Economy of Communion Project

Interview with Liz Wallin | November 14-15, 2026

Part One: Introduction

Interviewer: Can you tell us your name, and a little about your story: how you got to this point?

Liz Wallin: My name is Elizabeth Wallin, and I ran an organization called Project Lia, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, working with women coming out of incarceration.

The way I got here today is a very winding road. I had a couple of experiences in my early twenties that led me to Indianapolis, to an Economy of Communion business working in the environment. I started an internship with them to learn more about the EoC model, and how businesses could increase their social impact.

Interviewer: Briefly describe the nature of Project Lia.

Liz Wallin: Project Lia trained formerly incarcerated women to repurpose discarded material into home furnishings and accessories.

Interviewer: What was the nature of Project Lia?

Liz Wallin: The root of it was learning about the carceral state in the United States, and the root causes of how women in particular end up in our prison system. Understanding how the carceral state does nothing to address the root problems, and feeling frustration behind that: knowing that in our name, as citizens of the United States, we're complicit in how we are addressing, and humanizing, the most vulnerable among us. For me, that struck a chord. Not only how women end up in incarceration in the United States, but what happens upon their return to community.

Interviewer: What do you feel are some of the root causes that we don't address?

Liz Wallin: Root causes. Poverty, mental health, and trauma.

Those were the numbers that struck me: that over two-thirds of women in prison have a history of abuse. And I thought, what are we doing?

Especially as someone who loves efficiency. You look at these systems and they're anything but efficient, while also dehumanizing others. So, well then, what's the point? We're dehumanizing people, and it's also inefficient. And then it gets you down the rabbit hole of: In what name? For what purpose? That was my driving force for starting Project Lia.

Interviewer: What started your interest in incarcerated people?

Liz Wallin: For me, incarceration in the United States (the criminal justice system in the United States) is our number one social justice issue. It's a crossover and a culmination of oppression and issues among race, class and gender.

Interviewer: And how you got personally connected to that issue.

Liz Wallin: Personally, learning about the criminal justice system in the United States was enough for me to want to do something about it. And building community with people who have been impacted by the criminal justice system led me further into wanting to work in solidarity.

Interviewer: What did you try to do through Project Lia to deal with those issues? What was your goal?

Liz Wallin: My number one goal was to build community around the women who were joining us. Giving them a sense of humanity: that they weren't forgotten, by us or by the community, and that we were here to work with them. To get to know them, to get to know their story, to show care. And all while creating a sense of purpose through the products we made.

Part Two: Growing up in the Focolare

The Focolare

Interviewer: Do you feel connected to the Focolare? What has it meant to you personally?

Liz Wallin: I grew up with the Focolare as something I participated in. My whole family: my parents were involved as volunteers. So the spirituality of the Focolare, the values of the Focolare, are very rooted in my outlook on life. And I can't deny that space in me, or that piece of me that grew up with these values.

Interviewer: What has the Focolare movement meant to you personally?

Liz Wallin: The Focolare movement has been a guide for me. My sort of internal compass. A space and a learning of reflection, in continual contemplation of how I'm living out the values I believe in.

Interviewer: For someone who doesn't know anything about the Focolare, what does it mean to grow up with those values?

Liz Wallin: The Focolare, at its core, is universal brotherhood. Universal personhood, if I could find more vocabulary for it.

At its core it's an Italian word for a hearth. And a hearth is a place where we gather. Even in a family, you gather at the hearth, at the fireplace. That's where we get a lot of our warmth. For me, the Focolare is that. It's where I know my sense of spirituality, and how I view the world, and my beliefs, and the role spirit plays in my life.

A Focolare home

Interviewer: What would growing up in a Focolare home look like? What was different about it?

Liz Wallin: One tradition I remember growing up with was that at bedtime, my parents would always ask us: what was one act of love that you did today?

Interviewer: An examination of conscience.

Liz Wallin: Yes, the examination of conscience. What was one act of love that you did today? How did you participate in community?

That was something my parents brought to us every night, having us think before bed about what was that one thing I did. And as a kid, if that's the one thing you're being asked before going to bed, that cements for you: this is an important thing for me to be focused on during the day. I should be thinking about what I'm doing for others, so that I have a story by bedtime. That was, for me, a big part of growing up. This art of loving, that's rooted in the Focolare.

Coming back

Interviewer: What touched or moved you most when you first wanted to get involved with an Economy of Communion business?

Liz Wallin: I grew up with the Focolare and these ideals from as young as I can remember. And I remember my teenage rebellious years thinking, I can't do that. The institutionalized religion thing.

And then in my early twenties, coming back to community life, and realizing: huh, there's something I'm missing. What is it? And it was rooted in a spirituality, in community living, in sharing life in community.

So what was really exciting for me was that in the EoC, maybe I could find this without some of the other things. Maybe I could find these values operating within the context of business. Okay, there's something here: we could keep this professional, but I could still play with and be involved in the spiritual being. That was really exciting for me.

Interviewer: So finding spirituality in business itself.

Liz Wallin: Yes.

What it lends to business

Interviewer: How has the spirit of the Focolare shaped the way you understand or practice the EoC?

Liz Wallin: There are a lot of contemplative practices in the Focolare, and I think that itself lends itself to reflective practices in business, which is an important aspect of the EoC. It's very easy to set out with certain values, on a certain mission, and then lose yourself along the way. And I think those contemplative practices are at the core of what helps an EoC business.

Interviewer: How has the spirit of the Focolare shaped the way you understand and practice the EoC?

Liz Wallin: The spirit of the Focolare is rooted in concreteness. Constant reflection and dialogue about how our actions meet our values. And for me that's essential in an EoC business: not only for a business to hold these values of communion, but to really incorporate them in principled and procedural ways. Not only for the end product, but from within.

Part Three: Argentina

How I got there

Interviewer: Tell us about Argentina. What stage of life were you at, how did you end up going down there, and what impact did it make on you?

Liz Wallin: Living in Argentina left a big impact on me.

Originally I saved up and moved to Ecuador to learn Spanish. I was transitioning towards the idea that my career could end up in community work, community development, and that knowing Spanish would be a huge help, especially living in New York City.

When I moved down to Ecuador, I reached out to the Focolare there, just interested in building some community and getting to know people. I'd had some distance from the Focolare during high school and college, and so this was sort of a re-entry.

The group of women down there met weekly to reflect with each other on how they were living out their ideals. Just a beautiful sisterhood. And I thought, wow, this is really something I'm missing in my life. So I started going to their weekly meetings, and one of my friends suggested: since you're staying longer down here in South America, why don't you head over to Argentina and go live the experience at the Mariapolis there?

So I reached out and said, hey, I just want to come for two months, is that a possibility? And after a little back and forth they said, yeah, absolutely, come on over.

The idea was that I'd go for two months, practice a bit more of my Spanish, and head home. And when I arrived, within about two weeks I thought, I would like to stay the whole year for this experience. Just feeling that there was something there to impact me. And sure enough, there was.

I was tasked with working at the hotel in the community, managing the daily cleanliness and upkeep of the hotel and restaurant. And every day was a battle over who wanted to clean the bathrooms. None of us ever wanted to volunteer for it.

And one day one of my friends eagerly volunteered to clean the bathrooms. So I went up to her later and asked, why? Why did you volunteer to do that? None of us like doing the bathrooms.

And she said, well, that was my way of loving. Because no one wants to do it. I was able to take up that space and find purpose in that moment to give.

And that really struck me. *I did it for them.*

It changed my perspective moving forward. Every day after that, the two of us would volunteer to clean the bathrooms, and we would absolutely have a good time doing it. Loving that we could. Not seeing it as something I had to do, another task off the list, but really an opportunity to love the other, for the person who would come in to use the bathroom after and realize, wow, this is a well taken care of

bathroom. This is very pleasant. And the compliments kept growing, from visitors who would come and notice how clean the bathrooms were and say something about it. So our joy and our sense of pride in our work just continued to grow.

Interviewer: What else took place down there? What did you do each day besides clean bathrooms?

Liz Wallin: That was my introduction to the Economy of Communion, and to what it means to work, what purpose our work lives can provide for us.

But we also had a lot going on. We had shared housing. Shared meal planning, so it was very much an experience of cooperative living. We took courses on the spirituality of unity, studying history, and studying what it looks like in life to really live a spirituality of unity, and the routines and rituals that come with that. And sharing our life with one another, doing that alongside each other in conflict and in unity.

We also organized our own youth festival, where we invited the community in. Our theme was *No te detengas*: don't hold yourself back. You're the only one who can pursue the path you want, and decide how you might do that. It was a year of some big growth for me, as well as building some lifelong relationships and exploring more of my spirituality.

Rituals, and a shared purse

Interviewer: You said rituals. What are the habits of spiritual unity, the things people do in community to help build that?

Liz Wallin: They're rituals around building community with others.

We had a weekly meeting in our house: one, to share with each other more of our personal experience of how we were living out these ideals of unity, and the moments in which we really felt that. As well as more generalized logistics. What's the menu for the week? How are we going to spend our money when we go shopping? What are we going to buy?

And things like: well, it's this person's birthday this week, so we're going to need some money for the flour and sugar it would take to make a cake. And chocolate, that was a bit of a luxury, to spend your money on those types of things. And we had to do that all in communication and dialogue with one another.

Interviewer: Where did the money come from? You shared money?

Liz Wallin: We were all working. I was at the hotel, but there were various industries: jam making, chocolate making, textiles, grounds management. And what we made from that week was pooled together to run our household.

Interviewer: And these were Focolare industries?

Liz Wallin: The Focolare itself has some EoC businesses. I guess this one you would say was more for the benefit of the young people who were living this experience. And also their first experiment with work, and with the meaning of work in our lives. We'd make jam, make chocolate, and sell locally and

throughout the country, to help sustain the community down there.

Why Argentina

Interviewer: What drew the young people in Argentina towards the EoC approach?

Liz Wallin: Like most things in my life, I ended up there by happenstance, so it's hard to speak on behalf of other people's experience.

But I think ultimately we were all there trying to discover a new way. Or intimately knowing that there was another way to be in the world, and to be in community with others from different backgrounds. And we were all there to experiment with it. It was a really beautiful experience. We were from twenty-two different countries, speaking different languages, and really building a sense of unity among us.

Interviewer: Why Argentina? Is there a specific reason?

Liz Wallin: That's where one of the Focolare's Mariapolises is located, where they have this youth experience.

Interviewer: Are there more experiences like that around the world?

Liz Wallin: There's one in Italy. And I think one in Germany or Sweden, something like that. And I think there's one other one.

What I brought home

Interviewer: How would you compare your experiences in Argentina to those in the U.S.?

Liz Wallin: I took a lot of that experience and brought it into how I was trying to develop Project Lia, in the sense that where we find purpose in work is how we approach work. And that mindset can help develop a purpose in everything that we do.

And that's really rooted in whether or not you're building your own EoC business model, or even just bringing those values into the workplace. How do we use a culture of giving and an art of loving as a basis for building purpose and work?

Interviewer: Did going abroad change your perspective on anything specific?

Liz Wallin: The biggest thing that living abroad changed for me was that there are so many ways of living. And there's no one right way.

In the US particularly, we see our way of living as *the* way of living, the best way of living. And I saw almost quite the opposite of that: so much joy and happiness in other ways of living and building community, that sometimes are lost here in the United States.

Interviewer: And what first inspired you about the EoC?

Liz Wallin: The first thing that compelled me actually wasn't in the context of an EoC business; it was an experience I had down in Argentina, and realizing that the values I held played out in work, in what was the value of work in my life. And then learning more later on about the structure, and the more

intentional approach towards business, through the EoC. That pulled those two strings together.

Part Four: Starting Project Lia

The internship

Interviewer: What was the nature of your internship? How did you find out about it, what drew you to it, and what were you initially supposed to do? I don't think you showed up thinking, oh, I'll do Project Lia.

Liz Wallin: No. I don't know that there was a particular idea in place, other than learning more about the Economy of Communion and the values within it. What values are rooted in an EoC business? And in what ways might that play out?

How do you really incorporate them? Every business has values, right? Mission, vision, values. But the correlation between how those play out in the actual business model, not only at the end of the line, on the product line. You know: we'll donate ten percent back. But how does that actually play out within the company, between coworkers, between management and workers? How do these values actually show up on the daily? That's where I was at, going into it.

And this is funny: before my internship, I attended an event. I don't know if you're familiar with Jeremy Rifkin. He's an economist and a sort of social philosopher. There was this event that came across my social sphere about the third industrial revolution and the zero marginal cost society. It was in a warehouse in Brooklyn, and I went not knowing much about it, and they were filming a documentary, Jeremy Rifkin's documentary around the zero marginal cost society.

The idea is that as our digital infrastructure becomes more robust, our marginal cost of producing things comes next to zero. Ideas can be spread at almost no cost. An author can write a book and have it published at almost no cost. Of course, once you have the digital infrastructure in place there's a cost to it; as with anything in economics, there are sunk costs, and then from there. And green infrastructure, green energy taking the place of that. He calls it the Third Industrial Revolution.

And so this idea that smaller economies would be better suited to meeting those needs, and meeting that demand and that growth, more so than the United States, because of our sunk costs in our current infrastructure and how that holds us back. So going into this internship, I was showing up with a lot of ideas of my own about what that would mean for me, but really rooting myself in learning more about the EoC and how these values show up in business.

