

The Great Simplification - Joslin Faith Kehdy

Nate Hagens (00:00:02):

You're listening to The Great Simplification with Nate Hagens. That's me. On this show, we try to explore and simplify what's happening with energy, the economy, the environment and our society. Together with scientists, experts, and leaders, this show is about understanding the bird's eye view of how everything fits together, where we go from here, and what we can do about it as a society and as individuals.

(00:00:33):

Today's guest is Joslin Faith Kehdy, who joins us from Baskinta, Lebanon. Lebanon, as many may be aware or unaware, has had a 50% drop in GDP in the last three years and a 98% devaluation in their currency along with massive unemployment and social unrest. Joslin is an environmentalist effectively living The Great Simplification, and for that reason alone, this is a fascinating episode. She is the director and founder of Recycle Lebanon, whose goal is to make a circular system change to recycle our mindsets towards action. And since 2015, she's been organizing other environmental projects that aim to reduce plastic usage and pollution in her country, and also other initiatives that expand nature-based consumption and production alternatives. Please welcome Joslin Kehdy.

(00:01:51):

Hello, Joslin.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:01:52):

Hello.

Nate Hagens (00:01:53):

Thank you for joining me today. What is it? 6:00 PM in Lebanon?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:01:58):

Yes. Thank you for having me on this podcast.

Nate Hagens (00:02:01):

You're welcome. So I want to talk about your work with Recycle Lebanon and what you're doing to create packaging that's more environmentally friendly and doesn't rely on international supply chains and things. I'd also like to talk about what has

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happened to Lebanon in the last few years with a massive drop in the economy and inflation and everything else going on.

(00:02:33):

So those are two threads I'd like to get to, but maybe first you could introduce yourself to the listeners of this program, where did you grow up, what did you study, and what are you doing now?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:02:47):

Wonderful. So I was conceived in Lebanon, but born in the USA because during the Civil War, it was important for my American mother to take me to America to be sure I had the American citizenship. And so, I was raised in Lebanon in the village that I'm living in now, which is Baskinta in Mount Lebanon. And I was raised here throughout the Civil War, and after the Civil War ended, I was about nine years old, I went to the USA and stayed for say about four years. And in that four years, my German grandmother refused for me to speak Arabic and French, which were my mother tongue, and I had to acclimatize to English. And it was really showing the difference in the culture as a young age that would shock you to be a third culture kid and have your mother tongue completely taken from you.

(00:03:50):

So, this caused a lot of linguistical troubles for me til today. And I returned to Lebanon after four years with very broken French and Arabic and struggled with it, and studied here in an English school. But while I was raised in the Civil War in the village I'm living in now in Baskinta, my father set up a dairy farm to survive throughout the crisis. And so my job was watering the gardens, fetching the water for household drinking and helping scoop up the manure from the cows, and milking the cows and watching them make the cheese process. I think that's really stuck with our entire family.

(00:04:33):

Then at 18, I ran and took the first flight out to visit my mother's family in Hawaii. I stayed in Maui and learned design-build construction, which has completely shaped how I process and think today because of that decision.

(00:04:55):

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It's really showed me how things are interconnected on the ground. So in these seven years in Hawaii, I tried to go to university and I ran right out of class. It was very interesting because my mind was going miles per minute. I didn't feel I was really fit for university and I was also studying Mandarin Chinese. And, the course had ended after maybe six months. And when I moved to China to learn Mandarin Chinese, I completely realized that America had softened me, that life in China in Guangzhou was still very chaotic and it gave me anxiety and panic and I thought, "I've been in America too long. It's been seven years, I've got to get back to Lebanon. I've got to get stronger. I'm too weak having everything fed to you, and manicured life and everything's perfect and you're living in paradise."

(00:05:54):

But it also radicalized me, and it radicalized me in the sense that I saw the fast fashion trade industry and I saw the food industry. And so while I was already very environmental, going to China radicalized that moment for me and I started to look into reusable plastic bags and I ordered maybe 3000 of them and brought them back to Hawaii thinking, "Hey, let's fight plastic pollution." And, that was in 2011.

(00:06:25):

And so then after that, I booked a flight back to Lebanon and decided that I needed to live in Lebanon. It was this catalytic moment for me. Since I moved back to Lebanon, I was working with my sister on Taste Lebanon, a culinary food tour company and Food Blogger Connect in London. And then fast-forward now to 2015, and we enter in the waste crisis, and this is where I took everything into my own hands and created a new path for myself.

Nate Hagens (00:07:03):

Well, we're going to get to your work in this interview, but let me first ask you some questions about your country, Lebanon, where I've never been, and I don't know much about other than the famous cedar trees and the fact that you have had in effect a rapid great simplification in the last three years. Since 2020, GDP has dropped 50%, three quarters of the population of your country are now in poverty, and your currency has lost 98% of its value. I think the explosion that happened in Beirut a few years ago, that was in the Western media, but these other things are not so much. Can you describe what it's been like living through the last few years?

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Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:08:00):

So I would say the time before that was a bit like wearing a mask and then it all completely cracked and the foundation crumbled upon our feet. But, I believe we knew we were wearing a mask. We subconsciously, I think, understood that the system is completely broken here in Lebanon. So when it crashed, maybe we were subconsciously prepared for it, but it still took us all by quite a surprise on how to cope and deal with it.

(00:08:38):

But I must say that we're still quite used to it because that's how our country has been running since its foundation. We are the most corrupt country in the world, and when that corruption creates a failed state, we still know how to keep walking unfortunately because all of our systems have been built around pandering to the corruption.

Nate Hagens (00:09:07):

Do people in Lebanon outwardly know that it's a corrupt nation? Is this something that's understood and agreed on?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:09:16):

Yes. Our country does not function without corruption. It's specifically been designed for the corruption so that the elite politicians and mafia can run the system as it is ... to run it into the ground.

