

Ep.24 - Mary Kramer

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Mary Kramer



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. Welcome, my name is Ed Clemente. I'm your host today for the MEDC on this podcast, and we're very fortunate to have a very astute person that I've enjoyed working with over the years. Mary Kramer. She is currently Vice President Crain's Communications and she's Director of Homecoming, the Detroit Homecoming and of Special Projects for Crain's, is that correct? I get everything right there? (That's it. You got it.) Yes. And I'm very fortunate to have known you a long time and I might as well gush about you ahead of time. I've always loved the way you handled Crain's, but a lot of the stories and all those kinds of things. But originally I kind of met you through Jennette Smith and Marsha Stopa. And actually Terry Kosdrosky. The last two are both downriver residents, and they both were very big writers for you guys for a while, there too.



Mary Kramer 01:25

Great talents, all three of them, and Terry's staff at Automotive News.



Ed Clemente 01:29

Oh, I didn't know he came back. That's great news. Yeah, yeah. And well, that's, that's a good segue. Why don't you tell people because we call it Detroit Crain's, so you kind of live in this area, but you're really much broader than just Detroit. So why why don't you touch on that a little bit.



Mary Kramer 01:45

Crain Communications is a family-owned company, the Crain family. The GD Crain started the company in 1916, which makes it 105 years old in 2021. And still family-owned in its third generation of family leadership. So KC Crain is the CEO, and his brother Chris is active in the company as well. But I was hired originally by their father, Keith Crain, who was kind of an icon in Metro Detroit, and, but the company itself has a lot of B2B brands, so their business publications that serve a very particular niche. For example, Automotive News is based in Detroit, and that is the Bible of the automotive industry globally. Modern Healthcare is based in Chicago, it is the must read for hospital and healthcare administrators and CEO C suite. Pensions and Investments is based in New York. it serves institutional investors. So, the state of Michigan pension fund managers, they would be reading pensions and investments, I guarantee it. So if all these niche publications, then we have four city books, and the one that I lead for many years is Crain's Detroit Business, but I also was Group Publisher for Chicago Business, Cleveland, and New York. Great, great gig for three years to run all four publications. And that's what I did just before moving into this new role.



Ed Clemente 03:18

And you know, I'm gonna put another plug in for you. I think Keith Crain from someone told me that he recruited you out of Grand Rapids. And you're one of the, I would say early adopters to actually live downtown. And I think you've been downtown, almost your whole career at Crain's. (32 years.) Yeah. And I remember you would always bring that up when you'd speak publicly how you loved being downtown. But you I didn't know what you were doing in Grand Rapids. But you've always one thing I've always admired about you. You've always tried to build the bridge, that Michigan's a whole state, especially the bridge between Grand Rapids and Detroit. I know we're not really jumping into the exact topics we wanted to but can you touch on, because I think that's very critical, especially in

today's polarization world.

M

Mary Kramer 04:00

It is it is Ed because, you know, I grew up in Grand Rapids, and I worked at a newspaper chain that had multiple papers around the state. So I worked in Grand Rapids, Jackson Ann Arbor and Kalamazoo, so I had a pretty good handle on the not the culture, but the character of those communities. And I was recruited. I was the city editor of the paper in Kalamazoo and Keith hired me from there. And what was so interesting to me coming to Detroit at that time, 1989, was that the people the Big Cheese guys who were running the big operations in Detroit, they didn't really know the people on the west side of the state. Whether it was the Mike Chander Noah from Perrerego, or the Amway guys or Steelcase or they just didn't really know or even the strikers and and people in Kalamazoo the up John's, there wasn't a lot of connectivity across the And I thought that that was a mistake, because in the west side of the state, it was clearly that a lot of the Civic initiatives that were economic development initiatives were led by business. When I came to Detroit, it was the big four, the mayor of Detroit, Brook Patterson, Oakland County, that whoever was chair of the Board of Commissioners in McComb, and then the Wayne County Executive. They were they seemed to be calling all the shots and I never really saw business really engaged. And and so I thought that was a really weird kind of a thing. And I feel like that was to the detriment of Southeast Michigan that that business didn't have a bigger, bigger voice. It seemed it wasn't calling enough shots like they did on the west side of the state. So I really was very active early on in trying to get east and west to connect. And now we have Business Leaders for Michigan, which is doing exactly that.

