each one of them had and kind of keep them woven together from a conservation standpoint. But it was the story and the narrative that carried the thing.

Vivian:

I'm very excited to talk more about what the role of relationship building and storytelling, especially based on the themes of this podcast, how those have played a role in helping people talk about climate change. And then I know from your project, which we will get to soon, actually figure out ways to implement those conversations through action projects and to support each other along the way and what that means for these groups of women that y'all are working with, for y'all as facilitators and for

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everyone who might be listening, who's trying to figure out ways to tackle this really massive problem that we're all facing with climate change. But tackle it oftentimes on a very small level is how we can connect with each other and how we can connect with our neighbors and how we can pool resources and knowledge and expertise.

So thank you for giving us that background on how you're bringing people together to ask questions and share stories and all of that. So I want to dive into learning more about how you integrated storytelling into this project. So as all of y'all have mentioned, central to the project are collaborative storytelling strategies, which you weave into this programming about conservation and answering questions about conservation practices and how they can be implemented. So what do you mean by storytelling and why do y'all make it a focus in this work?

Linda:

I should emphasize with this idea of implementing these is that when we all talk about storytelling, we're not talking about having these women craft these really polished narratives that have a beginning, middle, and end with a climax. And that we've worked on word choice and done all those things that we think of when we think of, particularly in the arts and humanities, when we read a good story. So that all the things that we do with this idea of storytelling are all things that folks don't have to have particular background or training really to be able to do. There's plenty of training that goes behind what we do and what we have done. But at the same time to get started with it's really starting with having repeated and different types of moments where different people share their experience and their interests. And those can be as simple as, I'll just give example of two of the prompts that we have the women talk about or write to us in advance.

It just depends on the programming, we've done it two different ways. Here is just two of the prompts that we've used, and some of these prompts have been things that elicited the stories that we read for you at the beginning. So one of those prompt is just simply describe a memory about the land that is important to your story, who you are, what you care about. And then another storytelling based is what's a story you would like to be able to tell about your land five years from now? So those are two simple prompts. One of them is getting, which is very important for us with landowners, with that first prompt about describing a memory about the land that is important to their story. Sometimes landowners don't feel because they aren't necessarily the ones who are actively what we would think of as farming, farming the land. They don't feel connected to the land or realize they have a connection or a long history of family connections to the land and not necessarily the land they own, but just land in general.

And getting them to talk about that, we start to hear from them the stories of conservation and stewarding the land that are already a part of this story. And so we hear those and then in this idea of what's a story you would like to be able to tell about your land five years from now? That's a part where we get to hear about essentially their goals. What is it that they want to be able to do that if we were to fly in five years from now, what's the story that we would see? And what's really great about these is that for all of these ideas with storytelling, the women themselves are the experts. They are the ones who know their land, they are the ones who know their experience and it's personal so it really resonates. And we, along the way, will tell our own stories as facilitators.

And so we kind of bring all those pieces together, which is part of that relationship building that is so important to all of us as well as the idea of storytelling. So we ask about weather, what is a memory of weather or a weather event that you have? Or what is a weather event that you think about in terms of your decision making with your land? And they can talk about that story. So those are a little bit of just

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some of the, well, what do you mean by storytelling? It really is simply on one level, just having people share moments of their experience and their interests and their goals through notions of storytelling.

Vivian:

And it seems like the kinds of stories or questions, prompts y'all are asking to elicit these stories, create this environment that does invite everybody to contribute from the get-go. Because what I'm hearing from these stories is anyone can answer that question and anyone can pull from whatever knowledge, background, expertise that they have to answer that question in their own way as opposed to . . . I think, in a lot of conversations about what's going on with climate change, then we start with certain experts having certain knowledge, passing that onto people and then expecting people to do something with it without necessarily having a place in the conversation to find themselves.

Jean:

There is a history, a long history of Women, Food and Ag Network and our Women Caring for the Land learning circles to start out with the opportunity to introduce themselves because women kind of like to know who all is in the room before they open their mouth and ask hard questions. They want to know who's there. And so we give them a chance to express that. But I know in the early years, and so this is probably 15 years ago or more, and you think about the age of the women that might have been coming, it would've been a prior generation. Sometimes they kind of broke down in tears because nobody had ever asked them if they cared, how they cared and what they felt about the land. And so for others, sometimes it was the first practice they had saying something important about their farmland because otherwise they had been kind of diminished in that role and wouldn't refer to themselves as anything but a helper.

And so it's not only powerful from a programmatic standpoint, it's powerful for programming for women who are not necessarily polished at speaking authoritatively about their land and opening up that door to that authority to say, yes, I have this experience, or this is my desire. Makes a big difference.

Vivian:

And that caring about being involved in the stewardship of the land is essential to climate action.