Nate Hagens (00:09:32):

And it's halfway to the ground now. How has that affected the elites and the mafia?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:09:38):

Our president's told us we reached hell, but there's apparently still deeper depths of that.

Nate Hagens (00:09:45):

How can we be having a international civil with humor Zoom call when you're living in a place like that? Are there pockets of total normality or is it just chaos when you travel to the grocery store and such?

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Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:10:04):

Oh, it's complete chaos, but I think our coping mechanism is dark humor and sarcasm, and that either does us really well or it keeps us keeping on. People always say, "I'm resilient, I've got to be resilient." Anywhere around the world, they want to be resilient. We don't want to be resilient anymore. We don't want this Phoenix rising and burning. We've had enough of it. We want function, we want transparency. We want an operating state.

Nate Hagens (00:10:35):

So in the world right now, resilience is a buzzword in sustainability discussions. So you're saying that beyond resilience is function, that becomes a priority?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:10:48):

Yeah, as a collective trauma in Lebanon, we are done with resilience. It's something that is constantly being echoed across different outlets, and your nervous system continues to operate in this resilience level and it's a survival level. This mode keeps you looking at having to climb that mountain, and we want our paved roads and we want our running water and we want our electricity that comes 24 hours a day instead of one hour a day. And, we want to turn on the tap and have drinking water, and we want an electric pump that's going to pump my water to put that in my tap. And we don't have any of that right now.

(00:11:34):

I don't know if my food in my fridge is going to go bad before the next generator is going to turn the electric on. We're now at 82% poverty rate across Lebanon, and this is something that's taking all of Lebanon's elites and put us all on the ground and we're all as equal as we've never been because we're facing this crisis together.

Nate Hagens (00:11:55):

So the electricity is rolling blackouts and brownouts, and there's no schedule on when that happens?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:12:03):

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There's a schedule that it doesn't happen. Our government's electric budget is \$1.5 billion a year, and it's also 40% of our debt, and we only have one hour of electric from our state services. So, this is pure corruption.

Nate Hagens (00:12:22):

Do we need to speak really fast to get through with that one hour on this podcast?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:12:26):

Well, there's always a silver lining-

Nate Hagens (00:12:29):

Or, is this a specifically circumstance?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:12:29):

Yes, there's always a silver lining in corruption so you learn to manage. For us, we've invested in solar panels so that we can try to live a decent, dignified crisis. But, that's a privilege.

Nate Hagens (00:12:44):

So you invested in solar panels, not from a CO2 carbon standpoint, but from a stability, energy, security standpoint?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:12:53):

Yeah, because if you go to Texas, it's just your booming oil industry and you don't see any solar panels on the rooftops. Barely any. And it's because they have oil and gas. They have not reached a state of crisis where they're dependent on a renewable energy, whether it's wind or solar or if we can find a more sustainable option.

(00:13:18):

So this is what I think that through our crisis, we have found silver linings, which is that schools and universities have had to find investments. The government has obviously not had any option to invest in providing solar panels or renewable energy sources or subsidizing, so this has all come from foreign investments.

Nate Hagens (00:13:42):

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So what's the social capital like there? Can you go somewhere with your friends and feel safe or is everyone hunkered down? Or, are there pockets where there is social interconnectedness and pockets where there isn't? Can you describe that?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:14:02):

You remember that mask that fell off? Well, it's still glued onto many parts of society, and it's either held on by families sending money in to help sustain the economy of their relatives here, or it's sustained by many of the Lebanese having to immigrate outside of Lebanon and work outside of Lebanon, and either send money back or return back. And, it's created a sense of "Do I feel guilty for having a good time in a crisis?" in certain pockets.

(00:14:44):

I know if I go to the seaside, it's a booming economy. I'm on holiday. And, do I feel guilty? For the past two, three years as a collective trauma, again, we've heard a lot about either you're in the frame that you feel guilty or you're in the frame that "I deserve to treat my inner nervous system and my mental health and feel a bit human and go experience a stay-cation in my own country because I no longer can afford to travel." So, I'm going to invest the little money that I still do I have to try to live with a little bit of pleasure.

(00:15:28):

But, that's the privilege and there are much ... That's a very small percentage of people that are able to do that.

(00:15:37):

And also, back to this mask, we party when there's a war. We'll find an underground bunker to party in. We live life because we know life's very fleeting. We've experienced that as our gross history.

Nate Hagens (00:15:52):

And so that's not the last three years, that's for decades.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:15:56):

Yeah.

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Nate Hagens (00:15:56):

That's been the philosophy. Yes?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:15:57):

Yeah, it's just now we've really sunk in every aspect of political, financial, infrastructure, social, environmental collapse.

Nate Hagens (00:16:08):

But you're in a country that's lost half of the size of its economy in three years. A person can still go to a booming seaside resort and have meals and be on the beach? That still exists within the country?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:16:26):

Yeah, and then right in the same area, there's maybe a line around two corners to get bread because we don't have our wheat supply, and we don't have the electricity or the generator or the petroleum to operate the store and the mill.

Nate Hagens (00:16:47):

So has wealth and income inequality skyrocketed during this period?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:16:52):

So what's happened is that all of our money was stolen and the banks blocked us out of our accounts. But the elites managed to transfer all of their money out of the country. Today, you have bank account owners robbing the bank to get access to their own money. You have women walking into the bank and robbing the bank because they need to pay for their medical bills and a hospital because they're sick and they don't have access to their money.

Nate Hagens (00:17:28):

So if you go in your town to your grocery store, how does that compare to five years ago? Is it still things to buy for you to cook dinner or all the ... I would assume much of the internationally purchased things with the collapse and the currency are no longer there. What's it like?