Interviewer: During your internship at Mundell and Associates, what was your impression of the EoC from your work there?

Liz Wallin: It was really astonishing how much the business existed in the community: not only how it had relationships with its clients, but that it had a relationship to the neighborhood and to the people who lived in the neighborhood as well. How involved it was in planting trees around the neighborhood. We were a drop-off location for a local pantry. That was one thing I had never seen in a business before.

Interviewer: Was that surprising, or were you anticipating it going in?

Liz Wallin: Seeing how involved the business was in community was pretty surprising, because in the past my relationship to business was that it was a place where the client or customer goes to engage in the business, not a place where community can go and participate as well.

The idea

Interviewer: So it's re-humanizing instead of dehumanizing. Tell us more about how the organization came into existence. Where did you first get the idea? Where did you go for advice or encouragement? What was the very beginning?

Liz Wallin: I was interning with John Mundell at his EoC business, learning more about the model of the EoC, and how businesses could implement a sense of humanity, a sense of empathy, something other than a profitable business line.

It was a summer internship, but I was at a point where I was really looking to dig my feet into something. So I went to John and said, John, I'm not just here for a summer internship. I really want to get involved in something bigger. More impactful. This is where I see myself going.

And he said, well, I've been working with some volunteers at the women's prison. Why don't you start doing some research around some of the ideas they've been trying to address?

So I got in touch with this group who were already involved at the women's prison in Indianapolis, and heard their ideas and concerns around employment opportunities for women coming out of prison. And that opened a whole book for me. I started doing all the research. I started learning more about incarceration in the United States, looking at different programs around the world, how other countries were addressing these issues. And it funneled from there.

Once you know, you can't not know. And so: what can we do about this? That's what led me to Project Lia.

Interviewer: So then, some of the logistics. When did it come to mind that you were going to do this, and what were the first concrete steps? Because a lot of people have ideas that are interesting or entrepreneurial, or that would do some good, but they never get them done. And you got it done.

Liz Wallin: One of the big steps (and it was pretty messy) was that I started by sharing my idea with people in the community. I started just gathering resources. You'd be surprised: you share an idea and people say, oh, I have this, and I have this. So we started getting a ton of donations.

In a way, that kept me open to what it might look like. There are tons of business models out there: social entrepreneurship, where you could copy a model of creating a product that creates a profit, and use that business as a means of serving a larger purpose. But I think the hardest part, and the messy part, is when you try to root in community. You don't know what you'll get. So a lot of it came from sharing this idea, sharing these concerns, and receiving donations, receiving other people's input and talents, and seeing what came of it.

Even though there was this idea about being able to use repurposed material to create a product, and use that as a means to create a job pathway for women, then we would get a donation of a bunch of sewing machines and a bunch of fabric. And it's, okay, we need to learn how to sew, and we need to develop ideas around a product we can make from fabric scraps. And then we would get a whole donation of lumber and woodworking tools. Okay, we need to know how to use these tools, and what could we make from this discarded material. Then we got a donation of a screen printing press. Okay, we need to learn how to use a screen printing press, and what can we do with that? How can we build community around that?

So that was much of the way Project Lia developed. Very messy. Very tenacious.

Interviewer: Were there things donated where you thought, somebody gives you a loom and you're like, we're not going to learn how to weave rugs? Was there anything given where you thought, I don't know what to do with this?

Liz Wallin: There were definitely times when it was, okay, now I need to go find where to put this. We don't need this. There were many moments of that: now we have too much. And that was part of the learning process as well: to be more curated in the way you accept donations. A nice no, thank you.

Interviewer: We will bring you dumpster loads full of scrap.

Liz Wallin: Right. And then you need to take care of that.

A space

Interviewer: So where did you do this?

Liz Wallin: This brings in a little more of my background. I had just moved to Indianapolis, thinking I would be there for a three-month internship.

I was born and raised in New York City, and I had just come back from a year and a half living in various parts of South America. I came back to New York and wanted to find my way back south. I wanted to go back, but I was looking for opportunities to get there in the ways I wanted to participate. So I ended up in Indianapolis doing this internship, thinking, okay, three months and then I'm off again.

And at the start of Project Lia I had this internal conversation with myself: if I'm going to go forward with this, that's at least five years for something to really get moving and off the ground. Five years in Indiana? Can we do this?

And so it was, okay, here we go. Let's do this. We're moving.

I got started living in intern housing while getting Project Lia off the ground, and so new to the city. And I went to watch a futsal tournament one Saturday morning, closer to downtown, in this big parking lot. Right across the street from the parking lot was a very industrial building. And coming from New York: this is the most urban thing I've seen in this city, this industrial building. Welcome to Brooklyn.

So I went home after the futsal tournament and I looked up the building, what was happening in there, what was going on. And come to find out, they were releasing space in this building. There were a lot of creatives renting space, a lot of artists, a lot of small industries, as they were redeveloping.

So we got a space in the back of this building. Hard to find us. But it gave us a space to start collecting material, collecting tools, and developing ideas about what we could make and how that would create jobs.

Interviewer: John says the interns who cleaned that place had one of the dirtiest jobs he has ever given anyone. What was that like?

Liz Wallin: Easily. Sometimes I look back and think, I am so sorry. I don't even know what we were cleaning up. But yes, we were just getting down and dirty and cleaning the space, making it more inviting, a place we could come to every day with dignity.

The first things we made

Interviewer: What was your first plan, and what was the first product you decided to try?

Liz Wallin: I think the first thing we made together was a coffee table. We were using discarded lumber, and we made this beautiful mosaic table. We sold it at a local art market. From there we made some planters, and we played around with different ideas. And sure enough, soon we got a donation of sewing machines and fabric, so we were able to start playing around with what we could make from that. We made aprons, placemats, some fabric wine bags for gifting. Our ideas just spread from there.

Interviewer: Could you list off the range of things you produced?

Liz Wallin: On the woodworking side, we were able to produce things like our most famous little wooden birds, made from pallet wood that was laminated together and then carved out. Plant holders, candle holders. With the sewing machines we made placemats, wine bags, aprons. On the screen printing press we experimented more with artwork, T-shirt printing. We also had a laser engraver, so we were able to provide certain companies with their logo on a product, if they had an event where they wanted to give a grab bag to participants. So really, just expanding the opportunities and the markets we could serve.

Interviewer: What were some of the more popular items your crew created?

Liz Wallin: Some of our most popular products (and I still see them around every so often) are these little wooden birds we made out of pallet wood. It was such a process. We'd have to take apart the pallets, laminate the pieces of lumber, and then carve out these little wooden birds using a bandsaw. And we'd dye them, stain them different colors. They were just adorable, and people loved them. Every market we went to, the birds were gone.

No models

Interviewer: There were no models for this. You had to build it.

Liz Wallin: Entirely from scratch. I was borrowing ideas from worker-owned businesses, from cooperative markets. Building from a very arts-based reality, and what it looks like when artists work and collaborate on projects and invite in new ideas. I was rooting myself in existing structures, and placing that into an area of also creating social impact. How could we also address a societal issue we've created, through arts-based programming? Leaning into that line of questioning, and allowing something to evolve from within.

Family

Interviewer: How has your family responded to your decision to run Project Lia with those EoC values?

Liz Wallin: I had plenty of support from family and friends to venture out and take a risk in doing what I was doing. That was super essential: having a supportive network and community behind me.

There was a lot of excitement for that, and in the community too. I found a lot of excitement for Project Lia and our program from the community, a lot of willingness to be involved. There was enthusiasm towards what we were doing and how we were showing up. I think the biggest roadblocks were in funding this model.

Interviewer: Did it feel to them like proud Catholic parents whose daughter becomes a nun?

Liz Wallin: A little bit. I think it gave them a sense of, well, there's something to talk about. I'm one of five kids, so we're all doing different things. This was definitely more in their circle and community of things to keep up to date on.

Interviewer: Did your siblings go down similar roads?

Liz Wallin: No. My siblings are all doing different things in their own ways.

Part Five: The women, and the work

The first participant

Interviewer: How did you find the first woman who came in? How did that process start?

Liz Wallin: Just one participant. She was amazing.

There was already this group inside the women's prison who were working with a professor doing further education there. They were working on a history project: the history of female incarceration, particularly in Indiana. And she was involved in that group.

I got a call from one of the volunteers I was working with: she's going to be released, can I put you in touch with her? I think you'd be a great resource. So we got connected and she gave me a call one day, and we met up. And she was all in. She was our first employee.

Phenomenal. We did so many things together to grow Project Lia. She was a creative at heart, and already made amazing things: the smallest paper origami jewelry. She was full of creative ideas of things we could make, and she developed the product line. She was with us for almost a year, and then

she got further employment, worked her way up into management, and moved away.

Interviewer: When did you get the second? Did you have multiple at a time?

Liz Wallin: It varied. There were times when we had multiple participants at once, but often it was working with one participant, and then the next, with some overlap. We were very small and doing what we could to holistically support each participant, which takes a lot of resources.

Interviewer: How many women went through the program while you were running it?

Liz Wallin: Six or seven participants through the years, with a varying degree of whether we're still in touch and where they're at. Some pretty big success stories about how some of these women are doing now.

Interviewer: Where are a couple of them now?

Liz Wallin: We had one participant who ended up with an office job in the city. Another who is now managing a business, and doing well, and has bought a house. Just all following their own individual paths and living their lives.

And that was always the hardest part of trying to start Project Lia. There are a lot of restrictions around what success looks like, especially within workforce development. Okay, what certifications are you going to provide? All this funding is tied to specific skills, specific certifications. What will they come out with? What is the pathway? What industry are they going to work in?

And we were doing quite the opposite at Project Lia. The women will decide what they want to do, and what pathway they want to take. We're just here to catch them in community.

That's not a very digestible funding model, I guess you could say. Or it wasn't, at the time I was doing it. I think we're seeing a little more trust-based philanthropy now. But at the time it was: huh? We need a certification. We need to know. To increase efficiency: fifty women come into the program, where will they end up? And when you have a model where it's for the individual to decide; that was our biggest catch.

How the program worked

Interviewer: Could you walk me through what going through the program would look like, start to finish?

Liz Wallin: It's hard to outline it start to finish, because it was very individualized. Each one had their own experience of when it was time to transition or move on, and what that looked like for them, whether that was another job, or moving states. So trying to delineate a program pathway was a challenge for us. Some of them received certifications and some didn't, depending on: is this a need, or will you need this in the future?

But overall, on a day-to-day basis, participants would join us and start work immediately, so they'd be put on payroll right away. And then from there we'd spend some time just getting to know one another. I'd be teaching various skills in sewing, woodworking and crafts, and there'd be an exchange of ideas,

and then that space opening up to get to know each other and see what some of the other needs were outside of work.

Interviewer: Did participants come to you? How did that process work?

Liz Wallin: It was a lot of word of mouth. Participants would hear about us either within the women's prison, or from the various volunteers who knew what we were doing in the community. So they'd hear about us, get referred over, make a phone call: hey, yeah, come on over tomorrow. Love to meet you.

Interviewer: Would you go into the prison with the women?

Liz Wallin: There's a lot of red tape around that. But I did go. I partnered with another organization that was doing entrepreneurship classes in the prison, and I would go back and teach some of those classes, and offer up some experience and expertise in that realm. And so I'd build more relationships and make more connections.

Interviewer: Would the women live somewhere specific, or was that independent of the work you were doing?

Liz Wallin: It varied case to case. Most individuals had their own independent housing, but we would try to help out in whatever way we could. It wasn't part of the program, just independent housing that we helped pay bills for.

Part Six: Leading it

My role

Interviewer: As you were leading Project Lia, what was your primary role?

Liz Wallin: I was the founder of Project Lia, which I never felt very comfortable in.

Something I learned later about starting a business: you learn a lot about yourself. You're mirrored a lot of things. You push yourself in a lot of your weaknesses, because things still need to get done. Whereas if you work for someone, they're going to lean into your strengths, and you get to work on your strengths every day. But when you're running something, you're working with your weaknesses every day.

And it came to a point where I thought, this is not my role. I need to find someone else to fill this role, because I'm really good at something else and I need to go do that to be of benefit to this organization. That's actually what led me to try to transition Project Lia's work into an existing organization.

Interviewer: What did you love most about your role, and what did you like least?

Liz Wallin: What I loved most was being able to take an idea and watch it grow in community with others, and shape-shift in that way.

My least favorite thing was the weight of it. That sink-or-swim feeling every day. And really being at the forefront: as anyone in leadership, in good leadership, you're the one to make the sacrifices first. That's a hard thing to do.

And it's not exactly impostor syndrome, but not wanting to be the center, or the one doing the speaking, doing the talking, and always being asked to play that role. And I'd think, no, this wasn't about me. This is never about me. This is about something else. So, finding the opportunities to pass that baton, rather than being assumed to be the holder of that knowledge or that experience.

Interviewer: What did you love most about the work you did?

Liz Wallin: It was very rooted in community, and in solidarity, with an issue I found very compelling: in how we could really right the wrongs we've done as a society, and the systems we've built that push others to the edge and dehumanize their existence.