Jean:

And for them to hear that from each other, it's just so dynamic because they may have known each other for years. Our women in our cohort didn't. But I've sat in meetings where women maybe lived across the section from each other for years and didn't know that they cared the same way about the health of the land because they'd always, they'd done church things or they did school things or their kids have done 4H together, et cetera. And they were always busy about those other things and they never had the conversation about how much they cared about their land and what was happening and how concerned they were about water and air and the health of their people, et cetera. So opening up that story is really, I mean it's a history with Women, Food and Ag Network, but it also connects us to where we are at the present. It's something that will continue.

Vivian:

So the women shared these stories with y'all sometimes you said in writing, but also with each other. And so what kinds of conversations emerged from these initial little micro stories about why people

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cared and what they're thinking about in terms of their land and climate and weather? What conversations emerged within the group after those initial storytelling sessions?

Linda:

Several things emerged. Sometimes when they would introduce themselves, they would share a little bit too about what their other life is, like, "I do this." And then that expertise was then part of the circle. So we would see, this person has a role in kind of civic leadership. This person has a background in estate and tax planning. This person has urban planning work. This person's been an attorney. And we all of a sudden get all these other bits and pieces that when we start having some conversations about something maybe in a session or two down the line, that suddenly comes back up again. And that person then feels, this part of me matters too. And they can bring in that particular perspective or that expertise. And sometimes it's just a lovely just kind thing. People will share, I really like apple crisp for breakfast.

And that becomes a thing. "Oh yeah, I do too." And so those will just come in to weave those little fun connections in addition to some of what we think of as expertise. So what's nice is it moves across, which is what storytelling does, it moves across different ways of knowing. Lets all of those kinds of exist all kind of in one package. That's really lovely. And I guess I should just say too is, that what'll happen is not only will they then begin to ask each other, so then they'll ask another person a little bit about their idea or their land or something they heard them talk about their land, so give me that too. And then they add that in. And then over time what happens is then as we do each progressive session is their stories begin to weave together and they begin to say, well, I'm really now inspired to do this because that's what Sonya is doing, or I got this idea because Irene does this. And so then their stories begin to connect together and overlap.

Vivian:

It sounds like these stories lead to shared resources too and shared knowledge about what could be done and could be expanded on in their own communities even if they live states apart. So we've gotten kind of a sense of what these stories have led to what kinds of questions you're asking that lead to these micro stories. Could y'all give us a sense of what the progression of the project looks like so you have multiple listening sessions? Can you tell us where they start and what they're leading to, what you do in each session? How you build that storytelling network on itself?

Stephanie:

For one of the projects and the one that we're primarily focusing on today, which is this cohort model, where we bring a group of women landowners together for several meetings that span six months or so. We found women who would be interested in participating. And the first session was really about getting to know each other, explaining what the project was or is. And as we've gone on, we've gone deeper into people's stories, but also deeper into some "technical information" that the women can then come into conversation with, if you will, around, "Okay, how does this shape my vision for my land for the future?"

And one of the meetings that we did, they were individual meetings with each woman landowner rather than a group meeting. And Linda has created this very cool model where she can essentially say, here's what happens if rainfall is light versus heavy. Here's what happens for these different rainfall amounts, depending on what kind of ground cover is on the land. Here is what happens to how rain events and



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land cover are interacting depending on what's going on with the landowners' "readiness" to take care of their land and the community's readiness to be taking care of their land.

And so we run these different seemingly quite straightforward simulations that show how much water might be running off land and what that might be doing for water quality and biodiversity and soil health. And as that model is running, Linda asks the women, what are you noticing? What's true of your land that we should put into this model that you'd like to see what might happen? Let's talk about your relationships with other people who might be involved in managing this land or other people in your community or people in your watershed. And how does that affect what's going to happen to your land? And so there's this kind of back and forth where we try to stay away from a kind of top-down educational model. We're bringing different information into conversation. The women are telling us, this is what I see. Here are the relationships. Here's how my land acts when this happens. Here's the type of rain events that I've been seeing more and more of lately.

And then we're like, let's find your farm on a watershed map. What do you notice about where you are in the watershed? Let's talk about what that has to do with how water's moving across your land. And as we start to look at that, the women then identify, here's some high priority opportunities to deal with some issue that I'm spotting on my land. And a lot of it has to do right now with how water's moving, right, as you would imagine, and what that has to do with soil quality and health. And from there the women come up with an action project and we have some funding available to help pay for the action projects, which can span from, I want to put in some berry bushes to help pull some water that's really rushing down into my farm and creating issues where I'm trying to grow other plants or other crops to, I would like to host some kind of social event for the people in my neighborhood and my watershed so that people can come together and get to know each other.

