

Ep.3.31 - Alexis Wiley and Rod Wood

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SPEAKERS

Ed Clemente, Rod Wood, Alexis Wiley

A Alexis Wiley 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.

E Ed Clemente 00:29

Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente. And today we're fortunate to have Rod Wood, President and CEO of the Detroit Lions, also, Alexis Wiley, she is with Moment Strategy. She's the founder and CEO of Moment Strategies, as well as strategic communications. And she's very involved with the Detroit local organizing committee for the 2024 NFL Draft. Welcome to both you.

R Rod Wood 00:52

Good to be here.

A Alexis Wiley 00:53

Thanks for having us.

E Ed Clemente 00:54

So just to kind of break you two out, we're gonna focus a little bit on the history. But I would like Rod to talk about just how we got to this point, because I'm sure it doesn't happen by accident that the NFL draft is going to be here. So what was some of the process to get to that

point?

R

Rod Wood 01:11

Well, first of all, it's a relatively new phenomena for the draft to be moved around. Those of you who follow it, remember it being at Radio City Music Hall for any number of years, through a really freak in the scheduling of Radio City, they had double booked one weekend. And so the NFL had to move the draft out of New York, moved to Chicago thinking that was a one year phenomenon. But it was so successful, they decided to start moving the draft route similar to how they do the Super Bowl. And from that point on, it became a bidding process, just like to win the Superbowl cities would line up and then put forward bids. We bid a number of years ago, were unsuccessful. And then recently, were successful landing the 2024 draft. So it's a great opportunity for the city, it's a great opportunity for the team to be hosting the draft. And it's become almost as big as the Superbowl and in some ways a little bit bigger, because it is a three day event versus a one day game.

E

Ed Clemente 02:11

Yeah. And, Alexis, why don't you give a little bit of spin, because you were probably involved with it from a different capacity than you're in now. Right?

A

Alexis Wiley 02:18

Well, yes, to a degree. I mean, I think that this is something to see, I mean, the work that goes into really landing an event, like the draft, everything that they evaluate, and really seeing the progress. I mean, I was on the Sports Commission when I was at the City of Detroit, and who, oftentimes, we always pitched hard for really high profile, great events. And I think that now as you see the city has grown, changed, and really the increased profile of Detroit, increased profile of the state of Michigan, I think has really made us very, very competitive. And like Rod said, it is a very, very tough competition. It's not the kind of thing that just gets handed, this is such a big honor, and such a big opportunity for us to really be as both Detroit and the state of Michigan to really be on the national stage to give people a different viewpoint and a glimpse at our city and our state. So I'm just so excited and honored to be part of it.

E

Ed Clemente 03:19

Yeah, and just so you guys know, this audience's kind of like economic development sort of podcast, which actually I find more interesting sometimes just because that is what really, not only is it great for the fans, but it's also great for the communities that host it and just the ripple effects. Could you both talk a little bit about what it's meant? Like, I know, Kansas City had a huge crowd, you know, and so, could you guys talk a little bit about what it means actually, to a community like break it down a little bit? Either one of you.

R

Rod Wood 03:46

I'll say a few things and Alexis you can certainly jump in. I would say a couple things. One, is, first of all, it's gonna be a free event. And so any person who's interested in the draft can come and enjoy it. You go back and look at some of the prior cities that have hosted. Philadelphia had a massive crowd outside the art museum. Nashville, basically took over Broadway, you know, and it was a party for three days. Obviously, you saw Kansas City last year. So I think Detroit has a chance to have that kind of crowd. And it's really a three day TV show, too. So it's going to be 40 million people probably over three days watching the city of Detroit. And I don't know if there's a better advertisement that we can put forward for the city. It's really covered on three TV networks, ESPN, the NFL Network, and ABC. And then on Saturday goes to ESPN 2, so really four networks, plus ESPN Deportes for the Spanish speakers. And so it's everywhere on your TV over four days, and there'll be a lot of time to talk about great things going on in the city. I'm sure we'll be doing close ups on different things that are going on in the city so it's a great opportunity not only for those that are there for everybody around the world to see Detroit in a different way.

A Alexis Wiley 05:06

I'm sorry, sorry.

E Ed Clemente 05:09

Go ahead and talk about it from more of a public perspective a little bit.

