

# Ep.2.34 - Jen Nelson

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

michigan, people, state, communities, marquette, ed, ensuring, economic development, helping, connecting, perspective, bit, projects, business, restaurant, coo, small business, years, support, alpena

## SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Jen Nelson

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- A** 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.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29  
Hello, I'm your host today, Ed Clemente, and welcome to the show. And with us today, we have Jen Nelson, she's the Chief Operating Officer and the Customer Experience Officer at the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Welcome to the show, Jen.
- J** Jen Nelson 00:42  
Thanks, Ed, I'm excited to be here today.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:46  
Well I hopefully you can get some revenues on the back end of this because we don't give you any up on the front.
- J** Jen Nelson 00:53  
I would say Ed you are standing between me and the U.P. for the weekend.

E

Ed Clemente 00:59

So you gotta get in the car, sorry. So let's, you know, this is gonna be a little different because, you know, you're obviously not new to the MEDC, but you've been here for a while, but sort of when you tell people, even today, from your loftier position, what do you tell people what the MEDC really does in a quick sentence, because even I had problems explaining it to people who don't, aren't in the business.

J

Jen Nelson 01:30

Right. Yeah, I mean, so I started with really, economic development is about people. And I think that's a really key component of what we do. So really, what what MEDC is focused on is helping companies, small, medium, and large, grow and support the creation of good paying jobs at these companies for Michiganders throughout the state. We also focus on creating fun, vibrant, active communities where people want to live and, and play and where businesses want to locate. We want to make sure that we have those amenities in communities for folks, and also promoting us. People usually relate really well to Pure Michigan. So promoting us as you know, the best four season state. So yeah, a combination of of companies and company growth and community expansion and vibrancy and then promoting us as the best four season state through Pure Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 02:28

Yeah, when I used to work at my chamber, I used to describe it as it's like a yin yang thing, you got to have, for economic development, you have to have quality of life. Otherwise, the two can't just operate independently of each other. They've worked together. [Exactly.] Yeah. And so I mean, let's talk a little bit too, because you, you're you, I'm gonna say you've been in how many months now? It's six, seven months? Eight? I don't know at the moment.

J

Jen Nelson 02:56

Well, it's September. So now we're going on nine.

E

Ed Clemente 02:59

Nine months. And but you were here for, I don't know how many years before before you went to take a different job.

J

Jen Nelson 03:07

12 years at MEDC.

E

Ed Clemente 03:09

So what, this is more from my personal information, but what job did you leave? What were you at when you left? Like were you in a different position?

**J** Jen Nelson 03:18

I was, when I left I was Chief Business Development Officer. So that was my most recent position before I left. I had also I was also the COO at at one point, so I had a number of different roles within the MEDC. So I just went where support and leadership was needed.

**E** Ed Clemente 03:38

I know a lot of people that I've talked to up in Lansing and different folks who knew you from before, and so they're very excited when you are coming back. Because I know you've helped, the one thing people say is you got good common sense, which is probably the hardest thing to achieve in today's world.

**J** Jen Nelson 03:54

Right, you can't you can't teach that right? So...

**E** Ed Clemente 03:57

It comes from experience. Experience and actually not always being successful, but never really, it's just the challenges of life teach you how to be common sense and things. [Exactly.] So when when you, I should get to your background a little bit here, but I know you're, are you a yooper originally, I can't remember.

**J** Jen Nelson 04:20

I am a yooper yes, born and raised in Marquette. A little bit north of Marquette but I say Marquette for you know people that are listening to this podcast. They can probably relate.

**E** Ed Clemente 04:31

Is that by Presque Isle or something, isn't there a park up there? [Presque Isle Park park.] Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've been there many times. So you but you also then went to Northern?

**J** Jen Nelson 04:43

I did. I went to Northern Michigan University for my undergrad. I got a degree in Speech Communication, which is more like interpersonal family communication, not, you know, PR comms kind of the world that you live in. Yeah, Speech Communication and a minor in

Sociology. And then I was like, what am I going to do with this? So a little secret Ed, a little secret here. So I actually was planning to go to University of Arizona to get my masters and eventually PhD in Speech Communication and about a weekend I said, you know, this, this isn't this isn't for me. I'm not feeling it. So I took a year off and worked at a restaurant and then ended up going to law school.

E

Ed Clemente 05:31

In the U.P. worked at a restaurant?

J

Jen Nelson 05:35

Yeah, I worked at a few restaurants in the U.P.