And then as the relationships are there so that if I notice somebody up watershed is maybe not doing a great job of controlling the way that water is moving across their land, at least there's some relationship there where we can maybe start to have a conversation about what that looks like then on my farm. I guess my point is that through this collaborative storytelling process, relationships have a chance to come in a big way. And as we know or I hope folks know and understand, and this is what I believe, that the path forward to living in whatever climate future we're heading toward is we need strong relationships. We need community deeply. And so by having this storytelling aspect, people bring in relationships, people build community, and then they come up with "climate adaptation strategies." Which they may or may not frame that way, that have to do with building relationships and not just necessarily doing some kind of farming practice, if you will.

Vivian:

That was fantastic to get a sense of how y'all move through all of these components over the course of several months, but it sounds like there's opportunities to build trust even through conversations about apple pie or whatever it might be. Small moments to build trust with each other and then to build trust with y'all through these more one-on-one conversations and then to apply that through storytelling and then through more technical elements to these action projects. And it sounds like y'all are incorporating elements of storytelling throughout the entire process. I know that some of the iterations of this project, you bring in experts kind of in different technical areas where the participants can ask questions that might relate specifically to their land, to their action projects, to how they're addressing climate action. Why was it important for y'all to even through these very technical conversations to continue incorporating storytelling elements?

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Jean:

I think that this is the point where programming specifically designed for women in situations where women can thrive is quite different from other conservation outreach programming. And it's not that there aren't ways that women can learn effectively in other settings, but what we're doing is centering the idea that women carry out all things on the farm, but certainly conservation projects through relationships. They have to ask somebody else to help them to do this thing, or they may have to negotiate with a family member with whom they share the land. They may have to try to negotiate with the tenant to get them to do something that they may be dragging their feet on. And how do I manage that relationship? That happens through good strong relationships, but also through dialogue. How do I manage that? When can I practice how I might say that? How has somebody else said that? Centering that has made a difference in how women are able to actually carry out conservation projects.

So I could tell them, "Okay, here's how you go here and you ask for a grass waterway and it's going to be designed this way and it's going to take care of this many acres." And all that kind of stuff, that doesn't help them manage the relationships. And so this just turns conservation outreach on its head and says, let's start with where our people are that own the land, that care about this, that are going to have to live with the consequences. Let's start with them and then start adding the conservation technical expertise that they need when they need it the way they want it and they direct the questions. Completely different than a, you have to know all of this.

Stephanie:

And that's where I want to really emphasize the point that Vivian made earlier about trust, because trust breeds the ability to be vulnerable, and then the women tell about the challenges that they are encountering or have encountered, which often are relational, and that's a space of deep vulnerability. And so then you have women who are willing to share with each other's stories about, I had a tenant and I worked with him for years and he wouldn't budge on doing X, y, Z practice that I really knew my land needed. And so I had to fire him as my farmer and find somebody else, and this is how that felt. And here's how I continued to try and manage that relationship with somebody who might still be my neighbor. And yet I fired him from this job of farming my land and getting into how that felt and how I managed it and how I did it.

That's a story that requires trust that is built over time. And then what that opens up, I think, for the other women that we work with who aren't as far along with that journey is the ability to imagine something that maybe they hadn't imagined as possible before. And not to say, we're working with all of our women landowners to fire their farmer tenants and get somebody better on them. Not at all, right? But just to imagine a type of conversation that they might have hesitated to imagine before is possible and that people come out the other side happy and with land that is well managed.

Linda:

I think that's been one of the things as we think about this idea of trust and how we can also, because we meet repeatedly, we get a chance to get to know each other. What's really then fun and we can kind of talk through, like Stephanie was saying, well, how did that moment feel? What did I do? So even unpacking that process, that moment gets opened up a little bit. And what also is nice is that folks get to see each other evolve and like, I remember when you were thinking about that and now you are, whatever. And so one of the things that has become really important for action and for storytelling is that what is just as important with this whole process of telling one story, then also kind of adding to

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one story by listening and asking questions. Because when one is doing and asking questions, one's actually speaking the terminology and using the language.

And that one of the thing I think all three of us really share as crucial with climate change and with everything is that some of these issues can be intimidating and scary and sometimes can create paralysis because they are so complicated from the social and the environmental perspectives, is that it lets through not only speaking, but all that full sense of ownership to be able to take those issues of climate adaptation and community relationships and resilience and weave those stories into the stories of our everyday lives. So they're not just that information of the big picture, but they then become those intimate stories that we weave and we tell about ourselves now can include those things about climate action, about the relationships that we need for resilient communities and that we're weaving those together. And that's particularly central to everything that we do.

Vivian:

And Linda, I actually want to hear you talk a little bit more about this because I know you use a particular strategy in much of your work, including this project that comes from the arts and humanities and is crucial to this kind of story-based climate dialogue facilitation that y'all are doing. So can you talk about that strategy and why it's so useful for supporting dialogue and action regarding climate change?