A Alexis Wiley 05:13

I think for when you think about the city of Detroit, and having so many people come to our city, right, there are gonna be tons who watch it on TV, but there will be tons in Detroit, right. Think about the economic impact on our businesses. Think about the impact on just the opportunity for us as Detroiters to be involved in this nationally televised three day event. It's really, really tremendous. And one thing that we've been very focused on as a committee is really ensuring that the impact really ripples out right? Beyond the footprint that it really is something where we can build upon it to make an impact in our community to make sure that we're supporting businesses, we're supporting community organizations, it's something that really has an opportunity for all of us to get involved from a number of different angles that I think will also have lasting benefits long after the draft is over.

E Ed Clemente 06:11

I know there must be some other groups like local nonprofits, volunteers, you almost have to sort of assemble. I worked a little bit with Super Bowl when it was here, but there's so much volunteer people involved that you don't even think about what it takes to pull something like this. [Yeah, sure.] Yeah, Alexis, you were there for that?

A Alexis Wiley 06:32

I was just gonna say that when you consider I mean our committee is really people from all

I was just gonna say that, when you consider I mean, our committee is really people from all different sectors of Detroit and the state of Michigan, right. We've got folks who are who are deeply involved in philanthropy, leaders in business, people who are very focused on community organizations, equity, all of us are really at the table. Of course, the Lions has been a huge convener for all of us in in really making sure that we've got the right partners here, who are all thinking about the various aspects that this has the opportunity to impact.

E

Ed Clemente 07:06

And Rod. I mean, just a couple side notes for you, right? When I was a state rep, I had Allen Park in my district, so I had been to the facility. And that was something we worked with closely in that part, because I know it's partially Dearborn Allen Park, and I think, the official headquarters just where the border is. But also, I played two years at Ferris, I was a linebacker, just in case you might want to call me back in, but I think I'm too small for any sports anymore. But I so can you talk a little bit more too about what it means to be the host football team to be here to because I'm sure there's a lot of sort of granular activities that are going on at your places during this process.

R

Rod Wood 07:49

Well, you know, it's great, as we've talked about for the city, but is great for the Lions and our fans, because it'll be you know, hopefully, a lot of Lions fans will show up just like you've seen in the other cities where the Kansas City fans showed up. So it'll be great opportunity for our fans who otherwise couldn't travel to another city to see a draft and participate in it firsthand. And we're going to take opportunities to do certain activations for our fans only around the footprint of where the draft will be held. And you'll do VIP experiences. And it just puts another spotlight on the team. And a chance to show off not only Detroit, but the Detroit Lions fans, the Detroit Lions organization. As I said earlier, it's a big win for the city and the team to this is a bidding process. We beat out other cities, mostly proud to beat Green Bay, who's hosting it the year after us. So it's always looking forward to finish it ahead of them in other things, not just the draft.

E

Ed Clemente 07:53

The black and blue league, yeah.

R

Rod Wood 08:01

So it's a lot of pride and I do think you know, not part of this podcast, but we do have the Final Four coming back to Detroit in 2027. And I do think once you win one of these and show what you can do it leads to other things. And so the economic benefit, this is like lighting a fuse I think that could lead to any number of other big events coming because we're going to we're going to show off the city in a great way.

E

Ed Clemente 09:12

Physically, where are you guys, where's it gonna be? I don't even know. Or is that still being figured out?

R

Rod Wood 09:18

We're still working on it. We're not ready to publicly announce it. [It's all right.] We'll be downtown, how about that?

A

Alexis Wiley 09:25

And it will be very cool. [Yes.] Again, that Rod mentioned, it's free, right. So there will be lots of opportunities to experience and access the draft free of charge. So that's one thing to think about. And again, it'll be downtown. I can't wait to see how it all kind of comes together. The experience in Kansas City. It was unbelievable how they were able to transform different parts of the city to really make them part of the show. So I'm excited to see what they do here. And I think we're all gonna be really impressed.

E

Ed Clemente 10:00

We're pretty close to a lot of NFL teams like within a day drive, which I don't know about Green Bay, but Chicago is pretty close. And Cincinnati, Cleveland,

A

Alexis Wiley 10:11

The reason why we're very confident we're gonna have a crazy turnout. In addition to all of our Lions fans, we're gonna have people from Cleveland, Chicago, Pittsburgh, you know, we even think we're gonna get a lot of folks out of Canada right. It's going to be a convening point, and there'll be so many people, Detroit is gonna be the place to be.