E

Ed Clemente 05:56

And I should plug too. We both know Jeff Donofrio very well who just received that job, and we're glad to see he's doing well there in that position. Some of the other things too, I think that blends into this, but originally also, I was quoted a lot in your paper back when I ran the Chamber of Commerce down river. And you were really involved in economic development. And I have to say, I'm many years past but I was one of your 40 under 40. Way back. I don't know if you instituted that. But I think you know, the 30 or 20, under 30. Are those your those were kinda like your bailiwick, right?

M

Mary Kramer 06:32

Yeah, when I was running Crain's Detroit Business, you know, one of the things that I thought about moving to Detroit was that we were really good at beating ourselves up. That region, it just always felt like, you know, we were our own worst enemy, we would be

talking about Detroit. And and when you talk about Detroit, you're really talking about Metro Detroit, there was this, us versus them kind of feeling between suburbs and Detroit. And I just didn't think that that was the way you win the economic development game. And so, so this idea of creating opportunities to to recognize and celebrate the talent in our own backyard and Ed you were you were very much a part of that, but every year we have a 40 under 40. class and you know, Dan Gilbert was in a 40 class, like in the early early to mid 1990s before he was Dan Gilbert. And so, so it's it's a, it's been fun to watch. I mean, Jennifer Granholm was in our classes, we had political people, we have business people, we've had a few people who have actually been convicted of crimes about them too much. But But you know, it is what it is.

E

Ed Clemente 07:49

When did you start the sort of 20 under, or...

M

Mary Kramer 07:52

20 in their 20s, and we started get the 40s started in 1991. And then we started the actually around the time that, you know, we're talking about brain drain in Michigan. And so 40 under 40 is really successful people, they've achieved a pinnacle, they've done amazing things. 20 in their 20s was supposed to be more like, these are talented young people who could live and work anywhere, but they chose to live in Detroit or Southeast Michigan. Let's hear their stories. And so that's what 20 in their 20s has been. It's it's again, it's celebrating the talent in our own backyard. And we've done other programs like that. I'm very, very proud of those programs.

E

Ed Clemente 08:35

Well, you know, and I think one other thing you did, and even though it's was, you know, it's called Crain's Detroit, but the Bible for me when I worked at the chamber, as well as being a state rep, was to always get that Book of Lists. And I think because you also expanded it to the whole state of Michigan. I thought that was, you know, that's why I really think that that was sort of like the backbone for business in Michigan at that time. Cuz you've been printing that for a long time, I think.

M

Mary Kramer 09:04

I think we started that in the late 1980s. And I think Book of Lists is a great reference book, it can tell stories through data. I mean, if you look at, say, accounting firms over 10 years, oh my gosh, what an amazing story is told on who has been purchased and acquired, how

many accountants how many fewer accountants there are at different accounting firms because of a lot of different things, but automation is one of them. And so I it's, it's it's interesting to see the data but you can use the Book of Lists longitudinally for a lot of different reasons to for marketing purposes or prospecting for jobs even.

E

Ed Clemente 09:44

I'm using it actually for guests for the podcast. I mean, I it gives me good ideas for categories and another little plug for you but you are the first female to be President of the Detroit Athletic Club, and I also think the Book of Lists did a great job with diversity, ethnic groups, women getting profiled more, I mean, you want to talk about that a little bit?