Interviewer: If you met someone thinking about going into entrepreneurship, what would you caution them about? What's something you learned where you'd say, just know you're going to have to do this, and it's not always fun?

Liz Wallin: Get comfortable with the uncomfortableness. And get comfortable with it quickly.

I would say the biggest thing is getting comfortable with working through your weaknesses: what you don't know how to do, or what you're not good at, because you're going to have to get it done. And so surrounding yourself with other people who are willing to help you, who support your idea. I think that's key, and number one.

Alone

Interviewer: Did you have other staff who helped you?

Liz Wallin: Absolutely: the women we were working with. All amazing entrepreneurs in their own right. Very talented, full of ideas. So it was just generating new things every day.

The hard part of leading an organization is funneling: not only donations of things you don't need, but ideas that you need to refine and limit. That's also a hard thing to do. To tell someone, that's a great idea, but we can't do that right now, because here's where we're at.

Interviewer: Just to clarify: you didn't have anyone else besides the women who came into the program helping you run it. So you were solo in that sense.

Liz Wallin: Yes. On the day-to-day operations, solo. Which is something I wouldn't do again.

Interviewer: That's not very communal.

Liz Wallin: No.

It's hard when you're starting an idea. Part of the learning curve there: going back, I would have started as a program within an existing organization or infrastructure, to create more of that team-oriented decision-making, and have the support and the expertise behind it. And also, in starting a new thing, a

new idea, there's a lot of instability. So supporting that idea in an existing environment, I think, would actually help it grow.

How we organized

Interviewer: What about the business structure, or the way the organization was organized: what were unique practices there?

Liz Wallin: What marks us as different is that we were running a nonprofit program, versus if I were trying to run a business and had worker laws to run up against. I don't want to give bad advice, because there's so much legal in that.

Interviewer: What are ways your organization differed from the way many businesses would traditionally be organized? How did you have a different way of thinking about economics than most businesses do?

Liz Wallin: I was approaching business as a means to a different end, which in our case wasn't necessarily profit. It was a means to an end to provide a work environment that created purpose, and that built a community around individuals returning from incarceration.

So work was just a place of purpose. A place to lean into creativity. A routine and structure every day.

Interviewer: You were doing everything that didn't get done, and finding collaborators who'd come alongside. It wasn't like, I'm going to hire an assistant director and you will be that assistant director coming out of prison.

Liz Wallin: It was a strong pivot foot, and staying open. That was a challenge for Project Lia: not operating like a traditional business or organization, and inviting in individual talent and individual pathways, and working in solidarity with one another. And in some ways that was Project Lia's biggest strength, in re-envisioning and reimagining a new ecology, a new economy, and experimenting with the purpose and value of work in our lives. It was both our downfall and what allowed us to do the work we did.

Interviewer: Are there other ways you as a nonprofit acted differently from other nonprofits because of your values?

Liz Wallin: Involving participants in every aspect of the business. There was a lot of transparency and communication around operations, marketing, new contracts. Whereas traditional nonprofits incorporate hierarchy: of decision-making, of power. We were really working to re-envision that into a more cooperative and collaborative environment.

Interviewer: Decisions regarding business structure, and how the internal aspects of the organization were arranged.

Liz Wallin: We organized ourselves legally as a traditional 501(c)(3). However, there were moments when I was questioning that, and questioning how it might shift into a worker-owned cooperative, and how that type of structure would have been more aligned with what we were trying to do.

We tried to exist within a framework of no hierarchy. Some days that meant laying out all the things that needed to get done that day, and having a real dialogue about who would be best fit for finishing that task, whether that was skill-based expertise, or time management.

Co-ownership

Interviewer: What about co-ownership? Any stories there?

Liz Wallin: Not really: that was something towards the fifth or sixth year. I was trying to work through more of it, and I never got the opportunity to see it come to fruition.

Through the years, experimenting with different infrastructures and different economic setups, one thing we were hoping to do was build a more worker-owned coalition or cooperative, where individuals could come in and bring a more entrepreneurial mindset, and more independence in the products they were making and how they made them. Maybe they were more aligned with the sewing machines, or the screen printing press, or the woodworking. And really be given the opportunity to produce their own products, with the support of a shared infrastructure and workshop.

Interviewer: That's definitely a different way of thinking about work.

Liz Wallin: That's where the idea started from. It wasn't, oh, I have this cool idea for a thing I want to sell, and it'll help this part of the community. It was rooted in: what could we do? How does work play a role in our lives? And then how can we use that as a means to build community around women returning to our community?

The board

Interviewer: Any instances with board members' decision-making?

Liz Wallin: Not many, because we were all rooted in the Economy of Communion, so there weren't many moments where it came into contrast with what we were doing. And we were running a nonprofit program, so there wasn't much coming into contrast with a profit bottom line. It wasn't like we had to make decisions on whether to pursue a business contract that wasn't directly aligned, which might be an experience you'd get from someone like John, who has to ask, do we take this contract even though it doesn't align? We weren't really grappling with those kinds of decisions.

Interviewer: What kind of people made up your board?

Liz Wallin: There were some people from the EoC, and then some local business owners, community members, and other local nonprofit directors. A bit of a mix: not everyone had an EoC background.

Interviewer: What did the board help you with?

Liz Wallin: The board helped decide longer-term direction. There was a lot of discussion about which grants to go after or apply for, funding mechanisms, outreach. A lot of network connectivity to other programs, or social entrepreneurs in other cities who were doing something similar.

And in community, we would decide on the different events we were going to host. A lot of it was volunteer-run, and that was all done in community, inviting people in when they had an idea. For example, we ran a book club, and that was an idea brought to us by a community member who was willing to host and run it. We also came to a point where we had participants on the board, making sure their voice was part of that decision-making.

Interviewer: How did you get volunteers?

Liz Wallin: Again, it was word of mouth, building community around what we were doing.

The building

Interviewer: How did you get along with the others in your building?

Liz Wallin: Oh, the building was so collaborative. It was this industrial building of small industry: workers, entrepreneurs, artists. It felt very familial in ways.

There were artists who maybe only came on the weekend to do artwork or host an art show. There were ceramicists. Photographers. Filmmakers. Other woodworkers, furniture builders. There was a brewing company. Coffee roasters. An ice cream shop. Really a kind of microcosm of a market economy of makers.

Marketing

Interviewer: It seems like you might have had some trouble with marketing, because there was no one thing: you were doing everything from sewing machines to screen printing presses.

Liz Wallin: That was part of the problem, too. In this sort of unpredictable: what materials are we going to have? We don't know. Is there a clean supply of this material that we could produce over and over again? Versus a more arts-based mindset of, what can we create?

So what really were we selling? It was hard to define. But the birds.

Interviewer: What about marketing?

Liz Wallin: Marketing was a struggle. I was really trying to grapple with the do-good or feel-good storytelling around our marketing, and reframe what we were doing at Project Lia to be empowering.

That can be a challenge, when you know what drives customers in our economy. It was at times hard to tell that story. And it was not my expertise. But most of the feedback I got was: just tell what you're doing. Just say what you're doing. You don't have to package it. Just share the work that's happening.

And creating opportunities. I was in the position of community collaboration, connected to different organizations, but then allowing other workers, other participants, to step up and sit on a panel and tell their story. So even though I was facilitating some of the larger-scale collaboration, then inviting others to participate in that, and take that seat.

Part Seven: Money

Funding

Interviewer: Where did your startup funding come from, and where did ongoing funding come from?

Liz Wallin: We got some startup funding from the Economy of Communion: some multiple-year grants, which was huge. Because as a small organization, the first thing you need is someone to back that idea in longevity. It's one thing to receive some donations, but you need to know that for the next six months we can stabilize, and we can take some risks here to try these new things, because we have support.

But looking back on it, I would have done it differently. Instead of starting our own organization, I would have built more of a program that could exist within an existing structure (another nonprofit already working in re-entry), where we were an auxiliary new program that we could test and model and grow from within.

Interviewer: You mentioned you got a lot of your funding from the EoC in the beginning. How was that arranged?

Liz Wallin: Part of the EoC model is that businesses can use some of their profits to give back, and create a fund for other projects. We were able to use that as startup funding to support Project Lia in its beginning.

Interviewer: You said before that a lot of the grants wanted you to come out with certain programmatic outcomes, and you said, no, we're going to let them choose. Speak to that again.

Liz Wallin: That's a real experience in funder conversations. And it's becoming a little more prevalent: trusting that the people on the ground, doing work in community with others, know what's needed. Not prescribing outcomes based on what you want these philanthropic dollars to do in community, but really trusting that people know what they need to do with funding.

And pushing back on that a little bit, on requiring certain certifications just to have a story, or a program you could earmark. Oh, well, participants in our program get this certification. And it's like: does a participant *need* this certification? Will it benefit them? Are they going to use it? Is this the pathway they want to take? Asking those questions, and pushing back.

Wages

Interviewer: And your EoC values guiding decisions about economics?

Liz Wallin: Everyone else was paid out before me. I made sure everyone else was paid.

Interviewer: That's unusual. Talk about that.

Liz Wallin: Economically, running an organization based on EoC values meant making sure everyone else was paid, even if that meant skipping a paycheck for myself. Really taking on that responsibility of caring for others, and knowing that the economic well-being of others relied on me to facilitate that.

It's hard, because I feel that's normal. But I guess you're contrasting it with a Jeff Bezos who's pulling profits while his workers are on welfare. I get that there's that contrast. But how many people really think that way? For me, I don't think it's the majority of people who build a business so that their workers are on welfare. I don't think the majority of business owners do that. It's a small percentage. It's a heavy and powerful percentage. But it's a small one.

Interviewer: In regard to the use of money and profit, how did your values influence your decisions?

Liz Wallin: In thinking through how the economics of Project Lia would work, it was important that we were paying a higher wage. We didn't necessarily get to a livable wage, but we were paying a wage that would allow our participants to experience stability, so they could focus on other areas of their life. We were the highest-paying job training program in Indianapolis at the time.

That was an important value. Versus just being a training program. We understood that the women in the program would need to earn a wage. They didn't have the ability to experiment with arts-based programming and then show up to another job. It really needed to be that in that development, in that training, they were earning a wage.

Interviewer: Did the women take more than you did?

Liz Wallin: They did. It was important to us that we weren't only providing opportunities for learning and training, but that we were providing a stable job: so, providing a decent wage to the women in our program.

And that required me to lean into some of my privileges and take less than I was paying out to the women in the program. Using that privilege, I was able to get another job at a bakery that a friend owned, and worked evenings as a cashier there to supplement my earnings.

I had time. I had more capacity. I had more stability in other areas of my life, and I could give that time to make up those wages.

Interviewer: How much did the money you made from these things help you be sustainable? It sounds like you were using grants and other things.

Liz Wallin: The products weren't a means to the end. It was the process.

Partners, and competitors

Interviewer: What kinds of organizations did you partner with, and what were those partnerships like?

Liz Wallin: We partnered with arts organizations in Indianapolis: there's a lot of opportunity within the arts for something like Project Lia. We partnered with youth organizations and workforce development organizations. And there are other re-entry programs in Indianapolis that we partnered with, for certifications the women could receive.

Interviewer: And a fresh take on competitors: how did your values influence that?

Liz Wallin: In the nonprofit world, we tend to not see each other as competitors, but it often ends up that way when you're fighting for the same grant funding. So one thing we did at Project Lia was to really collaborate with other organizations doing similar work.

For example, there was another local organization working with women experiencing housing instability, and they made candles. They followed a very traditional social entrepreneurship model. They made these little two-inch candles (an amazing scent), but where would you put that as a centerpiece in your home? So we had the idea: we can make the candle holders. We collaborated with them to make holders that specifically fit their candles, and then we were both able to sell products on our end and on theirs. It expanded the market opportunity for their candles and for some of the things we made at Project Lia, and generated more sales for both of us.

We also shared a grant with another re-entry organization, which you could see as a competitor, because we were competing for grant dollars. The other organization was better at dealing with the administrative tasks of the grant and the certifications, and we were better at building the relationships with our clients and seeing out the daily programmatic operations. Just leaning into each other's strengths to collaborate cohesively.

Interviewer: Do you have any stories about providence, about things working out in surprising ways?

Liz Wallin: We did a huge collaboration with two other organizations. One was completely arts-based, and their need was to find more skilled labor in textiles, sewing and manufacturing, in the fashion industry. And another organization was also doing re-entry, similar to us, but we were focused entirely on women. Collaborating with both of those, we ran an industrial sewing certification course.

The other re-entry organization was better able to provide resources to the women in multiple aspects of their lives. We were really good at creating a safe environment for women to work. In fact it was interesting to hear some of their experiences of coming from the other organization, working alongside other people, where they didn't necessarily feel as safe at work. So being able to have this environment just for them was impactful. And then working alongside an arts-based organization that really had no social impact focus: they were looking to fill a skilled labor need. And the three of us coming together to provide a certification course for women.

A nonprofit

Interviewer: How did the fact that Project Lia was a nonprofit help you not have to deal with the dichotomy many businesses face, of what's in my interest versus what's for the common good?