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Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:17:49):

Yeah, so I remember in the beginning walking into the grocery stores and the shelves were empty, and you could see how much we were relying on imported products. And if I go in the grocery store today, I find really strange brands, maybe Turkish, not very high quality brands. And it's silver lining has been a return to local, a return to your local food, to your local processes. It's very difficult to have access to even fresh cheese because the grocery store's refrigerator isn't going to be running if the petroleum for oil and gas is shut off and we're not having enough to run the generators. So, it's all run by a mafia and it's all been dollarized and this is where it's really been hurting people.

Nate Hagens (00:18:42):

So the mafia today is much more prominent than it was five years ago?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:18:47):

No, it's the same mafia. It's the politicians. It's the mafia of the Civil War who became politicians who've run our government since the Civil War and who have created this legitimacy force upon the population by rewarding loyalty with access to delivering services to those who show loyalty. And so, you create this entire system where the smallest person in the government and the smallest person in society are depending on glorifying the politician, who's the mafia, who was our militia of the Civil War, to be able to receive a service from the government.

(00:19:29):

And, we have a word for this. It's called Wasta. It's called connection. You have to have a connection.

Nate Hagens (00:19:34):

Wasta.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:19:36):

So, we had at this-

Nate Hagens (00:19:38):

Chinese would be Guanxi.

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Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:19:38):

Guanxi.

Nate Hagens (00:19:40):

Why isn't there more of a civil uprising there complaining about capital controls and one hour a day of electricity and long bread lines and everything else you've mentioned? Or, has there been?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:19:54):

We had a revolution in 2019, and our organization personally had 20 tents and we set up solar panels. We set up five water tanks. We provided water filtration. We did 1000 meals a day with reusable stainless steel plates. There was no plastic there. We did a 3000-person a day cleanup to show what this revolution means for us is a change in the system. And, we were on the ground about 150 days, but I will tell you week one, it was infiltrated. It was political and it wasn't our revolution anymore, but we stayed on the ground for 150 days. And then, COVID hit and they forced us to all stay home.

(00:20:39):

And no one's really come back to the streets since then. So, this has been our most surprised reaction is that we're not making noise. We're just swallowing it. There's no other option. We tried a revolution and it created a big divide. We were closing roads and we had a lot of criticism that closing the roads is hurting the people, it's not hurting the government. We were crashing into politician's houses, breaking glasses.

(00:21:12):

There was a side between the aggressive and the non-aggressive and I was in the middle. We had received some donations and provided all of the teargas masks and the helmets, and our kitchen was the main source to come and get your onions for the teargas and to get yourself equipped. But, we had the army behind us and they were coming and getting onions for us for the teargas. We had the revolutionaries coming and getting onions and supplies, and then we had the mafia that we were fighting also coming and getting onions.

(00:21:51):

It just was a madhouse.

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Nate Hagens (00:21:54):

Here's a soft American question, but what do onions have to do with tear gas?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:21:58):

It just makes you stop crying. It relieves the chemicals. So, you smell it and it relieves it.

Nate Hagens (00:22:06):

I didn't know that because onions make me cry when I'm cooking.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:22:10):

Yeah, so there's just an effect when you have tear gas falling on you, you can smell it and it'll help you see a little bit clearer.

Nate Hagens (00:22:20):

But go on about your experience. Are you surprised?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:22:21):

So we've become used to it, and again, the citizens' access to state services and administration are siloed in self-interest and fragmented into these identity groups. What surprised me most is that we voted them back in during our election. So we had the revolution, we had COVID, we had the Beirut port blast, and then we had our elections and we voted them back in.

Nate Hagens (00:22:52):

Was there an alternative?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:22:53):

Yeah, the revolution came up and put themselves forward and the people didn't trust the revolutionaries.

Nate Hagens (00:23:01):

So it was more of the devil you know as someone that is better than the uncertainty? People were craving a certain tether to the past even though they were previously dissatisfied with it.

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Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:23:14):

Yeah, but you got to laugh at it in another angle because again, we're service based from the corrupt militia. So the entire country has fallen on their knees. What more of a prompt timing is it now to depend upon your corrupt politicians to save you? You don't have access to your money, there's no medicine in the pharmacies. The pharmacies that do have medicine are run by the corrupt politicians and the mafia, and so the medicine that is coming in the country, they're putting it in storage facilities and letting it expire so that they can sell it to you at a higher inflation rate than what it is today.

(00:23:56):

You go into a hospital, you need to bring your own gauze and materials and supplies because the hospital doesn't have the materials to service you, so you have to bring them, but you can only buy them in bulk. So, you buy them in bulk and then pay a lot of money, give it to the hospital ... if the hospital has electric that day, if the doctors are there because we've had a massive brain drain and they've left.

(00:24:17):

So, there's just this entire state failure and you're relying on the local citizen to elect the opposition to take you out of it but the bakery doesn't even have wheat for them to live on bread anymore. So yeah, I have to vote my politician in because he's going to give me \$100 a vote and I need to live. They just completely break you down.

Nate Hagens (00:24:46):

So do the politicians and the mafia and the whoever's, the elites, do they have relationships with international organizations that might be able to provide aid or infrastructure, et cetera?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:25:00):

Well, this is how they rose. They rose from these international infrastructure investments in Lebanon that were designed to fail. So the World Bank invested in our water sewage system, but our water sewage system isn't connected. That didn't get connected. We've invested in our composting and waste management, but they're not designed for non-corruption. And this is where we've come and said, "We really want enough. We want enough foreign involvement." And this was our stance at the

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revolution. So, anyone that brought me a bag of American rice, I said, "We're feeding 1000 people a day on local food. Please go to a farmer and get me a 25 kilo bag of freekeh or bulgur or lentils or chickpeas." And then I realized that we're not even producing enough chickpeas in Lebanon to sustain our country and our chickpeas are coming from Canada. So, there has been this intense disdain for many decades brewing against foreign involvement at the revolution. It peaked.

