

Ep.11 - Jennifer Owens of Lakeshore Advantage

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Jennifer Owens



Announcer 00:01

Welcome to the Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.



Ed Clemente 00:28

Welcome to the Michigan Opportunity brought to you by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Hello, my name is Ed Clemente. I'm your host today for the show and I want to thank a friend of mine, Jennifer Owens, President Lake Shore Advantage, welcome to the show.



Jennifer Owens 00:43

Thank you Ed, it's great to be here today. I look forward to talking to you.

E Ed Clemente 00:46
Well, I I'm really excited to talk to you too, because I know you have one of the more exciting areas in the state. And, and since you know, I've been doing my homework, I'm just really impressed by how much is going on in your area. So let's start out with that a little bit, Lake Shore could be anywhere in Michigan, so where is Lake Shore Advantage?

J Jennifer Owens 01:05
So we are in West Michigan on the shores of Lake Michigan. So the area we support is Allegan and Ottawa County, central cities are Holland, Allegan. Grand Haven. Many people know us from tulip time in the state. So getting ready for tulip time or just finished it. So yeah, the tulips are blooming here. And we're loving the springtime here.

E Ed Clemente 01:27
Do you have a pair of those wood shoes?

J Jennifer Owens 01:30
You know I do but I don't wear them. So they're ceremonial. I think most people will feel like we're all walking around with wooden shoes and Dutch outfits on all year round, I have yet to put on a Dutch outfit, which is surprising. My predecessor said he had not done that yet and so keep the tradition. But I love the history of tulip time. And I do have my wooden shoes, but I don't wear them around the streets.

E Ed Clemente 01:53
In today's internet world. Yeah, you never know how long photos will live with you. Um, so but. And the other thing too, is that I know it's a beauty - Not only is it obviously economic development, but it's also a very gorgeous place to live to. I know you guys have nice beaches and it's just a tremendous place I've been to just a few times. But really, I should get there more. And I know that why don't you sort of, you know, I know you got a bit of a profile but what do you do as an EDO - I say EDO a lot of times, but economic development organization, a lot of people might not know that term, but we do. So why don't you kind of say what your economic development organization does.

J Jennifer Owens 02:35
Sure. And I'll try not to use acronyms that no one knows because we in the economic field,

love to do that. But Lakeshore Advantage is really charged with making sure this generation and the next generation wants to live in our vibrant community. And we do that focusing on maintaining the base of companies who export goods and services out of the area, which we call primary or GDP producing businesses. So there's all kinds of ways that you go about continuing to keep those companies healthy and growing. But our team works really hard to understand our existing employer's needs work with early-stage startups to help them grow to kind of plant the next generation of our tulips per se, and attract new businesses to the area to make sure our economic garden continues to be strong today and tomorrow.

E

Ed Clemente 03:27

And I should also mention too a little bit that is a teeny bit of a homecoming for you. You've had an interesting background, I'm actually jealous of your background, you've worked at several different economic development organizations prior, do you mind kind of giving us the chronology of those? I know you worked at MEDC, but I don't know when.

J

Jennifer Owens 03:45

Yeah, yeah, no, I don't want to bore people. But I actually fell into economic development, like a lot of people do. There are degrees in economic development, although I went to school for journalism. And I started my career actually at MEDC. At state's economic development organization. There was a magazine at the time called the Michigan Business Report. And I was the editor and copywriter, and I just kind of fell in love with the profession and was at the MEDC and had a chance to grow into different parts of the organization. So I lead marketing and business development at the MEDC. But what I found about economic development, for me, is really building a community that you live in and being part of that community. Just was is hugely, so impactful for me as an individual. So I've had a chance to be part of the economic development teams in Ann Arbor, Kalamazoo and seven years ago, I got a chance to come back to the lake shore. I grew up in on the shores of Lake Michigan and lead Lake Shore Advantage. So it's been nearly 20 years and economic development a career I fell into But it's definitely my calling. So I love it and continue to grow every day.

E

Ed Clemente 05:04

Well not to be nosy - But what city did you grew up in? Or go to high school?