Liz Wallin: We didn't have to have much talk about it. We weren't met with conflicting decision-making models that, even though they may conflict, are intertwined in supporting one another: the profit bottom line, making profit to pay your employees, providing a stable work environment, being in contrast with maybe some of the things employees need from you. Luckily we weren't up against that sort of decision-making, being more rooted in the nonprofit structure than in a corporation.

Part Eight: The culture of the workplace

Counter-cultural decisions

Interviewer: Many have said that living out Economy of Communion values in your business practices will lead you to make decisions that are sometimes counter-cultural and counter-intuitive to traditional practice: an economy of giving rather than of having or accumulation. Can you share a few moments when EoC values guided a real decision you made? Start with employees.

Liz Wallin: Sometimes it came down to decisions like: what time do you show up? Does it have to be nine a.m. on the dot? And what happens when it's not nine a.m.? Does that mean you haven't met a certain goal or need of the business, or can we still share in that exchange, even though other things have come up? So it was more about how we incorporate other aspects of life, even though we all have a workplace with expectations to meet.

It's again in that dialogue, and that working in community. Does someone else pick up where that person left off, and take on an extra responsibility? Is there room for that to happen? Which again lies in this philosophy of an act of freedom versus an act of dominance. It erases the clear definition of what role I play at work. Am I only here to do one thing, that's laid out in my contract? Or am I here to be a participant in the community, and open to what that looks like every day?

Interviewer: How did you nurture that mindset in your employees? Were they surprised when they encountered this way of thinking?

Liz Wallin: There was a little element of surprise. But I tried to implement that culture by taking up that role myself. I would be the one cleaning the bathrooms, or taking out the trash, or cleaning up in the kitchen, or sweeping the floors at the end of the day.

There was no task that any one of us wouldn't be willing to take up, even though individually we were charged with different responsibilities. I could be writing a grant one minute and taking out the trash the next. And that wasn't seen as abnormal in our work environment.

Interviewer: So you led by example. Were there other things you did to help them understand that?

Liz Wallin: Part of our morning meetings really helped us to see how we're all showing up today. Where one of us might need extra support in some areas. Maybe I'm showing up with more than I need today, and I can share that. Give that. So we showed up in those practices.

Interviewer: If someone asked what it looks like to run a business the EoC way, what story would you tell them?

Liz Wallin: Running a business the EoC way looks very human-centered. It looks a little more unpredictable and messy at times. But it's full of purpose.

A specific example. It takes a mind shift in how we view accountability. Who are we accountable to?

Sometimes participants would go pick up another participant, another worker, because they'd be late, or they'd missed the bus, or needed a ride that day. So the person picking them up is now late too. And rather than saying, well, you're now late as well, it's: no, we're all here and we're all ready to go.

That shifts from individual accountability to accountability to the team. That we're all here and we're all successful today. As opposed to only being accountable to oneself, and making sure I'm here on time. Because if I'm here on time by myself, is that really what's going to push us forward and make us feel successful today? That ties into being first to love, and actions over words. How do we meet each other's needs on a daily basis?

Whole beings

Interviewer: And with employees?

Liz Wallin: At large, the EoC values guided me in seeing our employees as whole beings. And inviting them to show up to work as whole beings, with whatever was going on in life.

That led us to finding other ways to help them outside the framing of work. Even though our mission was workforce development (we're going to do this through employment), it led us to understand other challenges around housing, transportation, childcare, and how we could invite in supports around that, to support someone showing up to work fully.

Interviewer: Can you think of an example?

Liz Wallin: Sometimes my day would look like babysitting: watching over one of my employees' kids, or having them sit in the office, or finding something for them to make, while we all worked away, because childcare wasn't available that day. So by inviting in the whole being, you invite in community.

Interviewer: Is there any everyday business experience that was distinctly different from business as usual?

Liz Wallin: Inviting people to show up as their whole selves. That's not a business-as-usual environment, because people are bringing more.

Usually in businesses we ask people to leave it at the door. Come in with this professional character that they put on, and play a part, play a role in the company. And inviting people to come as their whole selves really changes the game, for all the relationships that develop in the workplace.

Interviewer: Recognizing the whole person, rather than seeing employees as workers to get a job done.

Liz Wallin: The power in recognizing workers as whole (rather than as a means to drive profit, or as the means of production) really helped us see how we could go beyond the workplace in building community. What needs came up. Needs around housing, transportation, childcare. And how that sometimes meant bringing your child to work, and sharing the workplace with them. By inviting each other to experience the uniqueness of one another, we changed the program quite often, depending on the needs of our participants, whether we needed to engage more with partners around financial literacy, or business entrepreneurship courses, or housing support.

Freedom, and policy

Interviewer: Promoting freedom and worker autonomy, rather than adherence to policy.

Liz Wallin: There's something to say there about creating an environment of accountability, which is not a foreign concept, and most people in the office-based, digital workforce are afforded that. Not having to go to the office means I can do laundry on a Monday while I'm still working, and no one's going to bat an eye.

Or think about paid time off. In labor that pertains to producing a product, there's not much leeway for taking time off, or being sick. But labor around the movement of ideas affords itself a lot of that. You see that more in companies where it's, oh yeah, it's unlimited PTO; whereas you would never see that at a warehouse. Which makes sense; you can't have unlimited PTO when you're literally relying on people to make something. But then we value it differently, and the wages are so much lower for that kind of work. So what's that about?

I think of flying here, and asking, can I sit wherever? And being told, no, you can't sit in those seats. Why are the workers on that plane not empowered to make a decision in a moment where it doesn't really matter? They're so scared of policy: no, I have to adhere to this policy, otherwise it's a complete mess, everyone will just sit wherever they want. That's not actually going to happen.

I think of that as big corporate policy training, where in that moment people have lost any sight of relation. Someone in front of you, and it could be, yeah, go sit in that seat, you'll be more comfortable. It has trained us to be completely transactional and policy-based. Versus using your own human determination. We're so far removed from that. And what impact does it have to the bottom line of profits? Did it have any impact? In that moment, would it have had any?

Interviewer: You've talked about the purpose of work. Is there a clear statement you could make about that?

Liz Wallin: There are people who have spoken to the value of work in our lives. There's research on this, and theories about how psychologically it gives us a sense of belonging. But that's because we've built an entire society up to this point around the work environment. That's changed over the years, because it used to be that people had different purposes in the community outside of work. Whether that was caring for children, or other roles in community that weren't always tied to labor, or to wage labor. So now our understanding of work is wage labor, and I think that changes it. But there's always been that purpose of work in all societies.

I talk to my students about this a little bit too. Their work in class: not just seeing it as something they need to get done, a task to be completed, but as an opportunity to go deeper in learning, an opportunity to go deeper in understanding a certain skill.

That's a mindset shift that helps us be more present in our own lives, and in the experiences we're having. Where it's not just draining. When you find those moments of an opportunity to love another, an opportunity to take the first step in seeing something and meeting a need. Just changing that perspective on how we experience work in our lives changes our presence, and our ability to see those moments of relationship with others.

The company cube at Project Lia

Interviewer: The company cube is a tool frequently used to give practical direction to behavior in the workplace. What were the ways you saw these at Project Lia? Build relationships every day.

Liz Wallin: That's what we were doing: building relationships every day. How do we engage with one another to meet a unified goal, and also individual goals at the same time? We need to do that through relationships.

Interviewer: Support with actions, not just words.

Liz Wallin: Those were seen in the small things. If a coworker needed a ride into work that day, taking that extra time and going out of your way to help meet that need. Taking action.

Interviewer: Not just sharing your wealth, but sharing expertise, time, and even yourself.

Liz Wallin: That was the driving force for starting Project Lia: sharing my time, sharing expertise, sharing talent. And inviting others to do the same, calling on other people to also share their time, their talent and their expertise.

Interviewer: We're often very hesitant to ask others for help. How should we look at that differently, as actually being a gift we're giving to others, to help them become everything they can be?

Liz Wallin: Innately, we all want to be invited in. And when we ask others to participate, we're inviting them in. And in some regard we're seeing them for who they are, and for the talents they have.

There's recognition in that. Hey, I see that you have this talent. I see that you have this expertise. Would you be willing to share that? Without it being transactional. This is a way to engage in community. This is a way of giving, of engaging with the culture of giving. And I think people are willing to do that because it builds their own humanity: seeing themselves as part of that community.

For example, we had a professor of philosophy who got involved in volunteering and in learning more about what we were doing at Project Lia. Some of the work he was doing involved prison work and the carceral state in the United States, and he wanted to lend that expertise and start a book club. We would meet monthly to share in everyone's understanding of a new book around incarceration in the United States and its impact, to learn from one another, whether we were impacted directly by that, or complicit in it, and how it was impacting other communities.

Interviewer: Valuing every person and every idea. How did you practice that at Project Lia?

Liz Wallin: In the sharing of ideas, and welcoming feedback from anybody, and then standing behind it if that was something we could engage with: a decision that could be made, changing a policy, changing operating hours. Taking that in communion with one another.

Interviewer: Can you think of an example of an idea that one of the women brought up where you thought, oh, that's interesting, I never thought of that, and then you did it, and it worked?

Liz Wallin: It came through a lot in our product line: ideas about what we could make, and how we could make them. Sometimes we'd have to say, okay, we're going to need to find some more resources to do that. But let's do it. We can put a call out to the community and see if that's something we can get.

Policy-wise: running payroll was a lot easier for me when I did it bi-weekly. But the need was to have it weekly. So I took on that extra administrative task to meet the needs of our employees.

Interviewer: First, to help others.

Liz Wallin: It was the culture we built. Jump in when you could to help another. That was throughout, not just something one person was culturally driven to do. It was pervasive at Project Lia.

A way of being

Interviewer: Can you share a few moments when EoC values guided a real decision you made around ethical behavior?

Liz Wallin: Project Lia, at its essence, was driven by EoC values. I was really grappling with the idea of how we could create a programmatic model that was rooted in the EoC, in this culture of giving, while also meeting a community need. That was a really driving force of the idea in and of itself.

I don't know if there was a specific decision where it was, oh, we need to pull in EoC values. It was our way of being. A way of operating and seeing business.

Part Nine: Community

Inviting people in

Interviewer: The Economy of Communion frequently claims that business can bring about communion among people. How have you seen that take place in your own activities with Project Lia?

Liz Wallin: Part of what we did at Project Lia was host community events rooted in education about incarceration in the United States, and actually have conversation, in community, about what our role is in all of that.

We hosted film screenings, where we'd watch a film with a panel discussion after. We hosted community events where we invited the community in to build alongside us, make things, come together, have a potluck.

So how is community playing a role? Not just telling stories of others, but being part of their stories. That was a big invitation we held out.

A big thing for me was: this isn't charity work. This is how we live in community with one another. And I was trying to get people to understand that you have to do that in proximity to others. Donations are great, but come have dinner with us. Come get to know us.

That was a big aspect of Project Lia: we don't just have participants, we have community members. Come get to know your community members. And through that, one, it was an aspect of humanizing each other in community. And it also highlighted the talents of others. How could everybody share their talents, and be in that role of working within their strengths, and feel good about that?

Interviewer: You're reminding me of Pope Francis, who said capitalism knows philanthropy, but we need to be involved in the lives of the poor, to be touching them and to be there with them.

Liz Wallin: Yes. Really getting to know one another. It's a very powerful thing. Society's done a great job at separating us. I think the magic is all in between. It's very personal.

I wasn't looking to create just another philanthropic venture, where we're taking the excess of what's been profited off and using it to fill the very hole it took from, and then, on top of it, usually exercising some sort of control over what that looks like. Because now it's ours, and we'll determine what that looks like. This gets into a little bit of anti-capitalism, which is hard, because the EoC, and these kinds of ideas, need the support of that excess.

Interviewer: I think the EoC is fine with working within capitalism, but it wants a reformed capitalism. They want to transform the system.

Liz Wallin: Because philanthropic dollars right now: it's just, okay, I've made too much, and here it is, and I'm going to control what you do with it. Well, I should never have taken it all from you in the first place. I shouldn't have those sorts of profits. So it's very backwards thinking.

Interviewer: Again you're reminding me of Pope Francis, who said we have crazy things like tobacco companies paying for cancer research. He said we're going to get to a point where manufacturers of weapons of mass destruction are putting up hospitals for those who have been maimed by them.

Liz Wallin: The thinking is quite backwards. I think the EoC deals with that by asking, from the get-go: what are the community needs we're meeting?

Interviewer: He also said we need to stop just helping the victims. Help them not to be victims.

Liz Wallin: Right. Right.

Beyond the transaction

Interviewer: Going beyond transactional business to real relational encounter. How did you do that?

Liz Wallin: Our ask of our customers (the people who would buy our products) didn't stop at the purchase. There was always the building of a relationship there. A political education, really. Knowing why we were doing what we were doing, beyond just buying a product to support our program.

We were really presenting the issue of incarceration in the United States, and asking our customers to go beyond that transaction and really engage with the issue. Whether that was educating themselves, learning more about the issue, growing in proximity, or volunteering. We had a lot of avenues for

engagement beyond just buying our products. So it changed from, okay, we just need a certain number of people to buy the products to sustain the program: no, we need the community to know why we're making these things. I think that's what really built the community around Project Lia.