Linda:

Storytelling has become this big almost buzzword, you hear it everywhere, people talk about storytelling. And there's this idea of telling ones story and this idea of just a one direction story. But as we've been talking about, this is really a bringing together of stories. And one of the things that I've learned from my background in collaborative performance and the humanities, particularly Shakespeare, is that what storytellers know about good storytelling that will resonate with people that will invite them to enter in isn't just that you tell a good story, it's that the story you tell has gaps. It has spaces, it has ideas that are left unspecified or unresolved. And those are those places that listeners or readers, if one's reading something, can enter into with their own experiences and their own needs. So I'll give an example from Shakespeare, since everyone knows I'm a Shakespeare professor. Many of us have read Romeo and Juliet, the famous play.

And what's fascinating is that Romeo and Juliet, we continue to get production after production after production in part because Shakespeare never tells us why those two families are feuding, ever. And because he never says that, that's a gap, that's a space. That then every production or every community or group that's putting it on enters into that space and fills it with their own context. And so that's what we're doing a lot with these stories is like in that model that Stephanie was talking about that I've created. There are certain aspects of that very simple model that leads space, that invite the women to tell their stories. Or when we have a content expert come and they give a little bit of their story, but only par. And then the women ask questions and then bring out more of the story, and then women ask how then their story enters into.

And I think sometimes when we think of storytelling, we jump too quickly to the idea of a finished and complete story. When the stories that resonate the most, and we can pull this, frankly, Indigenous cultures have known this for millennia, is that the power of storytelling is really, its interactiveness and when it's more communal and that climate dialogue that you're talking about. And so that's what we work to create as a sense of stories that leave open, that leave space for other stories to come and enter into. And that's very much how I have come to this and been fascinated by it is how much when we leave space for others to tell their stories too, that not only do we all learn from each other, but

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everyone gets a chance to own the story that they create. And it also, one thing that's been really powerful for us is that when we get the women to tell their stories, and it isn't just women. It's anyone who maybe hasn't felt they can tell their stories or they have a story to tell.

That when they tell their stories, they realize that they're experts too and that the ideas that they have maybe have been a part of who they are all along. And now there's a place for them to take action out of who they are already. And so it's really about their strengths and their gifts. Whereas when we think about information, we come at it from a deficit model, the old idea of the deficit model. We need to educate you and fill in what you don't know. And there is a value of information, but this whole comes at it from a very different place that really is much more empowering and much more about connecting is because it releases the strengths that are already there and that really is what can propel everyone to learn from each other. And for folks who never thought they had any knowledge enough to take action to do stuff that blows your mind, it's just like, "Oh my goodness, look at you go."

Vivian:

And earlier you mentioned how this process that y'all are doing kind of allows these narratives about climate and weather and what they're dealing with on their land, becoming part of their everyday personal narrative, which you're saying here about taking ownership of that story. And it seems like that's helpful too because the climate narrative isn't just about the gloom and doom and apocalyptic nature of climate change, but about the individual and collective resources they have to address climate change and the relationships they have to address climate change. And then that becomes a part of their everyday narrative as well, which can hopefully lead to action that feels supported in some way.

Stephanie:

I think that's such an important point, Vivian. It's easy when you encounter any kind of data or modeling around how climate change is currently affecting our social ecologies at all kinds of different scales and how it will to just feel paralyzed, right? Because it's terrifying. But what these really personal narratives that kind of bring together women landowners' experiences and strengths with climate data do, I'll give an example of what this might look like. So we'll talk through here's what the models say about the future of how rainfall will happen in Iowa. We're going to be looking at fewer rain events, but when they happen, they'll be bigger. And then we'll work with the women to come up with some memory of a rain event that could be comparable to the types that we'll be seeing more of. These four or five, six inch large rain events. And to also be thinking about periods between rainfall events where maybe it was dry and/or hot.

What did that mean for your crops? What did that mean for your land? What helped? What did you need? And so in thinking at that level of just my land, what's coming, what's something that I can do now to control some part of how my land will cope with the next time that happens or next times that happens? That's where the action projects come in. And then there's something tangible that, like Linda said, already plays on the women's strengths. So maybe that is building more relationships so that people can come together in tough times. For example, making sure that neighbors call each other when they know a bad storm is coming in. That's a part of climate resilience. Or maybe it means getting to know your neighbor up watershed and asking him or her to do some land works to help you control water. Maybe it means putting in a pond, whatever it is, but there's something small that you can do on your land that you already know the answer to. It's just a matter of taking the next steps.

