

**“I BECAME QUITE SINGULARLY FOCUSED ON HOW TO BUILD A PLAYGARDEN HERE IN SEATTLE... SOME WOULD HAVE SAID I WAS OBSESSED. I TALKED ABOUT IT ALL THE TIME, SEARCHED THE INTERNET AND VISITED SEVERAL CHILDREN’S GARDENS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.”**

## **IN DIALOGUE WITH LIZ BULLARD**

Liz completed her undergraduate work, and graduate work in Speech and Hearing Sciences at Indiana University. She moved to Seattle in 1986. She has three children, Claire, a staff assistant to Sen. Maria Cantwell, Hannah, a member of the national champion crew at Western Washington University, and Sean, a senior at Garfield High School.



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**SS** – Hi Liz, Thanks for talking with Courageous Creativity! In your experience, what do you think it takes to be a leader? Did leadership and taking initiative come to you naturally or is this something you feel you had to develop and work on?

**LB** – I don't really see myself as a leader. I had an idea that I shared with others and we fed on each other's enthusiasm. I was very fortunate to have the avid support of Dr. Abraham Bergman early on. He led the way through much of the bureaucracy of the Parks department and had invaluable experience with public projects.

**SS** – What was your childhood like? How did you feel about school and the education system? Did you always know that you wanted to work with children when you grew up?

**LB** – I grew up in the Midwest, the seventh of nine children. My parents practiced benign neglect, letting us out the door in the morning and expecting us home when the street lights came on for obligatory family dinner. We went on epic camping trips and weekly Sunday outings to the woods, Lake Michigan, small Midwest towns. My parents passed on their love of books and their love of nature.

But for some reason, I hated school. I did everything I could to get out of going... faked being sick, overslept... anything at all. Looking back, I realize I was bored in the classroom, and didn't like the complete focus on paper and pencil work. The freedom and exposure to books, art and play that I had at home was much more enticing than the sit down and work quietly on worksheets that I experienced in school.

I'm not sure I thought much about being a grown-up until I practically was one. Half way through college I began to seriously consider what I wanted to do. I have always been smitten with kids. I was fascinated by child development and specifically language acquisition. I was lucky to be offered a fellowship to study child language acquisition in graduate school and was one of the first speech-language therapists to work with children in the birth to three age range.

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**SS** – How did the idea of creating a place like the PlayGarden first come up for you? Did you know as soon as you had the thought that this is something you simply had to do, or did you take time to think about it for a while and spend time planning and talking to people before deciding to jump in?

**LB** – I read about a PlayGarden in Manhattan - the Rusk Children's PlayGarden, in a Garden Design magazine and was instantly consumed by the concept. I became quite singularly focused on how to build a PlayGarden here in Seattle... some would have said I was obsessed. I talked about it all the time, searched the Internet and visited several children's gardens across the country. I was fortunate that literally everyone I spoke to thought it was a good idea. My research period lasted from February to August and then I made a decision to try my hardest to make it happen.

**SS** – How has your role as a parent played into all this?

**LB** – When my kids were little we went to the park every day. Sometimes two or even three times a day... sometimes two or three different parks... the "ride your bike" park, the "swing park" the "woods," or the "beach park." We had so many choices. I am the biggest fan of Seattle's parks. However, when I realized how challenging going to the park was for many families of children with challenges, I was struck by what a bitter injustice this was. These are the hardest working parents and kids I know with schedules most of us would buckle under... hours and hours of therapy, doctor's appointments, tutoring. When there is finally a moment when the family can relax and have some fun, they are met with unwelcoming unaccommodating parks.

**SS** – I really like the concept of having camps for children with mixed ages and also the fact that your volunteers are teenagers themselves. How did you come up with the vision for these two things? And how have you seen things evolve since you first started?

**“...THE MAIN DRIVING FORCE WAS THAT ALL KIDS SHOULD BE WELCOME REGARDLESS OF THEIR LEVEL OF ABILITY. THE PLAY-GARDEN IS “A GARDEN FOR EVERYONE” ... HAVING FOUR- TO TWELVE-YEAR-OLDS TOGETHER ALSO ENSURES THAT ... EACH CHILD CAN PLAY AT HIS/HER OWN LEVEL.”**



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**LB** – As I began to develop programs for the PlayGarden the main driving force was that All kids should be welcome regardless of their level of ability. The PlayGarden is “a garden for everyone.” If we have children with challenges right alongside children without, it seemed an easy step to incorporate a wide age range together. That way parents can drop off all of their children at one camp. They shouldn’t have to drive their “challenged” child to the “special” camp and the others to their respective camps.

Having four- to twelve-year-olds together also ensures that no one is comparing one child to the next. Each child can play at his/her own level. The older children may take care of the younger ones and the younger may look up to the older kids but it might also be the other way around. The common element of outdoor play brings everyone together and is a great equalizer.

I knew from my own children that teenagers are ultimately cool. What better way to make sure everyone is having fun than having playful teenage boys and girls playing alongside the kids?

I have to say that an unexpected outcome of the mixed age ranges and inclusive programs is the interactions between the siblings of children with challenges. Our staff often remark on how the siblings who have special needs brothers and sisters are the kindest children they have ever met. But we know that siblings have complex relationships, even more so when one has an overriding special need. You can visibly see the relief and instant understanding between two children who share this family constellation.

We have also seen children with challenges who are often viewed as the “baby of the family” rise up and begin to take care of and teach younger children. It is fantastically empowering for them.

**“I KNEW FROM MY OWN CHILDREN THAT TEENAGERS ARE ULTIMATELY COOL. WHAT BETTER WAY TO MAKE SURE EVERYONE IS HAVING FUN THAN HAVING PLAYFUL TEENAGE BOYS AND GIRLS PLAYING ALONGSIDE THE KIDS?”**

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**SS** – Since the PlayGarden is such a community project, you must have a lot of different voices and opinions speaking to you. How did you/do you decide which ones to pay attention to and which ones not to?

**LB** – That was easy. I’m stubborn and know what I want. Seriously, I think because this was such a new concept there weren’t a lot of dissenters not were there other “experts” who had differing views on how the PlayGarden should be designed or operated.

The neighborhood was so supportive as well. They were so pleased to have the park improved.

**SS** – How did the idea of having a preschool be part of the PlayGarden come about? Do you think it might ever grow into a school for older kids?

**LB** – We held five years of summer camp here at the PlayGarden before our buildings were built. It was always a dream to run year round programs so when the facility was complete we started a two-day a week preschool. I spent twenty plus years helping families’ transition from their early intervention program to the public schools when their child turned three years old.

It was invariably an angst-ridden experience. Once again, parents are asked to make a choice to send their child with challenges to a special education program. The high therapy and educational needs for many of these children dictate this type of setting but we thought we could offer something different - an inclusive nature based outdoor experience. We now have preschool five days per week.

**SS** – I can’t begin to imagine how satisfying it must be for you to think about the journey of the PlayGarden; how it grew from simply being an idea, a vision to something physical, real and such an amazing community resource. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**LB** – Honestly, it feels like a dream come true mixed with a lot of blue collar work. It is incredibly rewarding to see children and families playing here and I am humbled by the wide spread support we have. It truly is a labor of love and I am overwhelmed by my good fortune in creating the best possible place to work. We are now into our seventh year of programs. Some of our first campers are now counselors. Amazing.