We had our book club. We would do letter-writing workshops. We hosted potluck dinners, to share food with each other in community. Holiday markets and craft markets, where we invited others to participate in the making of the products, of the crafts, and at Project Lia the artists would share in our craft of what we were learning to make. So it switched the model between the customer and Project Lia, allowing moments of mentorship, of teaching and learning.

We were changing that, and asking customers to be in real relationship with the artists. With the women.

Interviewer: Can you share a moment when EoC values guided a real decision, when it comes to customers?

Liz Wallin: One thing I saw when looking at other models of social entrepreneurship (or when we talk about businesses that do good, the traditional B Corp) is that they're looking at the end product, and how to maximize sustainability and profit. And in doing so they create a distance between the product and the hands that made that product. Sort of these feel-good stories.

For me, working within the context of the EoC meant more than just the feel-good story. It meant being in community with, and being in solidarity with, workers. And that led us to thinning that line between our products and the artists who made them.

So instead of, for example, me going to the market and selling the goods and telling this story: going together with our participants, selling alongside them, sharing their stories, taking pride in the work, and seeing in real time, in those market encounters, the joy that customers would get from looking at the beautiful things they made. That was an important decision in aligning how, practically, our values would show up in how we operated.

How people responded

Interviewer: How did others respond to the way you do business? Did customers, employees or peers notice something different about how you work?

Liz Wallin: There was definitely a lot of reflection and feedback about feeling seen, feeling heard, feeling part of a community again, coming from participants and from members of the community. Having a space to come to and engage with others: that in itself was new. And welcomed.

Interviewer: Is that something you saw in people who came and helped with the project? How were they blessed?

Liz Wallin: Naturally, people are looking for proximity. And I think you can find that across the spectrum of life experiences. We saw that in the community we were building: from professors volunteering their time to run a book club that we'd host once a week, to elders who'd come and volunteer their time to teach some of the skills they'd gained to participants, and vice versa.

Interviewer: How did you recruit those people?

Liz Wallin: We were out in the community a lot, at different events, hosting tables. There was a lot of word of mouth. Definitely leaning into the big city, small town feel of Indianapolis: at different meetings, and connecting in various communities to bring people together.

Interviewer: Can you describe how Project Lia contributed to unity?

Liz Wallin: Project Lia did really well at building unity in the community, just by inviting people in to participate and share in each other's lives, beyond asking for a transaction. Through events, through education, through the sharing of needs and talents. That's how we build unity.

What it meant

Interviewer: What moments bring you the deepest sense of joy or meaning from practicing business the EoC way?

Liz Wallin: The relationships that have been built. They always surprise me.

I remember one time we had a participant who was very young. She was with us for a couple of months and then suddenly moved away, due to different circumstances. And a year later I was in the office working, and she came in; she was in town and wanted to say hello and come for a visit.

It's moments like that where I thought, wow, we're really doing something here. Because that is so not normal, for someone to want to return and come visit. A real relationship was built there.

Interviewer: What moments have brought you the deepest sense of joy or meaning from practicing business this way?

Liz Wallin: The relationships that are built that go beyond work. Lifelong relationships. Learning from one another, and letting that impact you and change you as a person. You never know in the moment the strength of your impact: how far the relationships you build really go. So it always comes after the fact, when someone shares with you that moment in their lives and what it meant for them.

At Project Lia that happened often, at times when we were passing by in each other's lives at a certain moment. The impact of what it meant to be seen and to be heard (especially coming out of incarceration, coming out of an environment that was particularly dehumanizing), and landing in a place that saw your wholeness. Having participants share that impact with me later on really changed me, and brought a deep sense of purpose to the work I was doing.

Interviewer: Can you paint us a picture of one of those?

Liz Wallin: By creating that space, the impact of having that space to show up fully, and actually realizing that your experience is not only valid but powerful. And being able to share your story and use that experience to better our community.

One of our participants had that space, and had her voice heard, and really felt empowered to build connections in community and to network. And that led to a job offer.

And what that's in contrast to is basically trying to erase your criminal background. It was more: oh no, I can actually own this. This is a valid experience that can be heard. Versus trying to step into the world and put on a mask to hide that history.

One thing a participant told me once was that not having to hide her story (the fact that she had been in prison) was helpful. Showing up at Project Lia, we already knew that. She had been in prison. And that was helpful, because it's exhausting to try to hide that every day, when it's something she has to deal with and confront.

If you were to come out of prison and get a job somewhere else, you would try not to talk about that experience. But it's very real. That could have been five years of your life, or ten years of your life, that you're just trying to move past. But how do you heal from that experience? That was seen in contrast to other work environments where that part of their story was asked to be hidden, or forgotten.

And as it relates to incarceration in the United States and the systemic issues around it: the incarceration of poverty, the incarceration of mental health, the incarceration of abuse: these are systemic issues that impact individuals. And asking people to just forget about their stories voids them of their humanity. I think that's the first step we did at Project Lia: to acknowledge each other, and build those relationships.

Part Ten: The end of Project Lia

Interviewer: So who is running Project Lia now?

Liz Wallin: Project Lia is no longer.

Interviewer: How long did Project Lia go, and can you tell us what led to it not being there anymore?

Liz Wallin: We ran Project Lia for six years, working with various participants across that time.

But there came a point where I was really starting to feel I wasn't in the right role. As you said, I don't like talking about myself, and I felt that being the face of an organization requires you to put yourself out there, talk about yourself, and also play some politics. And being a fairly principled person, I found myself stuck. It was hard to get around some of those loopholes.

So I thought, well, let me get out of my own way. Let me get out of the way of this work. Maybe there are others in better positions to do that, while I continue to do more of the programmatic operations.

I met with a mentor and partner. And I asked, hey, would you want to be the executive director of the organization, and I'll continue to run programming? So the idea was that we would join forces, collaborate, and transition one infrastructure into another.

It was going really well for a few weeks, and then I got a phone call saying, hey, I took another job.

That put me in a moment of, oh gosh, what just happened? The exact opposite of what I was hoping. I didn't want to be the executive director, and now I'm the executive director of two organizations. How did that happen?

I had to learn a lot of things quickly. I was running into fairly established programming with youth aged fourteen to twenty-four (summer programming, year-round employment, workforce development) as well as the arts-based programming we were doing with Project Lia. So it was drinking out of a fire hose for a bit there. All while the building the other organization had been operating in was sold, and we had to move everything out. It was just a wild couple of months.

Coming out the other side of it, I was able to settle more into some of the programming. But ultimately I was just burnt out from a year of transition and trying to keep things afloat through multiple levels of it: not only organizationally but infrastructurally, literally moving the buildings we were in and all the equipment that had to come with it. And programmatically and operationally, a lot of transitions in different grant requirements and funding. It was a lot. And eventually I had to say, okay, I need to rest, and take that for myself.

And then I just started nannying. I had two different families I was working with, one with a six-month-old and one with a three-year-old. It was a beautiful moment of regrounding myself in the present moment and reminding myself: one foot in front of the other. Children have a great way of doing that. If you think you know where you're going, try to do it with a three-year-old. I just took the lead from them, and from how a day would unfold.

That led me to find an opportunity to transition into a teaching program, with the Indianapolis Teaching Fellows. I applied, I got in, and almost the same thing: jumped headfirst into education. I was teaching full-time while also getting my master's in teaching and learning on the job. I graduated in May of 2025, so just this past May. Two years of teaching, and I'm into my third year now, in fourth grade. And so now I'm finding myself exploring the Economy of Communion and its values, and what that looks like in education.

Interviewer: So was that the end of Project Lia, when you had to step back?

Liz Wallin: Ultimately, stepping down and stepping back meant an end to Project Lia at that time. My last participant had gotten a job elsewhere. And so I was the only one left, and stepping down ultimately meant an end to Project Lia.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to someone seriously thinking about starting an EoC project or business, who's younger and trying to figure out what that would even mean?

Liz Wallin: My biggest piece of advice is: connect with the community. The root of the EoC is the art of giving, the culture of giving.

And don't do it alone. Find ways in which you can collaborate. Work alongside. Promote a new idea you might have with something that's already existing.

One thing I would do if I could do it again: I probably would have started Project Lia more as a program out of another organization. Sort of how we were, at the end of Project Lia, working to transition into an existing infrastructure that was aligned in so many of its values and routines. But doing that from the beginning. And then incubating that idea. Surrounding it with a lot of support and community and collaboration.

Part Eleven: What the Economy of Communion is

Describing it

Interviewer: As you started Project Lia, how did you see yourself as Economy of Communion? What were the identifying marks of your project from an EoC perspective?

Liz Wallin: From an EoC perspective, those values were integrated into every aspect of what we were doing. Not only in the interactions; I actually built the EoC values into the routines of what we would do every day. How we would keep the workplace. How we would start morning meetings, sharing out with each other.

It was built in, because I was really grappling with this idea of: okay, we can have businesses with social impact, or that provide good. But how do we incorporate this into what it is like to show up every day at work? And the role that work plays in our lives?

Interviewer: How do you describe the EoC to someone who's never heard of it?

Liz Wallin: In my days of sharing these ideas, I tried to use vocabulary that is already understood. Social entrepreneurship. Social impact. Ethical company. Community-based business.

Because the EoC can seem a bit standoffish to someone who doesn't know what it is. And language is important, and how we use language matters. So I tried to use a lot of vocabulary people are already using every day in thinking about new business models.

For example, TOMS: you buy a pair and they donate a pair. These business models already exist. But I think the EoC takes it a step further, in incorporating those values within the model, within the company, within the daily operations, and holding to those values every day.

Interviewer: How would you describe the EoC to people who have never heard of it?

Liz Wallin: For someone who's never heard of the EoC before, I would say the EoC is re-envisioning the value of work in our lives. And doing so based in a culture of giving. A market of encounter, that doesn't rely on the scarcity of goods, but rather on the idea of a multiplication of goods.

Interviewer: What is distinctive about the EoC approach? It's like social entrepreneurship, it's like a B Corp, but what's different?

Liz Wallin: For me, the distinguishing factor between an EoC business and a B Corp business is that it doesn't just show up at the end of the line, at the product line, or in the profits. It shows up from the very beginning, and it shows up through the process. It's not just thinking about, okay, once we make a profit, what do we do with that profit. It shows up in how we are going to make a profit, with these values in place.

Interviewer: What makes the EoC way of doing business unique, in your opinion?

Liz Wallin: Instead of trying to solve problems we've already created, it's: how do we not create problems by doing business in the first place? How can we avoid creating a problem that then needs to be solved?

There's a way of doing business. There's a way of creating an economic model, a sharing of goods, that's not extractive in its essence. And I think that's what the EoC is seeking to understand, resolve, address.

Interviewer: What makes the EoC approach distinctive? Going beyond transactional business to real relational encounter?

Liz Wallin: The biggest distinguisher between an EoC business and other business models is business as an act of freedom versus an act of domination. Trying to gain control over part of the market, versus recognizing that there are different talents, and that market share can really be enacted to benefit a customer, a client, a given goal.

Interviewer: What about going beyond profit maximization to living a life of giving?

Liz Wallin: It is a way of living. Engaging in that kind of community goes beyond profits. It goes beyond an end bottom line. And ultimately it benefits everybody involved in that process, whether they're connecting to a better resource, or receiving a better product. Everyone involved in that culture of giving benefits.

In one sentence

Interviewer: How would you describe the EoC in one sentence, a motto, a mission, to always come back to?

Liz Wallin: The EoC. It's always personal.

Interviewer: What's the motto, or the mission, of the EoC, a thing to always come back to?

Liz Wallin: It's not for everyone. If you are power-hungry and profit-driven, it's not for you. Don't try.

I guess the motto of the EoC, for me, would be people over profit.

Practicing it

Interviewer: If someone asked you what it means to practice business the EoC way, what would you tell them?

Liz Wallin: I would tell them it fundamentally relies on understanding *why* you're doing business, and *how* you're doing business. Those are the two main questions that doing business the EoC way requires. And the answers to those questions should be anything but profit.

They generate something beyond profit, in community with one another. Not to say that we don't need to make ends meet. But again, this line of reciprocity: how my generative processes help another business, or help a member of the community, and how that generates back into the business in ways that might not show up in the books.

Interviewer: What does it mean to practice business the EoC way?

Liz Wallin: Practising business the EoC way is not an easy task. It requires constant, principled decision-making. Choosing people over profit, and what that looks like, not only for the channelling of profit, but for what it means for your workers in the company, and what it might mean for the

community at large. It's not easy decision-making, and it's important that it's done in collaboration.

Interviewer: What unique challenges arise from trying to practice business with an EoC framework?

Liz Wallin: The biggest challenge for an EoC business is having more than one bottom line. Aside from profit, meeting goals of building community, building relationships, being human-centered: that can complicate decision making in a lot of ways. I think that's the biggest challenge set out for an EoC business.

A lifestyle

Interviewer: Some have said the EoC is not just a way of doing business but a lifestyle, or a vocation: not another management theory, but a whole way of being in the world. Does that seem accurate in your own experience?

Liz Wallin: I do. I think that's true. This is not just a do-good business. This is really trying to think about how we live in community, and then how we involve purpose in our daily lives, and how that plays out in what we do for work.

And I think that's challenging in the world we live in. We live in capitalism. And our purpose gets lost in that equation, as humans and in community life. It isolates us from each other. So coming in with EoC values can be really challenging, in the sense of challenging corporate greed, where we exist to become more independent. Successfully independent.