J

Jennifer Owens 05:08

Yeah. So I grew up in. I grew up in St. Joe. And yes, yeah, I went to the Catholic school there. So just south of where I am now, and never ever thought that I would live back in this area. At the time, you know, I went away to school, and it was either Detroit or Chicago was where I was going to live. And then as my husband and I had more and more boys, we now have three, we figured you know what, it's not too bad to be close to mom and dad. And so, so we kinda moved -

E

Ed Clemente 05:38

Free babysitting, yeah!

J

Jennifer Owens 05:40

Free babysitting! But just absolutely love it here. And, and I recognize that the path for a lot of young people, you know, you got to go away to really appreciate what you're coming back to. And I just love it being here and being close to my family. It's it's been a huge blessing.

E

Ed Clemente 05:57

And you did mention Southwest First and Spark maybe?

J

Jennifer Owens 06:01

Yeah, so worked at Ann Arbor Spark and Southwest Michigan First. So Ann Arbor Spark was a great privilege to work with the University of Michigan and though I am a Spartan, but I have so much respect for University of Michigan and what they do and research and business development, and then worked at Southwest Michigan First before that is heading their business attraction and marketing programs. So each community in Michigan has been so different. And one of the takeaways for me is like there's no one size fits all approach to growing an economy because in Michigan, you know, we have so many diverse communities that each one I've been a part of, has really allowed me to grow as a professional and deploy tactics that made sense for that community.

E

Ed Clemente 06:45

And I also know you worked with my old buddy Ron Kitchens who made you do some rugby stuff I, knew him through rugby.

J

Jennifer Owens 06:52

Ron was great. I learned a ton from him, he really pushed me to get into public speaking and got to speak to over 1000 individuals at Catalyst University. And you know, it was really sad to see him leave to go to Birmingham, Alabama recently, but a great economic development leader that I learned a lot from when I was there.

E

Ed Clemente 07:14

And why don't you put in a plug a little bit, you don't have to read everyone that's on your board. But usually, it's a good idea to at least mention your chair, person, whoever they might be.

J

Jennifer Owens 07:23

Yeah. So we have a 20 person board member board, and a majority of them are private sector businesses. So we're headed by Scott Brooks, who's head of Brooks Capital Management, who has assisted living organizations. Our Vice Chair is with Gentex Corporation. We have leaders from Herman Miller on our team. So our board is very diverse and represents what our economy is, that help drive this we have two county administrators on our board from Allegan and Ottawa. So it's a really nice balance between public and private sector. Our organization, when it was created, nearly 16 years ago, really wanted to have the majority of our funding come from the private sector and have the government, the government as a strong second partner. And so we continue to have the majority funded by the businesses we serve. And it really helps us kind of steer where our direction should be having those strong leaders can help us chart the course.

E

Ed Clemente 08:28

Then I want to drill down on one company you mentioned just because of my own research, is Gentex. They're kind of an interesting company. I know they're, I know, they're a little bit into aerospace, but automotive, can you just give a quick 30 second description of what they do.

J

Jennifer Owens 08:44

So Gentex is really a vast majority of the technology and sensors inside your vehicle today. So the rear view backup cams, the side mirrors that tell you if someone's in your blind spot. They also develop auto dimming glass as well. So like on Boeing jets, where the glass dims when you see light go at it. So really is a technology driven company with

primarily automotive focus. They are the largest employer in our area. And in 1974, they were started with by a guy Fred Bower with a big idea and a patent and have grown to nearly 6000 people today and continue to have all of their workforce in West Michigan. And so what I what I love about this community is a strong sense of entrepreneurship that really starts with some of our largest employers like Hayworth and Herman Miller, again, started by entrepreneurs with a big idea, community came around them and help them succeed, and they continue to give back and pay forward. So although we have had closures and companies leave, we really try to keep the talent by having that strong entrepreneurial pipeline to allow those individuals to create what's next for this community and it's helped us continue to succeed.

E

Ed Clemente 10:03

And during COVID, I think just a little bit when we talk prior, but you've had quite a few entrepreneurs even open up during the time you went and think entrepreneurs would be opening up aggressively.