Jean:

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So when I think about how complex it is to do an educational program, if you're starting and saying, I want to make an educational program. First off, to not come at it from the deficit standpoint, that's a big deal. But then also it's very challenging when you've got some technical expertise, how to weave that in so that it makes sense in the context of that person's life, whether they've got a lot of time to work with this stuff or whether they just kind of touch lightly because they're really busy and they've got somebody else that they trust to manage the farm, but they're concerned and they want to be involved. And that dance back and forth in terms of time to have something that is compelling that they go, "Wait a minute, that's what's happening. Oh, I didn't necessarily pay attention to that rain. I didn't realize that that's what happened.

Now I'm going to go back and look more carefully because I know what I'm looking for." That is a real dance for interpretation to interpret how much technical information is going to be relevant so that you don't just rain down all this technical information about watersheds and acre feet and all that kind of stuff. To be able to say, this is really what it looks like. You can go see it if you're concerned about it. Here's actually happening to your crops, your farmers' productivity, profitability, the whole bit, and here's a suite of things that may help with that. And to put those in the context of that person's life, I think, takes a real art to blend that science to not overwhelm that technical side.

Vivian:

And it seems like that's figuring out ways for people to not only connect that technical information through relationships, but also how that technical information can help them connect to each other and to the land, as opposed to it just being this jargon washing over them and they don't know what to do with it, that it actually becomes a way to tether them to the land and their relationship to the land, which I think a lot of us are. It's hard to keep that relationship to the land and our environment and each other strong right now. And I think it that's become more difficult, especially during the pandemic and everything else, and that it gives them agency. And Jean, I wanted to have you talk a little bit more about this idea of agency and about how the role of storytelling can potentially help combat the invisibility that so many women farmers and landowners face in the agricultural space.

Jean:

It's a complex piece, but to even start talking about this in the first place, in Iowa for example, women owner co-own half the farmland. It's really, that's a place to start that conversation. And once you start that conversation, well, if they own it, what are they doing? Do they care? Maybe they live out of state. I'm sure they don't care. And to start countering that story and to be able to say, "Oh gosh, here's really going on again." Again, taking the technical and pulling it back to the context, "Here's what's really happening. Women are taking action. Oh my gosh, we find that they want to do something, they just want to do it in their way." They want information, they want to learn it the way they want to learn it. It's not that they won't learn in these other contexts, it's just that they get so much further. They're so much more effective when we meet them where they are and hear what they have to say. And it makes all the difference.

Vivian:

With that idea of meeting people where they're at, identifying the assets that people already had that they can bring. And then building relationships. I know when we've talked earlier in preparation for this podcast, and we talked about this idea of belonging too, that that can bring. When you have trust, when you're building relationships and when you're creating spaces where there are gaps in the narrative

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about climate action for people to say, here are the assets that I can offer, here are the resources that I can offer, here is the expertise, the knowledge, the experiences that I can share with myself more openly and with my neighbors and the people around me. That all of that maybe creates this sense of belonging, which can lead to agency, which can lead to action. So can we talk a little bit about why belonging is important to climate action?

Linda:

It's been so inspiring to me to hear in terms of belonging again and again from the women landowners, how they felt they have not belonged. And that means that they don't even feel they have a voice or they feel they don't know very much about something. And when you get them to tell their story over time, bits and pieces, these little micro stories. They start to realize, "I actually do know a lot more than I thought I did." I mean, I am shocked how many times they start talking about their land and they say, "I know." They're like, "Well, I really don't know enough to be able to ask my farmer who seems very successful. I don't know enough to ask anything." And yet they're rattling off what's going on at the farm. They know what kind of issues are happening. And I'm like, "You know a lot."

So just sometimes the ownership comes in through speaking it and speaking it out loud has been really interesting. Which again, is this idea of storytelling is that it isn't just the idea of having a story, but it's also speaking that story and realizing and kind of owning that story. So time and time again, I feel like people are like, "Oh, I never realized that I know as much as I do." Or they also say, "I never realized that the whole relationships part of this is part of climate action, is part of conservation. When I'm working to build a relationship with my tenant that is part of conservation." We put so much focus on roots in the ground that we don't sometimes focus on all the other things that go around that system to support it. And that's been the really interesting thing, which research is finally catching up to this whole idea of like, it's a social environmental system.

It isn't just about the environment. So research is catching up, but we are still catching up. And that definitely hasn't trickled out too. So when we have these get togethers where women are going out now and they're getting people together and they're sharing things or they're getting people in their watershed together. These are not folks that have ever thought they would have a role in climate action, but now they see there's a place for them and the gifts that they have and that sense of ownership that I think what the storytelling and what we're out to do is to show that the opportunities for climate action and for just resilient community action are huge. And we kind of open up the straight jacket.