Interviewer: What do you think of the phrase, it's just business, it's nothing personal?

Liz Wallin: What do I think about "it's just business, it's nothing personal"? It's always personal. It's EoC. It's always personal. We exist in relation to one another, so everything we do has a ripple effect.

And I think that's also the distinction between an EoC business and social entrepreneurship. With social entrepreneurship, you're using capitalism to solve some other problem, but you have to extract from somewhere in order to solve the problem you're trying to solve. Is it possible to create an ethics around that? I don't know if there's an answer to that. So how could we look at other models of economics that don't create the extractive process of capitalism?

Why do it

Interviewer: Why would you encourage someone to be part of an economy of giving rather than just trying to maximize profits?

Liz Wallin: Because at its core it meets our human needs. As an individual, it's really what gives us a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

You find a lot of CEOs generating a lot of profit who are awfully lonely. And in an economy of giving, we find ourselves rooted in community. And that's an incredibly fulfilling place to be.

Interviewer: Why would you encourage somebody to join the EoC and practice its values?

Liz Wallin: One reason is that when we give permission for others to show up fully and authentically, we give ourselves permission to do the same. And it's powerful. It changes the way we can view work in our lives, and the way we organize around work in our lives.

Interviewer: It's hard enough to be an entrepreneur and start something up. Doesn't the extra burden of trying to live out an economy of giving add to the stress?

Liz Wallin: It's a burden I'd be willing to take any day. We're always making choices between two hard rocks. The EoC is a burden I would take any day. Because it's generative, in more ways than one.

Do you know this idea of providence? When you give, you receive a hundredfold. And in the economy of giving, what we receive maybe isn't as predictable, because it's done in community. But it's always what we need.

Interviewer: Talk about that a little more: how being in community is much less predictable.

Liz Wallin: People are messy. Being in community means being with people of different backgrounds and different experiences and different ideas. Community is made up of people, and people are unpredictable. Coming together in community means coming together with different ideas, different cultures, different backgrounds, different experiences, different traumas, that all join together.

And being able to work with others in a shared value system, in a shared purpose: what that looks like might look different for everyone. That's unpredictable in ways, and something to be worked through in dialogue. Which I think is the hardest part. How do we do this in communication? It's a skill that needs to be taught.

Interviewer: Dealing with messy people.

Liz Wallin: Communicating. Dialogue. And sticking with it.

Mentoring

Interviewer: If you were encouraging a friend to try the EoC, what would you tell them from your own experience?

Liz Wallin: I'd say they already are. They already are involved. They already are engaged. We are constantly engaged in a culture of giving, if we so choose: to not isolate ourselves, and to be in community with one another. It requires us to see other needs and meet them.

Interviewer: Have you had the chance to mentor or guide others in EoC values?

Liz Wallin: We talked about the values of the EoC with the women in the program, and how we were tying that into programmatic routines and procedures.

Interviewer: Would you be willing to mentor someone who wanted to practice an EoC approach to business?

Liz Wallin: Absolutely. There's a lot I learned through the process of starting an idea and watching it come to fruition, and then transitioning on the other side, that I would love to share with individuals seeking to start their own EoC business, or to implement that in the workplace.

Interviewer: Is there someone who sticks out as a mentor to you, who guided you in those ways?

Liz Wallin: John Mundell was a huge mentor to me. Just seeing what he did with his business: how he went beyond the mission and vision of what he was doing in the environment, in contracting and remediation, and how he used his business as a vehicle for bringing about community and building a network of giving.

Part Twelve: Extraction, and a new economy

Extraction

Interviewer: Can you give some examples of how business is frequently extractive? What do you mean by that?

Liz Wallin: I think ultimately business as an idea is extractive. Because in order for a business to be good, you have to find an ongoing need that will be filled. And much of what we have in business today is not finding a need, but creating a need, so that the business model can continue to live on. And in creating a need, that's where the extraction comes into play. Whether that's a material need or a lifestyle need. If it's something you've created, you have to extract from somewhere in order to fill that ongoing model.

Interviewer: Can you give a particular example?

Liz Wallin: You could talk about the idea of beauty, and how the idea of beauty has been marketed to be a certain way, so now you've created a need around a certain look, to keep up with fashion trends.

You could say the need is created in a latte. Instead of enjoying coffee at its finest, and fairly cheap, now we need to add sugar into the model.

Even creating an infrastructure around cars, and depleting funding for public transportation. You create a need for individualized transportation. There's an ongoing need for cars.

Or think about our phones, and how phones are made. I see this a lot: I'm a builder, a tinkerer, so I like to know how things work, how machines work. If you look at how machines have evolved over time, they've gotten more and more complex and less and less user-friendly.

If you had a car back in the day, you had a manual that explained how that car worked. You could take it apart, see how the parts worked together, and fix the one that broke. Now we've created products that need an expert to deal with them, or that need another piece of technology to diagnose the problem in the first place, with the computers built into the cars. That's how I see it. In the name of innovation and technology and advancement, we've actually complicated things and created needs for more industry.

And then I think the greatest question our society has at hand is this: through all of this (efficiency in the name of efficiency, and creating more industry to create more jobs), how do we value and see purpose in a person when there is no productivity? Because ultimately we don't need everybody to be productive. But we've gotten to a place where we dehumanize those who don't serve one of those purposes of productivity. And then we have the whole prison-industrial complex, of, well, some of them we'll just put in cages.

Interviewer: What are examples of how business creates its own needs that then have to be filled with charity?

Liz Wallin: We see that in the tech industry right now: how they've created this monster of AI that then is going to have to be dealt with.

It's this concept of creating just because we can. It's an act of domination again. Doing something because I can, versus doing something for the greater good. And it's fairly pervasive in our culture. A bit of a colonial mindset. I'll take this because I can.

The world is your oyster, right? Do it because you can, versus do it for the common good. Maybe that's a question we need to reflect on more often. There's a moral question in there.

You could start a hundred different businesses. But in the Economy of Communion, you would ask yourself: is that business in service of communion with others? You wouldn't start an EoC business because it was a highly profitable idea, alone. So already you would be thinking to yourself: I'm not just going to do it because I can.

I think of the submersible that imploded a couple of years ago. Why did you think you could do that? And the force of nature taking it upon itself to show us. So it's: generating a business in service of the common good, versus generating a business in service of a profit.

Because profit is extractive at its core. In order to generate profit, we must create an excess. Profit, as an idea, goes beyond what we need. Which is extractive.

And back to this: why choose to live more simply? Because I've chosen to stop at the point at which I don't need more.

Interviewer: So are you saying that having and pursuing more than what we need is actually part of the problem?

Liz Wallin: Yes. Because then it infiltrates our decision-making. Then we can't distinguish between what we need and what's in excess of that.

Interviewer: How do you decide what you need? Going beyond that is a problem, but how do you know where that line is?

Liz Wallin: Deciding what we need has to be a societal conversation. An individual can decide what they need as an individual. But as a society, I think we've lost touch with what a common good is, and how that's a right for everybody. That's a question that requires deep dialogue, especially in the diverse world we live in today.

Interviewer: Would you be able to say succinctly why profit is problematic?

Liz Wallin: Profit as a decision-making model requires us to take away from other areas to generate that profit. And I think that's what creates the victimhood in other areas of business.

Whereas if we understand that profit can be a means to sustain: if we talked more about sustaining a business than about generating profit, it would change the way decisions are made within that company. You wouldn't need to cut back on certain foundational values just to create that profit. You could make decisions based on the health and dignity of your employees. Or the health and dignity of your customers, or of other client relationships, or of competitors. It would change the way we make decisions.

No more victims

Interviewer: Pope Francis challenged EoC members to create a world with no more victims. How do you take that challenge personally?

Liz Wallin: The challenge to build a world with no more victims is essentially the idea that we are not participating in, or creating, businesses of extraction. Thinking through business, and thinking through an economy that in and of itself has shared values, that acts in communion with one another, and that recognizes its impact before it creates impact in an extractive way.

And this goes back to creating a business around a need that exists, and finding economies that support community, that support a way of life in communion with each other, versus creating an economy that is built upon the creation of needs that then need to be expanded upon or filled. I think that's the clear distinction.

Maybe we could go into defining what economy is. Economy as we've come to know it, which is business-driven, versus economy as a means to facilitate an exchange of goods and ideas. One that supports human flourishing, versus one that creates ongoing desires and needs that then need to be filled.

Interviewer: What makes that personal for you?

Liz Wallin: In building an economy around human flourishing, the chord it strikes in me pertains to unnecessary suffering. Especially unnecessary suffering that's been inflicted by another human. That's my ultimate anguish.

Because it's not that we want to eradicate suffering. There's value that can be seen in suffering. There's growth. There's emotion. There's experience. There's wisdom in suffering.

But suffering that exists intentionally: I don't think we need to live in a world like that. It's the distinction between suffering from an environmental cause, and suffering when we created the environmental cause. It's like the disharmony that exists in nature is not a bad disharmony.

A culture of giving

Interviewer: How do you envision the connection between the EoC vocation and the culture of giving?

Liz Wallin: They're one and the same. The vocation of the EoC and the culture of giving are one and the same. We're called to be in community with one another, whether that's through what we have and how we give it, but also how we engage in business, and the value of business in our lives.

Interviewer: Chiara Lubich contrasted the EoC with traditional business by saying we want to live a culture of giving rather than a culture of having. How have you practiced that, or seen others practice it?

Liz Wallin: Even in my personal life, the culture of giving versus the culture of having: just viewing the things I do have as things I'm in care of. And being very quick to lend out what I have. So it becomes less about what I have and more about what I'm in care of, and giving that freely. And that's both in material things and in talents and ideas.

Interviewer: What about the multiplication of goods, rather than the scarcity of goods?

Liz Wallin: I like to think of it as: when you use something, you try to use all of it.

Right now we have an economy built upon the efficiency of the end product, versus the efficiency and sustainability of the materials being used. And so there's very much a giving away to trash of what's a byproduct. I think there could be more innovation around the use of that byproduct, of what's created in excess.

A new ecology

Interviewer: You've mentioned this phrase before, a new ecology, and a market driven by a new ecology. Explain that, and what you think are the necessary conditions to make it possible.

Liz Wallin: For me, a new ecology requires a lot of thought and conversation around localized industry, and what that means in meeting our everyday needs. It really looks like a cultural shift in how we live out our daily lives, and in what we can dream of and expect from being in this world together.

So for me, a new ecology is very localized, and rooted in community. A life like that: you wouldn't expect to travel much. You would stay where you are rooted, in the place you're rooted in. Localized industry might shift the way we imagine diet for ourselves.

We've really created an ecology of a global economy. And is that sustainable? I think it brings the sustainability of a global economy into question.

Now, many would argue that a global economy has created flourishing life for people all around the world. But it really depends who you're talking to. If you're in the middle of a war over natural resources that we use for our phones and our technology, is that a flourishing life? Has a global economy led you to safety, and to a community you feel safe and nourished in? So I think it's important to recognize and understand who's leading those conversations and telling that history.

Interviewer: What would that new ecology look like? If we were going to start that in Omaha, would I not get bananas or coffee?

Liz Wallin: You could do some greenhouses for bananas. I'm sure there are lots of ways to reinvent diversity. And maybe it would be more season-based, rooted in the biodiversity of the local ecology, the local environment.

It would be a pretty big adjustment for us. Fascinating, though. Because for me, the history of this is not very long. The change from where we are today (the culture and the lives we live today) is not very far from a different economy that we lived in a hundred years ago. Which is within two generations of human life. So it's not much. But the lift seems quite heavy, I think, because it's rooted in convenience and comfort. And I do think a new ecology will require a lot of discomfort. And we have to be willing to buy into that.

Trash

Interviewer: Talk to us about trash, and how Project Lia addressed that concern.

Liz Wallin: At Project Lia we challenged ourselves not only with addressing a social impact, reframing society's perception of our criminal justice system and our pursuit of justice, but also with what's out there materially that is seen as discarded, that has no use, no value. And how we could reframe society's perception of that as well.

How could we make trash into something beautiful? Something that was desirable. That someone wanted. That had value. So, taking that trash, taking that discarded material, and making it into something new. That was the whole idea.

Eyes to see

Interviewer: When I talk about the rental work I do, I say we take on houses everyone else thought should be torn down, and workers other people thought were unemployable, and tenants other people didn't want to rent to. There's an act of redemption going on, in having eyes to see. When Chiara and the original EoC members came up with this idea of how to help the poor, let's give them jobs, that was a pretty strange idea. Most people saw them as people in need, not as people who could produce and participate in community and in the market. How have you experienced that?

Liz Wallin: In the EoC there's a mutual understanding of the dignity of work, and of what work can mean in our lives.

For me, Chiara, in starting this, wasn't only seeing that there's a need in poverty, and we need to give. She really saw that solving poverty meant engaging with. There's a proximity, a solidarity, with those living in poverty. That's where the EoC was rooted: in sharing life with, in living in solidarity with. That meant creating opportunities for engagement with those living in poverty.

And I think ultimately, when you live in solidarity with, you gain the eyes to see. The different perspective. You're not looking *at*. You're looking *from within*.