R

Rod Wood 10:34

I think, you know, one of things I said about the graph too, is it's really the intersection of pro and college football. So there'll be fans of all these kids that are coming out of whatever your favorite school is, you want to see your teammate from Michigan State or Michigan or Purdue or whatever the school is get drafted. And we're conveniently located to a lot of the biggest football schools too so there'll be college fans there, pro fans there. We've got great airports so it's very easy to get to the city, as well as those that are going to drive in. And so I think we'll be surprised and the whole city will be surprised that the turnout is going to be massive, over all three days. And then the first two drafts are at night, Thursday and Friday. So there will be all day during Thursday or Friday for people to enjoy other parts of the city.

A

Alexis Wiley 11:22

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E

Ed Clemente 11:38

You know it's something else you sort of touched on both of you is that, like I said I was there when they did the Super Bowl, I was in the legislature. But Detroit is such a different city since then. I mean, it has changed even with like the Joe Louis 27-mile greenway they're building and so many other things have changed in those, I don't know how many years ago, it was probably 15 years now. Maybe not. But I mean, I think a lot of people who haven't been here in a while, are really going to be surprised how much change has been just since the Super Bowl. Alexis, you probably have dealt with that firsthand more.

A

Alexis Wiley 12:17

No, 100%. So I'm originally from Los Angeles, and I moved to Detroit in 2010. And my family every year, my family comes a few times a year. And they're always talking about how Detroit's grown and changed. And I tell people, like the minute you get here, you're gonna fall in love with it. Right? And Detroit is such an awesome place to be. And I think when you also think about from a broader perspective, the state of Michigan, right, there's so many great things to experience and see within just a few hours drive. That I just think you got to experience it. Don't let anybody tell you about Detroit or Michigan, you come and experience it yourself. Really to get a sense of why it's so great. Why we love it so much.

E

Ed Clemente 13:06

Yeah, we've even seen a bump obviously at the MEDC since COVID, even of how many people domestically in America have like, discovered like the, you know, the third coast or whatever, you know, just come here and just going to the U.P., or just going to Lake Michigan or wherever. I met with the head of the National Parks. He came here to Detroit because they had so many crowds at Sleeping Bear Dunes and Pictured Rocks. I know this is gonna be a little cooler temperatures at that point, but there's still a ton of things to do, you know, even no matter what, we're a good four season state. And we really appreciate that. And when I think too, I got to ask you a question, Rod. Where is Goodrich?

R

Rod Wood 13:55

Goodrich is up near Flint. It's, you know, Grand Blanc, you probably know where Grand Blanc is.

E

Ed Clemente 14:01

Oh, yeah, yeah, I know Grand Blanc.

R

Rod Wood 14:02

Rod Wood 14:02

We're maybe 10 minutes from Grand Blanc. [And that's your high school?] That's where I went to high school, yes.

E

Ed Clemente 14:09

Is it a big school? I don't even know.

R

Rod Wood 14:11

It was a tiny Class C school when I was there. And now it's a really big class B School. So it didn't have anything to do with me being from there I don't think but it's grown quite a bit.

E

Ed Clemente 14:22

Do you anticipate for the club, the football club? Do you anticipate like, does this give you guys a bump too as far as like, how maybe your draft picks might be involved by seeing something? Because I mean, are you allowed to like, I don't know how you guys recruit. So is that like a big advantage to somewhat for sports, or no.

R

Rod Wood 14:47

The draft is very much decided by how you finish the prior year. So your record determines your slot. And I'm hoping that we're drafting very late in the first round because that means we had a very good year this year. So, if that happens, a lot of the players that will be going early will be gone before we get to pick. I think our fans would be more happy if we were drafting late to because that means that we had a really good year this year. I don't think it really helps in terms of recruiting the players, I think it does help, you know, it's terms of communicating and getting our fans excited. And the being there hearing firsthand, the next Lion being announced. So I think with the fans, it's a much bigger deal than it will be players.

E

Ed Clemente 15:31

Yeah. Just the last couple of questions for you, but do you have like sort of a headline you would like to see when this is over? Like, what would you see like, as a headline that you think would be a good sort of springboard that you hit the mark?