M

Mary Kramer 10:04

Well I think that, you know, we look at, I remember when I first came to Crain's Detroit Business, I said, somebody had sent me a press release or talked to me about a specific kind of story, and they said, oh, we don't cover nonprofits. And I said, we don't? And so I kind of looked into that. And some of the other areas that you know, when you start a new publication, you have guardrails, you say, this is who we are going to be and this is what we're going to do and this is what we'll cover. Nonprofits, minority owned businesses, women-lead or women-owned initiatives, or companies. Those are really important things to the fabric of the region, especially nonprofits. Our core business readers are either serving on the boards of nonprofits, or they're being asked to contribute to nonprofits. They're a huge part of our economic system in Southeast Michigan, big workforce. So why would we not cover that? So now, one of our most popular list is the Top Paid CEOs of Nonprofit Organizations. It's always a very, we do it every year and we look at the 990s and pull a lot of information together. And it's used in a lot of different ways, by boards of directors and by people who want to donate money. They want to see how much the CEO is making in a nonprofit organization before they write their own check.

E

Ed Clemente 11:23

Well, and I mean, I think you're on a board, aren't you now, Skillman or? (Yes, I chair the board now.) Yeah, okay, great. And but I know that most of Detroit's resurgence in statewide resurgence was really led by nonprofits. You know, these foundations, and I think you did a couple big sections about how they were leading the charge early on.

M

Mary Kramer 11:45

Well, yeah, I think foundation stepped in with things like the New Economy Initiative and some other things when there really wasn't a lot going on. But to your point about resurgence in Detroit, I would just say that, to me, there are three pivotal things. One was the Detroit 300 Celebration in 2001, where we actually, I chaired the business recognition piece of that, and we actually reconnected companies that were born in Detroit, but had moved to the suburbs, with their Detroit roots, and just trying to get people to remember from whence they came. And the next thing was the Superbowl in 2006, where Roger Penske led this tremendous civic initiative. And the Big Bang was Dan Gilbert buying the first building in 2010. Because no other person in America, no other entity would have the capital available to do what he did in building a downtown campus. And he has his investments have paid off. But without that huge investment early on buying and buying and buying and redeveloping and rehabbing and revitalizing these buildings. I'm not sure what Detroit would look like downtown right now.

E

Ed Clemente 12:55

Yeah, no, I remember all the turning points and people used to brag about not going downtown. And now you hear the opposite. We're going downtown to eat for dinner tonight.

A

Announcer 13:07

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E

Ed Clemente 13:22

You know, I always considered Detroit to be in Michigan to be a real international business climate too. And you guys put together some really great list of international companies here and then just international outreach. And I know this wasn't exactly a question ahead of time, but I think the international impact that Crain's has provided, I don't think really was existence before you guys start really printing about it.

M

Mary Kramer 13:45

Well, you know, it's funny. When I first came to Crain, one of the things that I did was, you know, Crain was founded in 1985 Crain's Detroit Business, and I went to the library, took an afternoon one day and went back and looked at the microfilm of the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News business sections. And basically what I, during that the, the year

before Crain's was founded in 1985. So 1984. And what I found was the business section was basically consumer business like which grocery chain was offering triple coupons, or B2B, which was basically about big labor or big auto. And there was all this other stuff happening in Detroit that really wasn't covered at all. And Keith Crain, it was Keith Crain's idea to have a business publication that did not cover the big three, Crain's Detroit Business covers auto suppliers, but not the big three unless it's a real estate or philanthropy angle. And so it was wildly successful because people were we built a business community. We built connections for people in the southeast Michigan area where where they were learning about companies in their own backyard that could be suppliers or customers or, you know, it was just this amazing success story. And I'm not I'm not just saying that I mean that we did actually, Crain's Detroit Business was asked at publishing conferences to talk about its path from giving away free copies to being totally paid in under three years. And it was unheard of in publishing.