Interviewer: Talk more about how Project Lia followed that model.

Liz Wallin: Project Lia followed a model of solidarity because we were inviting people in, not only to participate in, but to change the perception of, how we understand criminality and wrongdoing, and how we pursue justice. Not only how we might change that perception in society, but how that might actually look in action.

What might it look like for someone we thought did something wrong to actually be in control of, and build, and make something beautiful? To become the artist of it. So it's: oh, who made it? This is the artist. That really changed the perception, and reframed our story around hurt and wrongdoing in society. And living that in solidarity with one another, in an exchange of goods and an exchange of ideas, was our way of living out a solidarity economy.

Interviewer: One of the key aspects of Project Lia was to help people understand more about incarceration. What were the key things you wanted people to know, and to realize about the brokenness of the system?

Liz Wallin: The main thing I wanted people to know about incarceration was that it is a system we set up, reflecting how we believe wrongdoing and justice should be pursued.

It's incredibly punitive. It doesn't address the root causes of incarceration, the root causes of wrongdoing. And it doesn't serve those who have been harmed in that process either.

You talk to many victims of violence, and in our current system of justice there's no apology. There's not a lot of feeling of reconciliation. And so it leaves both those who have been harmed and those who have harmed others empty.

So I wanted people to understand that our current system isn't doing much to reconcile with wrongdoing in our society. And on top of it, it is also collecting victims. Victims of violence, victims of trauma, of abuse, people dealing with mental illness. How do we do that in our society? Is it just criminalized? And reimagining what that might look like, and inviting people to live in proximity to that.

Part Thirteen: Providence, and what we are in care of

Providence

Interviewer: Many people in the Focolare and the Economy of Communion talk about providence. What does providence mean, in your own view?

Liz Wallin: Providence is the idea that when we engage in a culture of giving, we are also recipients of that giving. So providence lends itself towards reciprocity, that sort of what goes around comes around, which many people experience in small and big ways. But an ultimate belief that in giving, I too will receive.

Interviewer: Can you think of examples where you've seen providence happen, where you made a tough call but it ended up being a real blessing?

Liz Wallin: The difficult part of providence is that when we give, it tends to be with a preconception of what we need in return. And providence denies this. You don't know what you're going to get, but you'll get what you need. There's an openness to it.

For me, reflecting on the larger picture of life (even going down this pathway of building an EoC business, working on this project), I didn't necessarily get where I thought I was going. But it lives throughout everything I do to this day, even though those paths have changed.

A more specific example. My house. I had help getting that house, and I've been fixing it up for years. And in that process I've intentionally viewed it as: this is not something I own. This is something I'm in care of right now.

So when I had participants who needed housing and I wasn't living in the house: well, why don't you go live in the house? But it's all within this mindset of abundance versus scarcity. And providence sits in that abundant mindset, versus giving as a taking away: now I don't have something.

Abundance

Interviewer: Talk more about what it means to have a mindset of abundance, and how that impacts the way you think about your own things.

Liz Wallin: An abundant mindset: I believe that there's never without. That you will have enough. That in giving, giving is generative, versus giving as a taking away.

I've used that philosophy in many areas of my life, where I don't have ownership of things, I have care of things. This house is in my care, versus this is my house. And I do that with ideas as well. This is not my idea, but I'm in care of this idea right now. What could I give to it that would be generative, rather than extractive?

It's a bit abstract, and it's hard to see, because usually when we think of giving it's: I give to you and you give to me. Whereas the reciprocity is not linear. It's not always easy to see providence, not always easy to see reciprocity, because when we give, we give with the mindset of, I give to you in hopes that I will then receive from you. Versus, I give to you and I receive from this other person. There's an exchange happening there, it's just not linear. And that's a mindset we need to build.

One thing I'd say is, I would love to be a philosophy teacher. Or an economist. But I teach fourth-grade math right now. My students kind of hate me sometimes, because I'll say: think about this, life is bigger. And they're just, huh? And I say, fractions are everywhere.

Interviewer: Pope Francis calls EoC entrepreneurs agents of communion. When have you most felt like you were living that out?

Liz Wallin: It ties into what we were just talking about: sharing your own needs with others. Allowing yourself to rely on community. I lived in intern housing for two years, so I lived with interns who came and went, and I had to be willing to accept whatever that experience would be like, living with others.

An agent of communion, I kind of like that. An agent of the culture of giving. How are you promoting a shared economy?

Living simply

Interviewer: EoC entrepreneurs participate in poverty. What have you sacrificed?

Liz Wallin: Participate in poverty. I don't know if I like that language.

Interviewer: Another interviewee rephrased it as living simply: I'm willing to live a more simple life in order to get done what I wanted to, to help others.

Liz Wallin: Again, on language: I wouldn't call it a sacrifice, so much as choosing to live in community with others, and what that looks like. I think that's an incredibly generative experience. It just requires a commitment to live a life in community. But I don't like the language around sacrifice, or choosing poverty, because it sounds as though there's a choice to live in poverty, where that's something people don't choose. It's very systemic.

Interviewer: So, living simply. How did you live more simply than others might, so you could make this project happen?

Liz Wallin: It requires letting go of some pride, in the sense of needing others. I needed others. I needed community in that moment. Not shying away from relying on others, and having them rely on you, that being a reciprocal relationship.

Our society tends to promote individualizing success, and being independent so that you're not a burden to others in your life. And I think that's the exact opposite of what we need. We need to be a burden to each other. It's how we relate.

By living more simply, it required not having certain things, so I would have to ask for favors, and then I could return a favor in another way. Asking for a ride to get somewhere, and being able to reciprocate that by cooking a dinner. It really just gets us involved in each other's lives in a much more fruitful way. So to me, there's not much sacrifice in that.

Gift, and privilege

Interviewer: From its start, the EoC has said business starts with a gift. Do you think of your activities as starting with a gift?

Liz Wallin: I could appease that question. But again: language. A gift, or a privilege. I tapped into the privilege I had of a network that was willing to support me in this idea. So this risk, quote-unquote risk, would look so much different for someone coming from a different background, making it possible or not possible. So I saw my privilege in many ways as an opportunity, or as a call to give. To use that for the common good.

Interviewer: If you think certain people have been given much more privilege than others, do you feel it's an obligation to turn that privilege into something for the common good?

Liz Wallin: Yes. Because I believe that privilege is profit. And it's in excess, and should be given, and given freely. Much as the profit derived from a business. It's just in a different form.

Property, and open source

Interviewer: A lot of people talk about private property, and even the church says good things about it, that a person should have something to be able to give to their children and grandchildren. What do you think are the obligations of somebody who does have some private property?

Liz Wallin: I would probably disagree, and say we're stewards. I believe more in the philosophy of stewardship than of ownership. So the obligation towards stewardship is in the common good.

Interviewer: I think the Catholic Church actually holds that everything we have as private property isn't really ours: it's God's, and we're stewards of it, which is what you're saying. From *Rerum Novarum* on, the reasoning is partly that having some property teaches responsibility. But once you have what you need, you have an obligation to share the excess towards the common good.

Liz Wallin: Yes. But I come at it with a disagreement about private property as an idea, having any sort of legal ownership vested in an individual entity. I could understand that in protecting land. But then again, you put that into the common good, and it's not one sole person making a decision on the outcome of that.

I'm more of the mindset of open source. Even ideas. Do we really even own ideas? An idea is never singular. An idea comes from piecing together other pieces of information that have been generated by others. So I'm more a proponent of open-source everything than of proprietary ownership.

Interviewer: Even of your own voice? There's the story about the actor objecting to an AI-generated version of himself.

Liz Wallin: I read that article too. He says, that's ruining me, that's not fair. And I mean, that's with the mindset of, well, I can profit off my voice and you're taking that away from me. That's living in a world where everything is seen through the lens of profit. If we didn't live in that world, that would never happen.

Interviewer: I'm trying to think about how it applies to using AI in the classroom. One student actually reads and does all the work and turns in their own work, and then somebody else uses AI to create the whole thing. It seems unfair to the first one.

Liz Wallin: Isn't that the free-rider problem?

Interviewer: But that would apply to almost everything we're talking about here. If none of our ideas get credited to us, or we don't own anything, it'd just be one giant free-rider problem.

Liz Wallin: Sure. What's the problem with that, though? There are ways to avoid that problem. There are ways to create metrics and standards around it.

Asking for help

Interviewer: Some say the heart of the EoC is the human desire to give and create communion, that it's really at the heart of who we are as human beings, and it's not a burden. Have you experienced that in your own activities?

Liz Wallin: That was the driving force of much of what I do and how I engage in community.

There's this one psychological finding: if you ask people for a favor, you're more liked by them. Because people enjoy being needed. It's a much faster way of building trust and building a connection: asking a favor of somebody. So that's interesting, right? Being a burden, or being in need, actually is a trust-building activity.

Interviewer: And it's counterintuitive, because the person doing the act of helping is where the trust equity grows.

Liz Wallin: Right. So actually the person deemed more trustworthy in that situation is the person in need of something. The person asking for the favor.

Interviewer: And the desire to give and create, is that something you've experienced?

Liz Wallin: It's a driving force for me in my life, in the many career pathways I've taken. This desire to improve the community around me, and to improve it in relational ways.

Part Fourteen: The classroom

EoC values in a classroom

Interviewer: Does your faith play a role in your commitment to the way you practice business, or your commitment to the Economy of Communion?

Liz Wallin: I'm trying to make this relevant, because I'm not currently running an EoC business. But I think about my classroom now, and how I run my classroom. If you pulled up my philosophy of education, you would find my faith at the core of it.

And I think that's a helpful experience, actually, because even though I'm not running an EoC business, how do these values show up? Because I think that's also important. You're interviewing a lot of business owners. But how do you, as a participant in a business, incorporate EoC values even if the business itself hasn't adopted this mission?

That’s similar to where I find myself today as a teacher. How do I, in my classroom, build a community around an economy of giving, caring for one another, invested in each other's growth?

Interviewer: How you can practice EoC values as a fourth-grade teacher is a fantastic question. Maybe not for business majors, but for education majors.

Liz Wallin: Teaching. Learning. And business.

Interviewer: How do EoC values apply to people who aren't entrepreneurs?

Liz Wallin: The EoC values don't only apply to business owners, or to people who find themselves running their own businesses and developing a model of business. I think they apply to anybody, really. We're all workers, in some sense. And the culture of giving is something we can bring wherever we are.

I see myself doing that now, as a teacher in fourth grade. How I structure my classroom. What I believe is the essence of education, and how my students should be able to experience that. How we build community, how we show up in community with one another. In this case, maybe not with the goal of profit, or the goal of a successful business, but with the goal of learning together.

Interviewer: Take one of the values: unity.

Liz Wallin: Unity. So, for example, in my classroom we all have individual goals. We have individual learning targets we're trying to meet. Everyone is starting from somewhere different, for various reasons and experiences in life. And we still have to try to work together, in unity with one another, to reach those individual goals. And then, as a class, how are we successful as a whole, as a unit?

It's fascinating. It looks different every day, and different with every student. That's where we tie into: how do we do this in community with one another? How do we show up every day not knowing what that looks like?

Freedom, not domination

Interviewer: You've mentioned Paulo Freire and his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He talks about education being the practice of freedom. What does that mean, and how do you see the EoC as a way of thinking about that too?

Liz Wallin: In my own philosophy of education, borrowing from Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (education as an act of freedom versus an act of domination), I think that highly correlates to the EoC.

What is the EoC doing, in contrast to other business models? How is it presenting itself and pushing forward the art of giving, a culture of giving, that acts as business as an act of freedom, versus an act of domination? Whether domination of a particular sector in the market, or of a particular sector of profit, or of extraction. How do we actually engage in business, in trade, in the exchange of goods, in the exchange of ideas, in a way that at its core is an act of freedom?

Interviewer: That was the original name of the EoC: the EoC in Freedom.

Liz Wallin: It was. Bring it back, which was so confusing to people. But an act of freedom. It goes back to this idea of how we show up every day not knowing what that looks like. To be in community with one another and not knowing what that act of freedom might look like on a daily basis. It's scary, it's unpredictable, and it's certainly not easily profitable.

Interviewer: A lot of times in business we have policies and procedures to keep things in line, to keep things professional.

Liz Wallin: Predictable.

Interviewer: Because we want to keep them predictable. In what ways does the EoC intentionally not do that? How is that more of a challenge, and what are the blessings that come?

Liz Wallin: It's important to note that when I'm talking about the unpredictable, the messiness: it's not chaos. We don't want utter chaos. That's not conducive to any sort of shared value or goal. That's not unity.

When I talk about unpredictability and messiness, it is within the foundation of unity. And there's a harmony to that. So you can rely on that unity to push forward on shared goals.

I think it's about understanding the key difference between a dominant professionalism and expectations. And that's something I uphold in my classroom now. It's not that we all need to be professional in some particular way, but there are expectations within this classroom. And we can all meet those expectations in different ways. And when we're not meeting those expectations, there can be a conversation around that, versus just a dominant culture of professionalism, and what that should look like, and when one person doesn't fit that picture, that image, that role, they're deemed unworthy.

The company cube in the classroom

Interviewer: Let's go back over the cube, but think about it now in terms of being a fourth-grade teacher. Build relationships every day.