Vivian:

And you said, we're waiting for this kind of work to trickle out a little bit more. But I'm curious if y'all have heard of if there's been ripple effects from the women who have participated in these circles and their experiences with these storytelling strategies. Do y'all know if this has affected the way that they engage with people who haven't participated with their neighbors, with their family members, other people that they're trying to talk to about climate action?

Linda:

Yes. We have, we've talked about this ice cream social of the folks in the watershed come together. They have now done a second annual one. And so folks come together and now people are starting to get to know each other and realize, "Oh, you are in this neighborhood too." One of the women in the first cohort through the things that she was sharing, she's not going to go on and she's not going to be presenting to other women landowners to be able to share some of her expertise with them. So we

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know that there's this kind of ripple effect as they're now working to come fold others. We know that some of the women are working more and more now with their families and bringing their families into this process more. And that's been really exciting. And I just want to emphasize one thing that I feel that's really important that we've also done is that the women landowners that were part of our first cohort are also co-authors with us on an article that is going to be coming out.

And that isn't standard practice. And that's something that we feel ought to be because we learned a great deal from these women. And so in some ways now their voices are going out to the larger community as we work to also break down this barrier between community expertise and research expertise. And so that is one thing I really want to emphasize, I think is something that these barriers are all over the place, but they're coming down and that's really exciting. And Jean, I know you've got more to say too.

Jean:

I was going to say, I'll just piggyback on that particular point. We're talking about at least some of the women have acres and acres of row crop land or row crop and pasture land. So this isn't, lest you imagined these are small farmers. They're not all small farmers. Some of them are, and some of them have a lot of land that they're impacting. So the potential to make change and have all of these women recognize that they are enough, that they know enough to do something, that they're sufficient, is so contrary to what if you even just look at agriculture. It's so contrary to what you would hear. They're going to say, "Oh, I don't know as much as my farmer does." Well, heck, if you stop and think about it, maybe the farmer doesn't know everything. They might not be an expert on everything, but they're an expert on what they do.

And so we're just lifting up women landowners to say, you're an expert on what you do and what you know. And it's kind of, he's an expert on what he does. If you've got a male farmer, I'm using he specifically, common to be able to say they don't know everything either. And we just kind of give them that as if they know absolutely everything. And they may not, they may know a lot, they may be super knowledgeable, but we assume that they know everything and that we know nothing. And to stop that barrier is just a really big deal. And the same thing happens when it comes to conservation. "Oh, I don't know, nearly enough to be able to even have a conversation about cover crops." Well, we can help you with that and we can teach you enough so that you know enough and you don't have to be the expert, that there's ways of getting around that. But I think that's a big piece of the narrative.

Vivian:

And getting past that paralysis y'all have mentioned multiple times that comes up when we're talking about these huge, huge issues, but figuring out how none of us can know everything even if we tried. So how do we build those relationships and start sharing our stories and our knowledge so that we can co-produce more knowledge together like Linda was talking about. One of my last questions as we're starting to get towards the end of our conversation, we're talking a little bit about ripple effects and how this kind of work can lead to further climate action in participants' communities. So we talked about how storytelling has helped lead women landowners to take personal and community initiative to address climate action. This climate action though, in many cases, needs funding and policy support. Y'all said that the action projects you created, you did get some funding for people to actually be able to implement them. So what role do you think storytelling has to play in propelling climate policy in agricultural communities?

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Jean:

One of the things I think that the storytelling allows us to do is to stop that paralysis. Because our assumptions about funding and how funding should flow and when it should be delivered and how quickly you should be able to act. The timeline women have to carry out a conservation practice needs to be a little longer because they've got to work through other people. They've got to get somebody else to take action too, and they've got to stay on top of that and work with those relationships and maintain all of those. So it's a different timeline and I think that's a policy piece. That really the storytelling is how we can share that and how we can share what women are actually experiencing is through that storytelling of what they have told us. It's an open door there. So that's one of the pieces that I think is pretty important. That storytelling can change that, because we wouldn't know this about women's timelines otherwise.

At the end of a two-year project, you should have so many acres of this in the ground and that so many linear feed of this particular practice and this many practices in, might need a little longer timeline, doesn't mean that it won't get done, it'll get done. It's just that we need to let it go a little longer or start it in a different way. Maybe we start the project by having a lot of opportunities for women to tell these stories and figure out what piece of this thing is going to make sense in their world. And then we start the clock running. I mean, I think there's a lot more creative ways that we can implement ag funding and ag policy, and I will tell you, as a long term conservationist, I have been astounded at how much these women have done for the smallest amounts of money.

In agriculture conservation, we throw thousands of dollars at programs. And I'm not saying we don't get results, but holy moly, these ladies are doing amazing stuff with dubs and dabs of money, and I'm not going to diminish their action one bit from the things that we talk about in the other conservation programs. It matters.