E

Ed Clemente 15:27

Well, I mean, I like I said, I would for a lot of my visits for downriver when I ran the chamber was visiting a lot of those international companies, and because they didn't even know a chamber existed, or whatever, you know, so it was always a good thing. And now, let's get to your real sort of love. And I think it's been one of the bigger successes, is the Detroit Homecoming. I mean, I always thought that was such a great idea in the beginning, but why don't you just maybe talk a little bit about the evolution and where it's at now?

M

Mary Kramer 15:54

Sure. So Detroit was in bankruptcy in 2013 2014 and a friend of Keith Crain's, a contemporary who had worked in Detroit at one point, but went on to New York to be the publisher of Fortune Magazine. He had moved back to Detroit, and he was retired. And he told Keith, it would be great if there was somehow a way of connecting the successful people who are from Detroit, with the city again, and maybe some good things would happen, like investing or whatever. So, Keith, liked the idea, introduced me to this gentleman, Jim Hayes. And we planned, I went out and I tried to find some financial backing for what what I called the Detroit Homecoming. And I remember initially talking to people, like would you sponsor help support this was mainly in the foundation community. And they said, well, how many people do you think again, I'd say, oh, I don't know what 75 or 100. And we want to create an immersive experience for them, roll out the red carpet, show them what's going on in Detroit, and get them reinterested in the revitalization of the city. Well, the first year we had 150 people, and our peak was 250. It's invitation only. We're going into our eighth year, COVID permitting, we will be wearing

masks and we want to make people feel safe. But what has come out of it is a remarkable series of investments and connections made. To give a couple of examples, some expats got together, we call them expats, got together and when the tax law changed to create Opportunity Zones, they put together an Opportunity Zone for the east side of Detroit to rehabilitate multifamily housing. That is about \$100 million operation right now. And one of their biggest investors is a successful expat who came to Homecoming and put some money in that fund. So there are all kinds of really good things that have come from this. And we're really looking forward to the 21 Homecoming.

E

Ed Clemente 18:01

Yeah, I know, you've had some really big names, in fact, I was looking at the Detroit Regional Partnership, and I saw someone from Ballmer's office, you know, and I have to remember Ballmer was with not Google. He was with Microsoft.

M

Mary Kramer 18:16

He was right. He was the CEO after Bill Gates.

E

Ed Clemente 18:19

Yeah. And I mean, he was born somewhere here. Was he born in Detroit? Actually,

M

Mary Kramer 18:24

He may have been born in Detroit, but I think he grew up a little outside, but he was he was a scholarship student, I believe at Detroit Country Day. And he's been very generous to Detroit, Detroit Country Day and Lawrence Tech, because he was able to take applied advanced courses, computer courses and other courses at LTU while he was still in high school.

E

Ed Clemente 18:47

And you know, I know Ross has done a lot with to the Detroit area. I mean, yes, he did mention just the big players, but those guys really helped.

M

Mary Kramer 18:56

But there are other things too, Ed. I mean, there have been people, you know, there was a woman who was a gymnast and award-winning gymnast and she was based in New York

and but she learned how to be a gymnast with the Detroit rec department back in the 1960s. And she started a satellite youth program for gymnastics here she's branched out, or Christine Liedke who has a story of fashion design. She was in New York. She's back in Detroit now and she's using a church group up in Flint to sew her fashions. So there's all kinds of outcomes big and small. That have come about as as as a result of connecting at Homecoming.

E

Ed Clemente 19:39

Yeah, and there's probably a million more questions I could ask you about just I could have just done a podcast just about the Homecoming but because I really have enjoyed whenever you put out your post publication of that event too. The last couple things is pretty quick. But if you were talking to maybe yourself or someone who's just in high school. After all your experience, where would you recommend people to go into for school now, like if you could give advice to somebody in early developmental age?