(00:26:10):

And, the government is still relying on the international institutions and the IMF and the World Bank to save us. That ship sailed because their corruption is so complacent in our destruction that we are holding the international institutions accountable and saying, "Actually, fund local institutions. Don't fund the government. Fund local institutions." We have the largest amount of NGOs operating in a country. Fund the people through transparent channels and don't give us money that's designed to fail.

(00:26:52):

If you want to invest in us, we want our universities, we want our hospitals, we want our schools. We want solar panels. We want operating water. We want electricity. We want our basic human infrastructural rights to be able to function and do our work and live in dignity.

Nate Hagens (00:27:12):

So if international people are willing to fund those things, do the elites and the mafia get involved so that you can't spend the money if it is allocated?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:27:26):

Well, you just asked a whole nother bag of five hours. You want to really do your research and-

Nate Hagens (00:27:33):

Okay. It's complicated.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:27:36):

... know who's in which NGO and how many of these NGOs are you supplying that has elites as their board members or their founders. It's a very deep layered system of

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corruption. Not because this person at the very bottom wanted to be corrupt but because he didn't have a choice but to go into this system because it doesn't operate without it.

Nate Hagens (00:28:04):

So, it's self-organizing, post-growth Sopranos flavor Superorganism that has emerged in Lebanon?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:28:13):

Yeah, and we're all laughing at it. This is our coping mechanism.

Nate Hagens (00:28:17):

I'm not laughing at it. I didn't really understand it until this conversation. But talk about privilege, I live here on a farm in the Midwest and I have internet and I have dogs, and I can go to the grocery store and buy things for not much money from anywhere in the world. And how many people living like me, soft Americans, completely take that for granted while simultaneously on this blue-green earth there are other humans that are in abject poverty and fear living in a country like you're experiencing right now.

(00:28:56):

It's a lot to take onboard, and I think if I lived there, too, I would want to go to a seaside resort and just have some normal human interaction with my friends, if that were possible.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:29:08):

Yeah, but for you to get to that seaside resort ... we had fuel outages, and so you had to get in line to get petrol and the lines lasted two to three days. So you would park your car and have someone come pick you up if they had gas to go home and sleep while your car was holding your space in the middle of the night to come back in the morning and get your chance to fill up your tank. Before they would come and say, "Oh, now you've reached here. You've waited three days. You're on a ration. We can only give you a certain amount."

(00:29:43):

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And we're in the Middle East and we have access to oil and gas and we have oil and gas fields in Lebanon that we have not yet been able ... this is also a whole nother bag of our oil and gas industry and Israel. It's corruption. It's systemic violent corruption, and we just keep digging our hole much deeper. How much can you break us down? Well, we're a never ending pit. So we're done with resilience because that resilience lets you carry things that actually shouldn't be carried anymore. It's enough. Our resilience is detrimental to our survival at this point.

Nate Hagens (00:30:29):

So, I have 20 more questions about what's going on in Lebanon now and how people are responding, but I wanted to get to your work. You founded Recycle Lebanon in 2015, I believe, and looking at your materials, there's four main initiatives that your organization attempts. Could you maybe give a brief summary of what you're trying to do and what these four areas?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:30:57):

Okay, so back to our dark sarcasm to sustain our mental health. I named the NGO Recycle Lebanon not because I believe in recycling and not because I'm recycling waste. It was to recycle Lebanon from the mindset to drive action. And, the waste crisis was the last plastic straw for me, but it was the last plastic straw in a crippling state where water, electricity, air quality, and basic rights had this dance in complacent corruption. It just was enough. So let's recycle the country.

(00:31:32):

And so, with the ongoing challenges faced in Lebanon serving as this microcosm of the larger systemic and ecological collapse facing the world, I was very focused and driven to develop these tools of these four programs in the NGO to empower this interconnected action for communities and to provide long-term solutions. So many organizations focus on relief and urgent aid, and I'm focusing on the very long vision.

(00:32:07):

So with Recycle Lebanon, our main aim is to catalyze a system change, and we're doing that through a circular economy because that's what's being called for now, especially with our infrastructure and resource failure. So, a circular economy is very appropriate for this form of system change that we're trying to implement.

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(00:32:30):

And I did this in 2015 by starting to ... Honestly, I didn't know what to do. It's not my expertise. And I wanted to know who's doing what, where, how. So I designed this platform that we could map out whose doing what, what's involved, how can you connect, what's the resources, what's the data, how do we visualize? If someone, a layman as me, didn't understand the situation, where can I go to take an action? It just was very practical. And that obviously took many years to develop instead of just an idea you think will happen right away.

(00:33:13):

And I'm very, very proud to say that today you can go to regeneratehub.org and find our circular economy platform where we've mapped out the challenges and nature-based alternatives across the interconnected sectors, and we are now upgrading the platform so that you can have membership to the data analysis features that could support in policy recommendations. We have a public-private partnership between the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Environment because if you really do want to tackle ecology or waste, you have to first look at what are you producing and how are you producing it, where are your materials flowing to? How can you recover these materials before we even have to go to recycling? Because recycling around the world doesn't work. It's your last stop. It just happens to be in Lebanon before 2015, we didn't even have that as a stop. We were just filling our landfills until a cancer emergency crisis occurred and the waste crisis stopped that.

(00:34:19):

So, the only difference now is we do have waste management sorting facilities, but back to corruption, we may have enough facilities to cover 70% of our waste in Lebanon, but the government is only contracting one company and all of the other private companies are left to themselves to find funding. And the municipalities can't support because they don't have funding. So through this Regenerate Hub platform, I didn't want to raise awareness about the waste crisis, I wanted to raise awareness about the entire systemic failure and how your resources can feed into another sector and how this nexus collapse can be used as a force of transparency to help shift this change.