J

Jennifer Owens 10:14

Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, really, when you see the economy go into a recession, entrepreneurship goes way up. What we saw is we had several entrepreneurs who came alongside and developed actually crowdsourcing programs to provide masks to provide face shields to not only hospitals in Michigan, but healthcare systems throughout the US all for free. So a group of entrepreneurs developed actually a technology to allow people to access those PPE kind of donations, and not only got produce them, but also gave them to them for free. So our entrepreneurs saw this as an opportunity to kind of step up and drive the community forward. Not only that we had you know, and I know everyone did, but we had several of our microbreweries convert to hand sanitizer and making that so New Holland Brewery, which I'm hoping you've tried their beer, it's pretty good Copper Craft Distillery. You know, although the demand for beer did not go down during COVID, surprisingly, they actually did convert some of their production lines to making hand sanitizer when that need was so great. And providing that at no cost or reduced cost and businesses at need.

A

Announcer 11:33

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Ed Clemente 11:50

And one of your other companies just got a bunch of other questions to ask you. But one of your companies is it JR Automation that did something where they sort of converted production lines with GM to do something for COVID, right?



Jennifer Owens 12:05

Yeah. So um, GM worked with JR to create a an automated mask making line, actually in Metro Detroit. So something GM had never done before. And JR put the automation in place for GM and came alongside and made it happen. And when we think about clusters or growing industry sectors for our community, Automation Alley, or automation is really growing here. As we look at talent shortages, we see JR, but many other growing automation providers who are figuring out a way to meet the talent gaps by producing it through automation. And I also want to mention that, you know, MEDC has been great in coming alongside with companies like JR, so JR has expanded, I believe three times in the last six years. And each time, I mean, MEDC was a strong partner, providing incentives support resources. So we really rely on the team at MEDC to, to help continue to keep our economy strong,



Ed Clemente 13:10

It helps you work here too. So you kind of know the players and how it works. A couple other questions, too. I know that I would imagine, you're, you know, with this sort of diaspora that's going on with digital workers and but you're having an I'm sure you're an attractive area for like emerging workers to for, you know, people are coming to locate, obviously, for the beautiful location, but they might not have to be, you know, in Chicago anymore. So there may be moving to your area. So are you experiencing that?



Jennifer Owens 13:41

Yeah, we are. And we've had a lot of grandparents have their kids move in, you know, from the coast that and like, well, they can stay here and work now. So yeah, so we've seen a lot of growth of the technology workforce. We have a pretty strong fiber network in a good portion of our community to allow access to that high speed broadband. However, there's more work that can be done. So one of the priorities for us in order to continue to grow that mobile workforce who can work from home or work anywhere, is making sure that high speed broadband is available everywhere in our county, there are, or two counties, there are some areas that don't have that and that's not okay because we want to be able to have every bit of our two counties to be able to compete for that talent. And if you

don't have that high speed broadband, that's a really hard play for a mobile tech worker who relies on that.

E

Ed Clemente 14:34

Well, you're gonna laugh but we're down to like three questions. Because it goes so fast. Yes, it does. Um, but this next one is from my previous background, I helped startup an organization called the Energy Innovation Business Council. So they do a lot with advanced energy and I know that was always a pocket for me when I was starting it up there were like two or three electric like battery companies or some are, that's still a big project or big group there, right?

J

Jennifer Owens 15:03

So in the last big recession, when there were resources available for alternative energy, we had a chance to really compete and win two pretty significant projects who've both companies are creating quite a great supply chain of customers in the lithium ion battery space. So the first company is LG Chem. So LG Chem employs nearly 1000 people producing those lithium ion batteries primarily for GM. The other one is Johnson Controls, who also produces those batteries as well. But what we're seeing is a really strong supply chain of companies in that space, and in the lithium ion battery space as well. And recite and looking at recycling that technology. So that's that's a really strong cluster for us that's and those resources from MEDC, from the state from the federal government really helped us plan these two major employers who continue to grow and invest.

E

Ed Clemente 16:02

I know internationally, Michigan is one of the go to states for all the electric platforms they know as we get into more and more of that space. The last couple of questions. Do you see any trends or do you see spaces you're moving into you think as you see indicators? And then one more question after that, and then you're free?