M

Mary Kramer 20:10

Well, I don't know if this comes naturally now because of the era we live in, but be digitally savvy is one thing. I mean, I, it's remarkable how many things you can do on your own, and you can create on your own, and I would be as creative and learn all the cool tools and do video editing and just use every technology platform I could. That's what I would do. I would also recommend reading, reading, reading magazines, digitally, I don't care what the format is, but I find it amazing how few people are up, they don't know anything. You don't know what's going on, you know, down the block, let alone the world or the state or the city. And so I just think being well read and being up on things. And being digitally connected and digitally savvy, are huge ingredients to a person's career success.

E

Ed Clemente 21:06

You're actually I think on Grand Valley's board right now, aren't you?

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Mary Kramer 21:10

I was I was on for eight years and I ended my tenure. I last two years of the eight as Chair, but my term came to an end in December.

E

Ed Clemente 21:20

And I think you're also on some advisory boards for Wayne State. And yeah, yeah, right.

Well, the last question I'll ask you will probably be your easiest, maybe. But what do you like living? You know, what do you like best about living here in Michigan.

M

Mary Kramer 21:37

Ed, you know, I talked to expats all the time. And I think that I like I like all the things that we have that are accessible, whether it's outdoors, the lakes, the water, we take those things for granted, I think. And also, at least in my life, the arts are very important to me. And so things that are so accessible in Metro Detroit, whether it's theatre, or music, or opera, or any of those things, very, very accessible. I lived on the East Coast for a while. And I missed the Midwest. That's when I realized, as much as I like going into New York for theater and different experiences, I'm a Midwest girl, and I think, coming home back home to Michigan, I never really felt compelled to ever leave again. I love it here.

E

Ed Clemente 22:25

Well, that's gonna I'm gonna just segue one more question then. We were talking about this in the pre call. But we're talking about like digital nomads. And obviously, in this era we're in, people can work more and more remotely, it's been accelerated. And how do you think that helps Michigan for maybe getting talent in and things like?

M

Mary Kramer 22:45

Oh, that's a really good question Ed. I am on a mission right now to have people who are in economic development, MEDC, university presidents see a video that we taped with some expats who did come home. All of them were talking about why isn't there a concentrated effort to bring alumni of the universities back for technology, good jobs in particular. Chicago has launched an initiative, believe it or not, to attract tech talent home. Why aren't we doing that in Metro Detroit? Why aren't we doing it in Michigan? I know there was something years ago in the Granholm administration, but I don't think it was very targeted and I don't think the universities were all in. And I think that it's really a good time, because we have found out that people can work many people can work remotely. So if we want to attract more jobs and get the Amazons to do more than run the vans around and have a distribution warehouse, we need to be able to make sure that we have the talent for those that for those big tech companies

E

Ed Clemente 23:56

Well, you might not even remember this, but I did some of that legislation for the Governor Granholm at the time when I was a state rep and you and I met in Detroit one

time to try to find why early adopters are moving back to Detroit, that part of it was tied into that educational component. And, you know, it was the very nascent part of the turnaround for Detroit, like you said in your three points. And I think that we're in as good a position as ever, as you see people globally. I mean, I got a cousin who just took a job works in good Michigan, but living in Norway.

M

Mary Kramer 24:33

Well, you know, I mean, just think about it Ed, I mean, think about the great talent that's living in New York making a great salary, but a lot of that salary is going to living expenses and they've got an apartment the size of my walk-in closet, you know, so I mean, we have a lot of things that we can push here. Same thing with the West Coast. They may be making a lot of money, but a lot of it goes to living expenses and the cost of living here, you can have a house you can, you can be close to water, you can be on water for a lot less money.

E

Ed Clemente 25:05

You can have two houses. A lot of people do. Well anyway, I know I could probably talk to you for another hour or two. I look forward to your you're going to write a book now I hope. Well, I look forward to reading it if you do but anyway, once again, it was Mary Kramer. She's Vice President Crain's Communications and she's a Director of Detroit Homecoming and of Special Projects and a good friend. And thank you very much, Mary again for doing this today.

M

Mary Kramer 25:30

Thank you.

A

Announcer 25:33

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