Nate Hagens (00:35:18):

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So that's the first of four programs, initiatives, but let me ask a question there. So on the Regenerate Hub, have you had to redesign it because of the revolution in 2019 and the economic collapse? Because A, the supply chains, I assume, have totally shifted and B, the corruption that you're talking about?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:35:43):

No, I had to redesign it because the corruption, which was that the elites in the revolution actually stole our data in our platform and we had to take them to criminal court and redesign the platform because we just are an untrustworthy country. And for me, this was the joke in creating the platform. The platform is free. Take it. If you are a country and a civilization, a society, that is constantly having to steal and take and fight and be in this corrupt system to advance, it's a joke. Take it. It's for free. It's forever for free.

(00:36:24):

So, this is what broke me from the revolution was to see equal revolutionaries fighting the same cause being as corrupt as we've been designed to be. So, that took me underground where I continued to redesign the platform with the support of our first grant, which was from the Japanese embassy and our team, Rachel Rosenbaum, who I recommend to join us on this next podcast with Alex.

(00:36:52):

So yeah, it brings me then to the next program, which is the EcoSouk, because the EcoSouk is a zero waste shop. We're the first zero waste shop in the Middle East. And I say that also as a joke because, well, we've been zero waste before we were industrial, right? We're just going back to our roots. It just happens that Berlin made that a really nice trendy scheme. So for me to always say, "We're the first in the Middle East," I'm just really trying to say this is absolutely absurd. We're just going back to our roots and now it's a trend. So I'm glad it's a trend, but how can we make that roll out across the board, not just in our shop? How can we really revitalize our ancestral traditions and merge it with slow technology?

(00:37:47):

But it brings me to how we're being able to open the shop. You've got someone like Nariman Hamdan, our store manager, who really was volunteering with us to see how can we go to find donations and fundings to open the EcoSouk. And she saw every

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door closing on us in 2018 and she said, "I have a store in Beirut, and why don't I just transition it to be the EcoSouk?" She works just on a 10% commission without a salary on the basis of a promise that once we get funded, we will give her a salary. And, she works every day, Monday til Saturday, from 9:00 til 5:00, sometimes 6:00 depending on the season with her whole heart.

(00:38:36):

This is where you really come together. This is the interconnectedness between making a system change. It's not with the idea. It's not with the project. It's mobilizing the hearts and the minds and the actions of the kindred spirits that are really looking for an authentic and genuine change. And, I'm very humbled that we have such a spirit like Nariman Hamdan that has made the EcoSouk possible. Because I can dream it up, but if I'm not with a team of like minded people to make this dream possible, then I'm just throwing my leaves in the air.

Nate Hagens (00:39:18):

So what does EcoSouk mean in Arabic and what sort of products are sold there?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:39:25):

Okay, so eco is ecological and souk means market. And in our past, you would go down the road to a major village or a city or just around the corner and you would find a souk. The souk traditionally had the products that were made from the land. But if you go now to a souk, you'll find Chinese products. We're not producing as we were in the past. With our silk industry, with our metal industry, with so many of our artisanal crafts are either died out for cheaper imported products or they died out with the knowledge of our ancestors. Or, they're on that cusp of where they are reaching the last artisan because the family that could take it over is not interested or has taken on a more academic educational role, financial role and the family has traveled abroad. Of course, the same scenario for crafts all around the world.

(00:40:35):

So inside the EcoSouk, we sell products for about 150 producers, helping create jobs. The types of products we sell is a refill bar where you can bring your glass jar and refill your shampoo, your liquid soap, olive soap. You can refill glass cleaner. You can refill the floor detergent. And, this isn't something new. Some of these products, one

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example is one is from Honey Herbs, who's been producing products since 1985 in an ecological way. All we've done is made an agreement with them that Nariman will meet him once a month and take his products in bulk and we'll sell them in glass refillable containers. Everywhere else in Lebanon, he sells them in plastic packaging. (00:41:31):

So if we can just work with one producer at a time to help shift their packaging, we're making a small dent. But with every conscious consumer, they're taking their product home and every use they're having to really see it in action. I got bit by a dog on accident because I didn't realize it was a non-friendly dog and I went to the clinic here in Baskinta and he didn't have any thread. He was out of thread to sew my hand shut. Suppliers can't find materials. We are in total collapse, so you have to have a way to get your products imported. And, I think that is obnoxious that we went from such an ancient knowledge to having to be completely dependent.

(00:42:21):

And COVID made this realistic all around the world for our supply chains. And again, I'll come back to the silver linings of crisis and with COVID, it really awakened people that they do want to buy local. Many of the producers in the EcoSouk are increasing the type of products that they're producing, and we have new producers every month that are creating new product lines because it's creating jobs for them and it's helping to feed the access to alternatives which you can no longer import in.

(00:42:53):

Now we have reusable menstrual pads and reusable diapers. This for me is a key of what we're selling. It's a top priority because you're not only just tackling the climate crisis with this product, but you're finally understanding the synthetic contamination of the product with your health. And the only way it reached the public is because it hurt their pockets. So, it was cheaper for them to buy reusable. Sometimes you need these crises to make people want to shift to an ecological or a health centric conscious purchase.

Nate Hagens (00:43:34):

So in the midst of a 50% economic decline and all the other problems you talked about, people are still trying to contribute and worried about climate change?

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Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:43:46):

Minus the COVID mask's massive single-use plastic pollution, I would say ironically, yes. So I did see that pre-financial crisis, a lot of restaurants were working with us in the Bala plastic movement to switch from their serving of single use plastic bottles to refillable glass bottles or purchasable glass bottles of water. That's gone to the wayside. You're just using plastic bottles now. So, there's a give and take. But last week some big restaurant chains contacted me and they're looking now to start going back to more environmental alternatives. You can see that three years on, industries now are wanting to invest in what was just a risk of total collapse. We want to make our economy again.