R

Rod Wood 15:51

I think if people leave here, and what they're saying is, I can't wait to come back to Detroit.

A

Alexis Wiley 15:58

Right. I can't see that

bingo. I can't top that.

E

Ed Clemente 16:01

Yet. In a weird way too that, you know your facility downtown is very popular when like other places are getting hit by blizzards. You must have had like about five or six games in the last couple of years that were moved to your stadium, right?

R

Rod Wood 16:19

Yeah, we hosted this year, the Buffalo-Cleveland game when the storm was in Buffalo. So we're probably the preferred location for the league to move a team that has to be relocated for weather or any other reason, just because we know how to do it, and they have confidence that we can do it. So yeah, I think the stadium's great, being downtown next to Comerica Park and near Little Caesars arena, the theaters, I think people will be blown away when they see the city firsthand.

E

Ed Clemente 16:48

One of the things I meant to bring up too is how is the Sports Commission sort of related to all this? I know, they're sort of behind the scenes on some of these things. And I know Dave Beech has been involved with some of these things. Can you tell us about what the Sports Commission is, by chance? I don't really know a ton about them.

R

Rod Wood 17:06

I'll say a little bit then Alexis can certainly add. It's an organization that really kind of came together, I think it was seven or eight years ago. A lot of people that in some ways are competitors. So you have members from all the venues, all the sports teams, major corporations, to really get a focused approach to how we're going to compete and bring big events to Detroit, other cities have had organizations like this a little bit more organized than Detroit was in the past. And therefore, part of the reason maybe we weren't as successful. So we spent a lot of time looking at the full menu of everything that might be coming up for bid, whether it's the draft item, the Super Bowl, all star games in the other sports, NCAA events. And then we put together a package to go bid on them. And our case for the draft, the Sports Commission was very involved, both in the creativity of the bid, participating in meetings with the league, etc. So it's been an outstanding group of people to get together and build relationships and bring things to the city.

A

Alexis Wiley 18:13

I think it's kind of indicative of a lot of what you're seeing, really happening in Detroit right now, which is really, everyone rowing in the same direction, and pulling all their resources together towards one cause, which is really doing good things in our city and improving and

strengthening our city. I think that's one reason why you see us making the progress that we've made, it's because everyone is working together towards the greater good.

E Ed Clemente 18:42

Yeah, and I just want to say too that Rod, I don't know when the improvements were for the stadium, but I mean, it's so much, you know, he really made great improvements there. And I'm just like, surprised, like, at concerts, or anything else that sort of fills up for you guys, because that's a good size stadium. And it's very impressive all the other uses, I was there for basketball, like NCAA basketball before, but anyway, that's just amazing what a utilitarian sort of value that stadium is.

R Rod Wood 19:13

Yeah, it's a great resource, obviously, for the team and the organization. But really, for the city. I mean, every time we have a big event that brings 50-60,000 people downtown, we're likely to be, you know, going to the bars, restaurants, maybe staying at the hotels, obviously paying for parking. So we just had the WWE SummerSlam which I can admit I did not go to, but 55,000 other people did. Great concert series. A lot of this is kind of pent up demand from COVID. And, you know, we did wonder what was going to happen post-COVID. Were people still gonna go back out to big events and you know, where were their fear factors going to be and it's coming back in full force. And I think we had I don't know how many different shows. We still have a couple more, we still have Metallica coming later on.

E Ed Clemente 20:01

You'll be at that one right?

R Rod Wood 20:03

I will probably be one of those. Yes, they're tonight, actually. And then Michigan State-Penn State's playing a Big 10 game. A lot of great things still account.

E Ed Clemente 20:16

Well, anyway, if you have any closing remarks, but I want to thank you both for taking time today to do this. Rod Wood, again, president of the Detroit Lions, Alexis Wiley, founder and CEO of Moment Strategies. We appreciate everything you guys are doing for this. And maybe we'll be hearing more from you in the future. But once again, thanks for taking time to do this. I know you're very busy. So I appreciate it. [My pleasure, it was fun.]

A Alexis Wiley 20:43

Thank you again, and I hope everyone comes to Detroit for the draft. It's going to be an

absolutely outstanding event. The Michigan Opportunity is brought to you by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Join us and make your mark where it matters. Visit michiganbusiness.org/radio to put your plans in motion.