J

Jennifer Owens 16:24

Yeah. So there are a couple things one, Industry 4.0, which is a term that might not normally be known by everyone, but really Industry 4.0 is automation, big data, machine learning. As I mentioned, we're seeing a great cluster in the automation space. And we see companies, because we're we're 30% manufacturing here. So really strong focus, we see a lot of our companies adapt - adopting those technologies, but not all. So a priority for us is making sure all of our manufacturers big, large, small, are embracing Industry 4.0

technologies. And that's something we're going to come alongside with MEDC and partner on that initiative, it's great that that's also a priority for MEDC. The second thing is we are the office furniture capital of the world, and the office furniture industry is going to change depending on how we work. So what what I'm wondering about is what's the next office future, but we do see our office furniture company shifting to what we call residential, which is residential and commercial kind of combined. So what does the future of office look like? And we don't know the answer to that yet. But we know we have great leaders in the furniture space who can help kind of chart the way for the future of office. And we want to come alongside with them is as we shift to where we work long term.

E

Ed Clemente 17:46

This is my Ed Clemente former Michigan history teacher question. But is the furniture capital big on that side of the state primarily because of the lumber industry? Or is that why it seems like because I don't know of other clusters for furniture, you know, around the United States or it's gotta be North Carolina, I think was one at one time.

J

Jennifer Owens 18:05

You know, I don't know if it... That's a good question. What started each one of these office furniture companies, and my guess is it's like, you know, one company starts and another spins off and you have the talent base nearby. I wouldn't say that we're the lumber capital of the world. I do think a lot of these companies are interconnected in some way to each other where, you know, one individual spun off and created another company long term. I know our two anchor office furniture manufacturers Herman Miller and Hayworth were both started by local individuals who saw a need to work better and more efficiently in the office and had one product each and then that grew to multiple products over time.

E

Ed Clemente 18:46

You triggered one more question for me. You mentioned; you're going to get mad because I can't remember exactly, but someone that I thought there's a food product that you brought it up to me when we got a pre discussion but what was the food product that's made there?

J

Jennifer Owens 19:02

Oh, we make all kinds of food products. I think the one that you were excited about was the Jimmy Dean sandwich bowl or Jimmy Dean breakfast bowl. Tyson started making all

the Jimmy Dean breakfast bowls but because half of both our counties are agricultural in nature, we also have a great food processing supply chain. But yes, when you have those Jimmy Dean breakfast bowls, they are made right here in West Michigan's lake shore. So another reason to enjoy those.

E

Ed Clemente 19:28

And they're sent all over the United States, right?

J

Jennifer Owens 19:30

Absolutely, yeah, they also produce half of the deli meat for Jimmy John's as well. So at that Tyson plant, so when you have a Jimmy John's sub with Turkey or ham, more than likely it's processed here.

E

Ed Clemente 19:44

And I know they agribusiness like he said it's an obvious cluster for you. But I know that you know you you have the opportunity there and you're it's surprising all the different things you sort of like a little mini bunch of ecosystems over there.

J

Jennifer Owens 20:00

Yeah, I mean, I think what was so attractive to me from an economic development perspective to be in the lake shore is that there's our eggs are not all in one basket. So we've got a great diverse mix of employers, which makes it wonderful. When industries go up and down, you know that we can kind of shift that workforce back and forth. So from food processing, automotive, chemistry, lithium ion batteries, we have it, but we don't have all of our eggs or all of our workforce in one place. And so that helps to keep us economically strong.

E

Ed Clemente 20:34

And the last question could be your hardest. Don't forget Pure Michigan could listen to these interviews. What is your favorite spot in Michigan? Or if you have a secret spot you don't have to tell us about your secret spot? But what do you like best about living in Michigan?



Jennifer Owens 20:49

Oh man, that's so hard because there's so many places but I do love Pure Michigan. There's nothing better than listing one of those commercials and being so excited about our home state anywhere for me that's by the beach on the shores of Lake Michigan's my favorite spot, although I don't really love sand so that's the one thing I struggle with is not having sand everywhere. I'm kind of a type A personality, but walking on the beach, watching you know, watching the waves that's like a piece of heaven to me.



Ed Clemente 21:17

Well, I know that you're piece of heaven, I'm sure for your region for all the good work you do there. And I want to thank you today again, Jennifer Owens, President Lake Shore Advantage. And once again taken thank you for being a guest today and taking time to talk with us.



Jennifer Owens 21:33

Thanks. It's my pleasure. Thanks for having me on.



Announcer 21:36

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