Nate Hagens (00:44:41):

Okay, so you have the Regenerate Hub, you have the EcoSouk and you have two other initiatives under Recycle Lebanon. What are those?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:44:51):

Yes. So I'll go real quickly to the Dive Into Action, which we spoke a little bit about now, which is where we did cleanups, which were a little bit more innovative. We didn't use any single use plastic or plastic in our cleanups. We did sorts and recycling and we do a lot less now because after the revolution and 3000 persons a day, people have become really accustomed to doing cleanups through sorting and recycling and raising awareness.

(00:45:20):

But the fourth program is TerraPods, and that's my baby because it's the final program to finalize, and it's the inter-connector to make sure that all of these other models and tools of these programs really work together. So sure, we open the EcoSouk and we're helping support 150 producers, but there's a lot more that you can do to help producers, and that's to afford them a maker space where the materials are grown on the ground and you're able to stock self-sufficiency on the shelves from a local maker space.

(00:46:08):

So the TerraPods is a bio-design maker space and an arts residency on an agroecology farm. And the reason it works is because it's a grow, make, and market

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model that we created where you're growing the materials, you're making it and you're marketing it through the EcoSouk.

Nate Hagens (00:46:27):

So what do you mean that you're growing the materials?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:46:30):

So right now, we aren't doing that yet. We've just taken the land, and it's a ancestral land that's been abandoned for about 40 years since the Civil War. And now we are cleaning the land and we will start planting it very soon, and we will plant for agricultural needs, but we will also plant for production of products.

(00:46:56):

So how can we use materials and how can we use produce waste to create materials? So, what are the alternatives to a single use plastic bottle package? What's an alternative to the packaging that we would be selling in the EcoSouk? We don't sell anything in plastic packaging, but if someone wants a see-through package, they currently don't have an alternative to plastic now. And, we want to follow the model that's being presented all around the world with different research institutions and academic institutions where they are piloting and modeling and creating plastic packaging from seaweed, for example.

Nate Hagens (00:47:38):

Well, plastic alternative, it would no longer be plastic, it would be seaweed, right?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:47:43):

Yes. Because I mean there is PLA, which would need a commercial composting, and we want to create bio-compostable alternatives, which are natural. They don't have any added processes that would make it difficult to compost that you would need a commercial composting facility. And so, we're looking now to hire biomaterial engineers and designers to really help us create these alternatives.

Nate Hagens (00:48:15):

And are those people exist in Lebanon?

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Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:48:17):

Yes, yes, yes. So we've got a few startups here in Lebanon that have been working with mycelium packaging and with mushroom, apple, citrus, coffee waste products, so turn it into bio-compostable, single-use plastic cutlery, plate ware packaging, et cetera.

Nate Hagens (00:48:42):

So it's not just a maker space. There are maker spaces where I live, not right where I live, but in Milwaukee or in Minneapolis where there's an aggregation of tools and people go there and they share a saw or a drill and they make stuff. But, it sounds like what you're talking about is that, but also plus it's a research lab where you're doing engineering of things that you haven't figured out a process on how to turn apples or citrus or mushrooms into single use packaging, but you need to figure it out. So, it's a laboratory of sorts, right?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:49:21):

Absolutely. And we have really wonderful partners on board with us. So we have local partners, local research institutions with us, and our advisory board member is part of a international Bionet. And we're also working with academic institutions and research labs between London and Spain and the Netherlands.

(00:49:42):

So, it's about how can we from all corners of the world come together and from inside a little village, create the alternatives. And, it always brings me back to raising a child. It always says you need a village to raise a child. And I say you need a village to fight climate change. You've got to come back into the interconnectedness of how people can work together. I'm not coming to say, "I've got the solution, Nate." I'm coming to say, "How can we create a space that is communal, that can collaborate and that can afford the experimentation?" Because right now, we have the time. Tomorrow, we don't have the time. We need the solutions today.

Nate Hagens (00:50:23):

That's really impressive.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:50:25):

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But what I would like to add is why an arts residency? And, it could be just as simple as having a bio-design maker space, which is an industrial slow tech facility on a farm. Wonderful. But how much are we really going to reach the people without bringing in our source, which is to create, and to create through art and through performance and through installation and through dialogue, and through the perspective of change. Because I'm not going to reach change by scrolling on Instagram and saturating myself and seeing, "Oh, the icebergs are melting." That's not going to reach me. It hasn't reached me.

(00:51:07):

I've made an organization to fight climate change. What is going to drive action? And for me, it's STEM with arts and we call it STEAM. It's crucial that the arts are that dialogue of change because you have to shift the perspective of what you're looking at it in. Are you listening to it in the same way? Have you found a quiet corner in the garden to have a communion with the nature, that you are nature with the plant? How are you expressing this change? Because for me, it's not by opening a store and selling products and making products. It's by doing all of that with the perspective through art and creation and with the perspective of access to data and visualization. It's this entire combination that then goes and presents policy recommendations based on this collective action.

Nate Hagens (00:52:09):

STEAM, where the A is art.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:52:10):

Yes.

Nate Hagens (00:52:12):

I like it. I like it, and I agree, we need stories, we need creation. There's an emergence that happens that's much beyond just the facts. You mentioned Instagram. At some point in your journey, I read about you, that you made the decision to adopt a very low social media profile. What was behind that decision and do you think it's made your work more productive?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:52:37):

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I decided that I don't want to post anything for the organization because it's not reflective of what the organization is working towards. And, I felt that I was wasting more of my energy having to post online than to just go underground in my hermit cave in a village and work with my team without having to post about it and be where we are today. Because I just needed action. I didn't like the saturation of information. I didn't like the quality and the content, and I didn't like the way that we're interacting with it.