Liz Wallin: Being curious about the other, and showing interest, and asking questions rather than making assumptions about why somebody might be upset.

Really trying to approach a student with curiosity, rather than, this shouldn't upset you, and coming with my preconception about it. Just asking: is there something else that I don't know about? And that's how you get to know people better.

I know I'm doing it every day. It's hard to self-reflect on. I'll give you a tangible example. They'll send me what we call a tier-three student, a student in another grade level who's had to be removed from their classroom for causing too much trouble. And they'll send them to me, and they'll sit in my class for the day and do their work with me.

And I build relationships with those students. I'll go down to the front office and say: he did *what*? Because in my classroom they were an angel. No issues, doing their work. But it's because I've built that relationship and that sense of safety. There are a lot of other environmental factors built into it too. But there are very tangible things happening.

Interviewer: If a student comes to you, what's the first thing you do when you interact with them?

Liz Wallin: I hold pretty high standards, but in a caring way. Really getting my students to believe that they can be the best version of themselves, even when that's hard.

And over time, individuals rise to that standard of being the best version of themselves. I build that relationship, and then they lean into it. They start believing they can, and they tap into that intrinsic motivation that individuals have.

Interviewer: The thing I hear you saying is that you're reminding them of a positive identity.

Liz Wallin: Reminding them of their humanity, too. Not expecting perfection. There's leeway for making mistakes, and coming back from them, and growing from them.

I think that humanizes. And someone can sense that, when they're being treated in their humanity, and being seen, and not just looked past as a means to an end. I think people can sense that.

Interviewer: Support with actions, not just words.

Liz Wallin: I have conversations with my students about what their goal is and how they might get there, but also what I can do, as their teacher, to help them meet that goal. How can I facilitate that? What are the extra resources I can bring in? What is the extra time I can bring in, to help them meet their goals?

Interviewer: Share expertise, time, and yourself. In the classroom, how do you do that?

Liz Wallin: I try, at any time I can, to make myself available to my students. To be present. To be prepared ahead of time, so that as I'm teaching I'm available to help students individually. And to come at problems from different directions and different perspectives, to try and tap into individual talents and understandings and ways of learning.

That could look like providing a different perspective, a different line of questioning around the problem, or using other resources. I often do a lot of storytelling when I'm trying to explain a concept, to make it more relatable, and I put student names into the story, even though I know it's a little silly. It just creates relational understanding.

Interviewer: Value every person and every idea.

Liz Wallin: This shows up a lot in the classroom (and in any environment, really, even the work environment) where what's produced by an individual is celebrated more than the effort of how someone is showing up.

So in my classroom I really try to also celebrate the effort someone's giving, and how that produces their own results. And to celebrate everybody's expertise. In exchange, if a higher student is helping a lower student, I find a way to highlight what that lower student is really good at, something that might not be relevant to the lesson, but that can be given in reciprocity.

Interviewer: First to help others. Do you encourage that among your students?

Liz Wallin: In some ways, yes. And in some ways, in my reflections, I'm preventing them from doing it, because then it's chaos. I encourage first to help others, and someone drops something, and everybody runs to go pick it up.

So: what does helping look like? It doesn't always mean being the one who does it. Sometimes first to help others means creating space for someone to help themselves, and giving them the right tools to do so.

Interviewer: Have you ever seen a student embody that?

Liz Wallin: Children are the best examples of this. It's so innate to them to rush to help somebody. My students will make comments like, they're crying, we need to help them. Or, they're sad because of this. It's so natural for them to meet other people's needs. Sometimes that's really great, and sometimes it's teaching them: okay, they're allowed to feel that right now, and we need to do something else. But they're so innate in the art of loving. It's just so natural for kids to care for others, and to see them as human.

Interviewer: Competitors can be friends too. Is there competition in the classroom?

Liz Wallin: There's a lot of competition in the classroom, and in education really. Students know who's a high student and who's low. They don't really use that against each other, though, which is really nice to see. Maybe not at the elementary level; I bet that comes more into play in middle school and high school. But at the elementary level there's still this lack of hierarchy, which is so wonderful.

Competitors, friends: it's asking students to help one another. When one student has mastered a skill: hey, this student is a master in this right now, can you go lend your time and expertise to another student who could use some help? And sometimes that learning happens way faster peer to peer than it does teacher to student. So, learning not as a competition of one knowing more than the other, but really as an environment of learning. How can we all seek knowledge together?

Education

Interviewer: Tell us about one person who has influenced your thinking on education, the quote you read, and your reflections on it.

Liz Wallin: As I've pivoted from working in business into a pathway of education, I think often about how the values of the EoC exist within education, where the classroom is a microcosm of society, and where students are first experiencing and experimenting with notions of community, and relation with others, and with themselves.

And one person who has really influenced this philosophy is Paulo Freire. He wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he states the belief that education is a practice of freedom, as opposed to a practice of domination. And he says: *which denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world. It also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people.* And I think that speaks to the very essence of the EoC, and to the value of work in our lives. It doesn't exist in isolation from people.

So in essence, education can serve to liberate. To be a place of building new ideas, of challenging existing assumptions and systems in place, versus education as a means of dominating. Of reinforcing existing thought, and just understanding how things work as they exist, versus thinking of new ideas of how they might exist in a new way.

That's an important thing to think about as we challenge these systems, and as we re-envision a new economy and a new ecology. And I think it correlates to the EoC and how we do business: is business an act of freedom, or business as an act of domination?

Interviewer: How does business tend to dominate, and how does the EoC bring freedom instead?

Liz Wallin: This language around an act of domination, a practice of domination, refers to the distinction between a business that sees workers as a means to drive profit, and a business that sees its workers as whole: as existing in reality, existing as a part of the business, as their whole being, as individuals. It brings humanity to each individual.

Interviewer: What does a culturally responsive classroom mean to you?

Liz Wallin: A classroom that nurtures collective growth, promotes collective care, and effectuates individual accountability will create space for students to succeed academically and in life. Before that, I talk about the classroom as a microcosm of our society, where students first experience and experiment with the notion of community, their relationship with others, and (most importantly) their relationship with themselves.

And in responding to this increase in access to information, it's ever more important that education focus not on *what* we learn, but on *how* we learn. Understanding the assumptions being made with the information. If we're learning about economic models, what assumptions are being made that allow these economic models to exist as a reality in our world? When the reality is that people are attached to the world and to each other.

Part Fifteen: The movement

What would make it stronger

Interviewer: What do you think would make the Economy of Communion movement stronger today?

Liz Wallin: Just more storytelling about what it is we're doing at the EoC. The culture of giving, and how you can participate even when you don't run your own business, how those values show up in the workplace. The different stories, whether big or small, and the impact they have.

Interviewer: What do you think would make the EoC movement stronger today?

Liz Wallin: Looking at various legal structures for worker-owned businesses. Delving more deeply into cooperative economics, and not only understanding how the EoC and its principles can be lived out within a for-profit business, but how we can reorganize a new economy and a new ecology.

Interviewer: What kind of EoC organization would you like to see in the near future?

Liz Wallin: Not necessarily a business model, but more environmental crossover between business and the environment and youth, and how youth play a role in all of that. That's the kind of organization I was transitioning Project Lia into: a youth-centered organization working in the environment, and pathways towards jobs. That would be my dream.

Interviewer: Maybe you can have an EoC car company that builds cars people can work on themselves.

Liz Wallin: Right. Creating tools that have actual manuals with them, where you can buy the parts, instead of just having to take the whole thing back.

Interviewer: Do you think all businesses in the future have the potential to adopt EoC values?

Liz Wallin: Potential is a big word. I believe we could create an economic system that was more human-centered, and built upon a culture of giving.

Around the world

Interviewer: How do you see the EoC lived out differently in other parts of the world?

Liz Wallin: A lot of the EoC businesses I was aware of, building models in other countries, were rooted in what became the early ideas of social entrepreneurship here in the United States. They were some of the first building ethical businesses around community, around local goods, all around giving back, beyond just creating a business for business's sake. Creating purpose-driven jobs and opportunities for individuals who in most cases weren't given those opportunities.

From what I've seen, the EoC in other countries has done a really good job at democratizing labor and democratizing companies and businesses. There are a lot more worker-owned initiatives in other countries. I think that's partly the nature of some legal structures, but also the nature, culturally, of cooperative economics in smaller economies.

Interviewer: What gifts do you think North American EoC has to share with a worldwide movement?

Liz Wallin: In North America we have a lot of expertise around marketing and storytelling. I think that could help grow the EoC worldwide.

Interviewer: What do you think are some of the more significant challenges facing the EoC, here in the U.S. or worldwide?

Liz Wallin: Really re-envisioning what it means to engage in a market of encounter. What does it mean for us as laborers, as workers, to engage in a decentralized business? How do we encourage and enable businesses that are run by, led by and powered by the labor? So, talking more about cooperative economics, and what legal structures need to be in place to make a business like that successful, especially here in the U.S., where we're used to seeing more centralized powers of control.

Interviewer: Do you think there are limits to worker-owned models? A lot of people have no interest in owning their own company and having that responsibility.

Liz Wallin: Democracy is romantic. But we live it every day. It's something that, especially here in the U.S., we fight for every day. And there are many challenges that arise from pursuing a democratic society. I would say the same thing in business.

For everyone

Interviewer: Looking back, what lasting impact has the EoC had on your life?

Liz Wallin: The lasting impact of the EoC on me is the way it shifted how I engage in the economy as a consumer. The questions I have when buying a product, or engaging in a transaction, or engaging with customer service. How am I, as a person in that process, humanizing, building relations, in each action.

And as a consumer, knowing when I have enough, and that I don't need to consume any more. I'm probably not the customer most corporations want. But it's made me question: what do I really need? And when is enough enough? That's simplicity.

Interviewer: People often say, I don't own a company, so the EoC doesn't really apply to me. How is the EoC applicable to middle managers, or people with a regular job, or teachers?

Liz Wallin: We can practice EoC values in whatever position we're in. How do we build relationships with one another? Whether that's in middle management, or even if I'm the customer of a business. How do I engage in relational communion with another? How can I engage in a culture of giving, even if I'm not the one making top-down decisions? There are many transactions within a day, and within a workplace, in which the culture of giving and the EoC values could be at play.

Interviewer: What would you say to a young person who fears going into business because they think it's going to drain their soul instead of give them life?

Liz Wallin: If you think it's going to suck your soul dry, you just don't know the EoC. There are so many beautiful moments in business (to humanize one another, and build relationships, and build community) that are so generative and life-giving. Someone thinking of starting their own business is in a position to make the types of decisions that improve people's lives, that build a better community, that change the landscape of business as we know it, the economy as we know it.

Interviewer: What would you say to someone who says, I don't want to go into business, I want to go into social work, because I want to make people's lives better?

Liz Wallin: Well, the burnout rate in social work is pretty high. So you might make other people's lives better, but I don't know about yours.

But it's true. Someone like that is concerned with the livelihood of others, with the well-being and the humanity of others. And if we can build a better economy (an economy rooted in human life and flourishing), then we rid ourselves of the need to solve and better the issues we've created to begin with. We can build businesses that don't necessitate then fixing other areas of community.

Interviewer: But then we wouldn't need social workers. That would be a great title of a short essay: a business can help eliminate the need for social work.

Liz Wallin: Yeah.

Interviewer: Was there a time when living by EoC values was really a challenge for you? When it made your life quite a bit harder, at least in the moment?

Liz Wallin: Not particularly. It grounded me more.

In the sense that I have community all around the world, and I wasn't as accessible in some ways of being in other places. I was very rooted in the community I was working with, and working in, and building with. But I didn't feel any sort of loss in that. I think that's just a basic human effect: when we're rooted in community, and when we have what we need, we don't really need to go searching for more.

Last words

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to share that you think is important for people who want to understand the EoC?

Liz Wallin: Just know that it's meant for everyone. No matter your role in work. Whether you're a CEO, or top management, or lower management, or an entry-level worker, you can really implement these values in the way you approach, engage with, and relate: not only to work, but in relationships.

And you can start from anywhere.

Interviewer: If you had to name the top few things someone should know?

Liz Wallin: One of those things is work as a vocation. Finding meaning in that. I think that's an important step in discernment for what we do. And I think it's important, especially as a business student thinking about starting your own business or developing an idea, that we're also thinking about some questions.

Questions such as: can we use the strength of diversity to properly redistribute resources? Can we move beyond the idea that to give means a subtraction of goods from one to another, rather than a multiplication of goods? How do our systems (social, political, cultural, economic) interact to support, or maybe even actively work against, a large-scale re-envisioning? What policy, legal structures, funding models and cultural norms are needed, not only for the acceptance of but the participation in a new ecology?

Especially at a time in our lives when we are not as reliant on the existing norms, the existing assumptions, the existing system, we really have the opportunity to reimagine. And as we think of that reimagining, and think about these questions, we can really use our voices to push beyond, towards a new economy.

Interviewer: Tell us what you think about our project.

Liz Wallin: I think this project (the EoC, and capturing these stories) really helps paint a picture of how we can build a new economy. Taking these values and these principles, and starting from within, starting from the everyday, to be in relationship with others, and to reinvent, or re-establish, or redefine the value of work in our lives.