Vivian:

That's a wonderful way, I think, to put that about storytelling, not only challenging assumptions, but then shedding light on barriers and opportunities to getting policies passed, to getting access to funding, to getting access to the resources we need and to move towards more equity and opportunities for collaborations and addressing climate action.

Linda:

I wanted to add to that too, what this idea of policy is. Just as Jean's saying, policy tends to again, focus on the big picture and the big projects, and to have these stories come out and begin to connect more with policymakers. I would like to think would kind of break open this idea of having smaller to finding ways of policymaking to support the small, the evolving as well as those big, big projects. And that I think is something that could rock the policy world a little in a really positive way is how sometimes by supporting these smaller initiatives, these smaller actions, how that really, I mean it's like seed funding, literally, it's small and how that it can be really transformative. And that's something that just looking ahead I'm particularly excited about is just kind of working with WFAN and with Jean for Stephanie and how we're going to be working with some others now across four different states.

To begin to sort of connect these women's voices with policymakers and begin to start to bring out some of those things. It'll be really exciting to see how do we all learn from each other? That's actually part of the whole project's name is co-learning. How do we learn from each other and change all of the way we do what we do, including policymakers? So I'm really excited about that.



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Stephanie:

I guess three points. One is to underline what Jean and Vivian were saying about the importance of this type of work, giving us a different focus for what qualifies as success in conservation programming policy and funding or climate policy programming and funding. What's the metric of success? And with storytelling, we're capable of looking at more qualitative metrics of success versus the number of acres that got cover crops. Eventually we'll get to the acres getting the cover crops, but there's all of this stuff that needs to happen in between conversations. Getting comfortable with walking into the NRCS office, talking to your farmer, maybe sometimes for years about getting those cover crops on the land. And that's all important effort that doesn't typically get measured but does get measured in our work. So that's point one. Point two is storytelling is how you do policy advocacy. Yes, you can show up to the state house and talk to your legislator or whatever with some data and numbers.

And not that that's not important, but the things that move people are narratives. That's why politicians use narratives all the time when they're trying to sell some kind of policies. They're rarely talking about the numbers and the data. If they do, they probably don't get a lot of traction. They tell personal narratives. And so the women that we work with are now prepped and primed to tell their stories. And so that brings me into the third point, which is as a programmer, like somebody who runs programming, having an opportunity to get to know the women we work with on a deeper level and really get to know their stories versus doing that again, like top down, "I'm the expert in front of the room, you've showed up at my event. I will impart knowledge to you. I will maybe know your name, maybe not." And then you will go on your way.

Hopefully you've signed up for the mailing list. I don't have a clue who was in the room and what strengths and what stories they have and I can't plug them in to future opportunities to do any kind of advocacy, whether it's policy or otherwise. And so what we've already been able to do with women from both the first cohort and then the second cohort is then set them up to be stewardship ambassadors, which is a program that Jean is involved with that WFAN is running with the help of partner partner organizations to have women landowners going out and telling their stories and really raising the visibility of women landowners and their stories in the ag and conservation world. We've also sent people to DC for fly-ins to go talk to their legislators about climate and conservation policy and farm bill policy. So having the chance to hear those stories lets me know where to plug people in for future action.

Vivian:

Thank you all so much for sharing those insights. I think that's incredibly helpful for me to think about actually in terms of my own work and of all the interviewees that I'm talking with through this podcast series. So we are nearing the end of our conversation, so I just have a couple wrap up questions to kind of give some key takeaways to our listeners. So first, what are the three key ideas that you want people to most understand about the work that you do?

Linda:

For me, it's that we as conservationists, as researchers, need not always to focus so much on telling a better story or being better storytellers ourselves, but how can we work to have our community stakeholders be the storytellers too? And to flip that a little bit from always the focus on us telling a good story to now engage the communities that we're working with as fellow storytellers.

Jean:

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I'll say that women are fabulous partners in conservation. That they take action and they do things. And if we meet them in better ways, more effective ways, I think we can start to move the needle on things and we can make some things happen. But we have to stop and say, "Oh gosh, why wouldn't we market to, create events for, create situations, create funding streams, support networks?" Why wouldn't we do that to an audience that owns and can influence half the land? If we continue to only talk to half, we're missing it. So women are worth reaching out to. They have great conservation concern, dedication, and it doesn't matter what that issue is, whether it's climate or conservation, it's there. People care.

Stephanie:

And I think for me, the strength of our work, not just the women in this proverbial room, but also WFAN, also our community, is our success comes down to relationships and the strength and diversity of the relationships that we're able to build because of the importance of bringing together different types of ways of knowing and living. And when you bring different ways of knowing together, you learn a heck of a lot more than if you're just a few people who all think the same talking with each other. So it has to come down to relationships, listening, dialogue, that really democratic process of creating and enacting knowledge.