Nate Hagens (00:53:12):

So if you're wildly successful with Recycle Lebanon and TerraPods with the maker space and the research and the art design lab, what could you envision five or 10 years from now as a result of your hard and visionary work?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:53:29):

So for me, I think it would be that our first step would be making it happen and then it being a pilot and a case study, because you can talk about climate collapse, economical collapse, political collapse. You can talk about The Great Simplification with Nate Hagens all day long, but then what do we do about it? And I want a model that I can have as an open source tool that says, "Come and try it. Build upon it, break it up, do it another way." But, we tried one way and where did it reach us and what can we do better and how can we improve and who can we collaborate with? And let's create because that's what we're here to do.

Nate Hagens (00:54:08):

So if it's a pilot and a model, is it all known by the engineers and the volunteers and the people that you have on staff? Or, is this somehow in the future or today an open source where there can be information and learning that's shared?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:54:26):

Yeah, it's designed in from me, absolutely. We've designed the Regenerate Hub platform that way, and we've designed in TerraPods that way. So after I finish cleaning these 40 year old abandoned terraces, I have two weeks to go, in June, we are welcoming in Saad Dagher, the agroecologist from Falestine, who will be coming and giving a training to the farmers and to the surrounding farmers in the village as

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a training model alongside two members of Hool, which are Karima Hassan and Hadi Awadi, who are our consultants for agriculture principles with permaculture design.

(00:55:08):

Because it's really important to bring the people in who have the expertise in this to let them lead the way. And, I think it's really important that we do this as a training model from the very start and that it's open source and that it's live and online. So, that brings me back to social media. I have waited until now. We are hiring now with thanks to the cause of donors a marketing creative agency. We're putting together our comms strategy. We start May 15th with them to create our marketing strategy, our comms.

(00:55:48):

And, I was very clear at the start that I'm not going with an agency if you're recommending for us to create a TikTok account or to increase our Instagram followers. It's time that we put together these training models on platforms that can be accessed and sourced by others easily, and with podcasts of how we can create knowledgeable content of what people can do based on what they're already doing and what they can collaborate to do even further.

Nate Hagens (00:56:22):

So let me ask you some personal questions after you've given us an overview of Recycle Lebanon and TerraPods and some of your initiatives, and you've lived through the revolution and the economic collapse of the last few years. Do you have any personal advice to the listeners and watchers of this podcast if they live in countries that have not experienced a great simplification yet, but they're aware of the global meta crisis, climate, oil depletion, complexity, et cetera? What sort of advice would you give to people listening?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:57:01):

I think I'll echo the advice I gave, which is it's coming. It's already here. It's coming, take action. And whichever action an individual is going to be called to do, whether intuitively or systemically, follow that calling and do even a small action. And, the responsibility for me isn't really on the individual, but it is combined with an individual

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action. And so, just act. Do, create. Don't sit. Rest. By all means honor resting, but really create and know that we are already experiencing The Great Simplification now.

Nate Hagens (00:57:47):

I like that advice. Who is the responsibility on, if it's not the individual?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (00:57:52):

Okay. For me, the responsibility lies on the fossil fuel industry and the conglomerates and the industrialists, and what is in the market for me to purchase. I'm not interested in going to school and raising awareness and telling the children and the parents of the children to recycle or to reduce or to use zero waste, or to come and shop and make the EcoSouk a sustainable marketplace. No, that responsibility is a necessity for the industrialists to shift into more ecological, bio-compostable materials that are designing out waste. We no longer have this option to create new enterprises or to continue producing products that waste. And this for me is where the basis of a circular economy comes in because it's a bit scientific, and when you know how you want to create your products and where its end life goes, just follow this model, but it costs more money.

(00:59:00):

So how can we create scalable material alternatives with machines that are already being used today? Coming from Lebanon, I can't go to an industry and tell them, "Yeah, shift. Do this." We need to create materials that can go into existing machinery, or we need to create machinery that can be opensource made and scalable. We can't think as a singular problem. There are multiple problems that are interconnected, they're cross-sectoral, they're intersecting. And one of my biggest pet peeves is in fast fashion, and I've had to be at the table with Nestle and Pepsi and crawl out of my activist skin that I don't like to be in. I don't want to be an activist.

(00:59:51):

And I had to crawl out of this activist's skin and say, "Why are we sitting here on a table with you when you're applauding that you've increased the amount of recyclable plastics in a product? And there's not even a label on your product that says by the way, this is made out of recycled plastic but if you put it in a washing machine, it's going to release billions of microplastics because we've taken this big plastic bottle

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out of the sea, and crushed it into tiny little fibers again so that we can win an award that we're not using raw virgin plastic," and now when you wash it, you're going to release a lot more microplastics than if you were using synthetic. And, why are we using synthetic fibers?

(01:00:38):

Why are we producing at such a scale that is creating our collapse? And one of the projects that we want to do is to work on the fiber farm that is very much taking headway in America. These wonderful fiber farm communities where they're creating within a certain amount of kilometers within their neighborhoods, and it's just a marvelous example that dates back to what people in my village today in Baskinta used to do. We've got sheep farmers and we've got seamstresses and we've got artisans that used to create the wool from the sheep to create the thread and the fibers in the clothes and the blankets. And, that is what we will be doing in TerraPods is bringing back these ancient knowledges and reviving them in ways that can be transformed. Because it's from the maker's side, whether you're an industrial maker or you're a slow tech maker or you're an artisan or you're an artist.

(01:01:38):

The consumer is purchasing a product that's available to them. And if we're not designing the products that are fighting to design out waste and system change and climate change and economic collapse and all of this to make it affordable and accessible, than I can just preach to you all day inside a school and say, "Let's recycle."

Nate Hagens (01:02:02):

Speaking of school, how are the teenagers, young adults responding to what's happening in Lebanon? And do you have any advice for young people listening to this program?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:02:14):

Yeah, there's a large youth movement in Lebanon and they have created a lot of noise within the ministries and organizations and the UN. They've come together. I'm really proud of them, and I've had to speak with five-year-olds that are so above the curve of where we're at because they see it, they feel it. They've been born into this. So, this is the two sides of the angle. For the youth, you're not having to convince them, and

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for the previous past generation, you're not having to teach them something new because it's our past ways.

Nate Hagens (01:02:53):

So I have a few more questions, and since you listen to my podcast, you might guess what they're going to be. What do you care most about in the world, Joslin?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:03:02):

Okay, heavy question. I care most about living because life is very fleeting. I've just lost my brother. Two days ago was eight months, and there's nothing that can replace my brother. And while I feel that Eli is with me at every moment, and honestly he's the one that should have been giving this podcast, it's not me, he is the expert to have given you a full breakdown on Lebanon, it completely awakened me to something that I had understood philosophically, but now I understand more bodily, which is sure we all live in Lebanon as if tomorrow's not going to exist. But now that my brother died, I don't know what's coming. And, death is literally around any corner and it's become a taboo. It's a heaviness to talk about, and we don't know how to deal with death and we shy away from it, and I really want to take that in to live a much deeper present, thoughtful life that is based on love.

(01:04:19):

And, that's really difficult. I can find myself just forgetting for a moment how short life is, and then I come back and just all of what my brother could have achieved and wanted to achieve are going to be achieved because his thoughts were out in the universe now and they're collective, and many people are going to create this reality that him and many others before him and after him are thinking of doing. But if we're not living our life in this present moment and knowing that this is the most important thing is to be alive, it's to be a human, and what encompasses this privilege, then I'm missing the plot.

Nate Hagens (01:05:05):

What are you most concerned about in the coming decade or so? And many of my guests are scientists and they talk about climate change or the Ukraine war turning nuclear, but maybe you might have a different answer given your situation and your work.

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Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:05:21):

I'd say all of it. It's all already here. What's coming? What is coming that is so much graver? Is it AI? No, it's our unrealistic approach to what's coming that is grave for me. It's that someone else is coming to fix what I know might be happening, but someone else is doing it. It's not the reality. The reality is we all have to be present and take action in whichever way that is for us.

(01:05:55):

For some people it might mean resting and being in a holistic space where they can give their energy in another form. So it's not to say you have to do-do-do mentality at all. It's just about being consciously present and aware that the system has to change, whatever that system means for you wherever you are around the world, however that's affecting you with violence and gender and equality and poverty. Wherever you are at on the scale, that all collapses and collides and interconnects into the climate, into the future of AI, into the economic. They are all interconnected so take whatever it is that you think can make a tiny wave in this world and ripple it with love.

Nate Hagens (01:06:47):

You are just the perfect spokesperson for The Great Simplification because I'm agreeing with everything you're saying. So in contrast, what are you most hopeful about in the coming decade or so?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:07:00):

I'm not hopeful. I don't want to be hopeful. I'm not sure that it's hope that's going to give me that hope. So when you reach a nervous system collapse, my middle name is Faith and I run by faith.

Nate Hagens (01:07:17):

You don't like the word hope?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:07:18):

It's not that I'm against hope. It's just that I don't want hope in the sentence you're asking me, I want action. I want reality. I want hands on the ground. I want to not depend on hope. You can have hope in the spirit maybe of it or faith in the spirit of it, but there's no one coming to save you. There's no one coming to bail you out. And, you

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can expect everyone to trample you. And you can expect the worst and you can think you're going to survive it, and you might but do we really to reach that level. When we already have a podcast like The Great Simplification who's bringing people from around the world who are raising the red flags, hear them, do it, move into a systemic change that is going to drive us out of what we are collapsing into.

(01:08:03):

Because when you fall, no one's coming. They're going to jump on your back. They're going to break you down to the very bottom and wherever you thought that bottom was, it can just keep digging deeper. And that's where we are today in Lebanon, and you can use sarcasm to laugh yourself out of that well, but it's action that's going to pull you out. Not hope. You can hope for that light. You can have faith that you're going to find that light, but without action, with hope and faith and love, and, and, and, and ... we're just philosophizing and that's not time for that. You can use your knowledge of that, but you need to shift.

(01:08:41):

If your action is just shifting your mindset in one activity that you're doing, then it's going to ripple another. And, we are all affecting one another. So this is our story of being human is how we share our energy, and when we forget that, we become really self-centered and self-centeredness isn't going to save us. It's our interconnection that is, and it's how we magnify our efforts when we bring this energy together.

Nate Hagens (01:09:18):

I love that. So if you do come back for round two, Joslin, what is one topic that you're passionate about that you would like to take a deep dive down?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:09:31):

The first topic would be about the case study of Lebanon's collapse and how it's a trajectory for what's coming in the world from a more research academic setting. And, the second conversation that I would like to deep dive is to present to you our journey into this pilot, because I'm not going to tell you it's going to happen right away, but I would love to be on this journey with you and to give the updates and to say where we're at and how the people are coming together for it.

Nate Hagens (01:10:01):

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I look forward to seeing your progress and your successes and failures, and I wish you all the best. Thank you for your time today, and thank you so much for your work and I'm glad that we're now connected.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:10:16):

Me too. And I'm really honored to be on this platform together with everyone else who has brought so much into this action and change that I'm on repeat about. And, you are really bringing them together and I'm very grateful to be in the space together with you and all of the others.

Nate Hagens (01:10:36):

Thank you. Just out of curiosity, it's now 8:00 PM your time. You said you're going to have dinner with your father. What will you likely eat tonight, just out of curiosity?

Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:10:45):

Okay, so we have moun, which is like food preserves. And so last year, he caught some sardines and he preserved them in a nice oil and they're just perfectly salted and ready to go, and we've got some bread and hummus.

Nate Hagens (01:11:00):

That actually sounds darn good. And, hummus. Excellent. Thank you. We'll be in touch and good luck with all your important projects, Joslin.

Joslin Faith Kehdy (01:11:13):

Thank you so much.

Nate Hagens (01:11:14):

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