Vivian:

Thanks y'all. And as we take with us those key ideas about the work that you do, my final question is what is the biggest recommendation you have for others who might want to use storytelling strategies to talk about climate change, especially in agricultural communities?

Jean:

I'll say that it's important to suspend your belief that we always have to do things the same way, without judging what we've done before and saying, "Oh God, that's bad or wrong." But to just kind of set that aside and to say, if we want to get somewhere different than where we've been, we do need to do something different. And storytelling as evidenced by what we've been doing really can open that door. Let's look at where that can take us and open up other opportunities. I think that's where the storytelling, it's a new technique. It's something that we haven't necessarily approached from the same way that we're using it, where it's not a complete story. It's the mini stories, it's the little elements, and it's the fact that all of the women have something to contribute. It's not, "Oh, I have to tell this wonderful story about my farm and you have to be impressed with my story because it's so perfect."

I think recognizing that we have an opportunity to pull in a new group of people who will feel empowered and have agency to do what they can do, and we're going to need everybody.

Stephanie:

I think it comes down to what we were talking about earlier in the podcast of removing that fear and paralysis that comes with the climate data dump, right? And instead saying, how can you locate yourself within a very specific part of this future? What can you do about the part of that future that you can control? And so giving people some action steps that are based in pragmatic hope rather than here's a lot of very scary information, good luck figuring out what to do with it. And that's where the collaborative storytelling really does something very important.

Linda:

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I'll add that part of it is that we put out that the kind of richness and diversity of the story so that it can be the weather that may really withdraw people. Maybe it's that connection to the land. For some of the women that we've been working with this time, the beauty of the root system of these plants, you show them the roots and they're like, "Oh my goodness." Or that you show them the power of those relationships so that you show the variety of the story so that it makes it easier to find that pathway in for each person who has their gifts and their interests. And that's part of it too. It's the sense of the range of the story, which then just kind of doubles back to this idea that we all tell a better, more beautiful story when it's lots of us, when it's like a plural story, when we're all sharing bits and pieces. And that to do that, it does not mean that any one of us has to be a brilliant storyteller.

Every single one of us can implement these types of storytelling practices into what we're doing already. That it's doable and it's not quaint and just cute, but that it's powerful and it's wisdom, that when we listen, it's transformative.

Vivian:

Thank you all so much, Jean, Linda, Stephanie for joining today. I'm going to take away, I know, with me this idea of powerful and pragmatic hope, as Linda and Stephanie said, through storytelling. So right before we sign off, can you let our listeners know the best way to connect with y'all in your work in the future?

Linda:

The best way to connect with us would be just to reach out to us. So my name is Linda Shenk. Reach out to me at Iowa State University. So my email address is shenk@iastate.edu.

Stephanie:

And you can reach me via my email, which is stephanie@wfan.org. Or unlike maybe most of my generation, I will always take a phone call over an email, so you can reach me at my office phone number, which is (515) 635-3276, extension #5. Please normal hours only for that phone call because it'll get routed through my cell. But yes, if you'd like to learn more about our programming, you can shoot me an email, give me a call, or you can look at the WFAN website to learn more about all of our programs.

Jean:

And I'm happy to entertain questions and people to reach out, but probably the best way to do it is to reach out through Linda and Stephanie and they can reach me. I'm accessible. Since they're the lead partners on this, I'm going to put them out in front.

Vivian:

That sounds wonderful. And we'll make sure to put this information on the podcast webpage as well. Thank y'all so much again for joining and for sharing about this wonderful project. I can't wait to hear about the next iterations and the next projects y'all have coming up.

Linda:

Thank you so much, Vivian. This has been fantastic.

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Vivian:

Thank you for listening to the Art of Climate Dialogue and we hope you'll listen to the rest of the series. More information about podcast interviewees is available at [ecotheatrelab.com](http://ecotheatrelab.com). We invite you to engage in conversation with us by leaving a comment, responding to the short feedback form in our show notes and checking out The EcoTheatre Labs' website. We want to thank all of the organizations and individuals who made this series possible. This project is funded by both a North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program Graduate Student Grant, which is supported by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and a Johnson Center for Land Stewardship Policy Emerging Leader Award. Our podcast consultant is Mary Swander. Our podcast musician is Omar de Kok-Mercado, and our podcast artist is Moselle Nita Singh. Our podcast land acknowledgement is adapted from text developed by Lance Foster and Sikowis Nobiss and from conversations with Shelley Buffalo. Rosie Marcu-Rowe is our podcast editor. And I'm Vivian M. Cook, Community Engagement Director for The EcoTheatre Lab and The Art of Climate Dialogue podcast producer and host. Take care.