E

Ed Clemente 05:36

You know my family owned a restaurant forever.

J

Jen Nelson 05:40

I know that. Yes. Bowling Alley bar.

E

Ed Clemente 05:46

Yeah. It was there for like 80 years. Yeah, I shouldn't tell you this, but like, let's just say, today, I couldn't work at the age I started back then. We had to work there his family. And as you know, Jeff Donofrio, who you should mentioned, you had a brief overlap with when you left here to go work with Business Leaders from Michigan, right?

J

Jen Nelson 06:11

Yes. So yeah, when I left MEDC, about four and a half, five years ago, I went over to Business Leaders for Michigan under Doug Rothwell's leadership, who has been a tremendous mentor of mine for years. And Doug retired, and I had the great fortune to work with Jeff Donofrio for about a year, which was awesome to learn from him too. And, you know, his style and his approach, especially just coming from within within government. So, and he helped with the transition, the Governor's transition and, you know, part of that was an economic development, so, and workforce development, which I know is a passion of his, so I had an opportunity to learn a lot from him in a short period of time.

E

Ed Clemente 06:54

Yeah, obviously, friends with Jeff as well, but I also was a good friend of Doug Rothwell, I really

like Doug, I liked his style, even when he ran the MEDC, I knew him back then pretty well, too. So as he helped Michigan out in a lot of ways. So let's talk a little bit more about, you know, your kind of role. So you're sort of more of the inside facing sort of person, when you say at the MEDC, a little bit.

**J** Jen Nelson 07:20

I am and you know, that's something that Quentin and I when I came back to MEDC, we said Quentin will be more outside, and I'll be more inside, which works out great. I'm passionate about connecting with people and employees, frankly, I mean, you know, we, have to spend a lot of time ensuring that our employees have the resources and tools and they have what they need, especially in this really stressful time in our lives. So I liked connecting with employees. So I was like, this is great, I can be you know, internal. But I do get out externally, I had previously at MEDC. And I told, you know, Quentin, I'm happy to jump out if I need to. So I do get to get out of the quote unquote office as well.

**E** Ed Clemente 08:05

And I think that, even with that, you're by being in the position you're in and I know I talked to you about this a little bit once before, but you really, in a weird way, you're probably more 360 of everything that goes on, because it's sort of even though you don't directly are involved, but it's somehow filtered through your leadership team, right, that you will find out and have to know about it.

**J** Jen Nelson 08:28

Yeah, exactly. And, you know, as COO, you have to be comfortable knowing being an inch deep, right, but a mile wide. So I know a little bit about a lot of things. And I'm comfortable with that. And you're right, there are a lot of things that flow through me. And you know, so when people say, Well, what do you do as COO, and we have our strategic plan as an organization. But what I always say is, you know, a strategic plan on paper is great, but we really need to focus on implementation and execution. So I've kind of approached it from implementing our strategic plan, focusing on our people in the organization, ensuring that we're providing growth opportunities, ensuring that we are building teams that are driving our strategic plan. I'm also looking at our processes and how can we be more customer friendly? And how can we find efficiencies in our processes? And looking at our tools that we have, we have so many tools from an economic development perspective, which is great, but how can we ensure that they're flexible so they can reach all parts of the state? And then also, finally, is taking a look at our internal metrics? How are the metrics that we're setting driving the behavior for our overall outcomes that we hope to achieve as an organization and as a stat. So I kind of pull it all together and people process tools and metrics as a big focus for my job.

**E** Ed Clemente 09:58

You know, and I skipped over one thing in your background. You mentioned it quickly, but I wasn't, I didn't emphasize it. But you're an attorney. You did work for Dykema or no? [Yes.] I wasn't sure

J

Jen Nelson 10:12

Yeah, I worked for Dykema for three years in the Corporate Finance Group. And Dykema actually did some work for MEBC, which is how I got connected in to MEDC's work. So yeah, still some really good friends over at at Dykema. And, yeah, it was a fun time. I'm a recovering attorney now.

A

Announcer 10:32

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E

Ed Clemente 10:48

Let's get back to your points about the, because in order, I think, to see inward you have to be you have to have a healthy view of the outside face too. I mean, like like you just said, you just can't be navel gazing, right? You have to also be saying, well, that's maybe what we're thinking about, what are we really projecting out there? [Right.] And that's going to be a challenge because the MEDC, I always tell this, the MEDC is almost like being say, not a legislator, but every year is different than the previous year. You can almost never have the exact same circumstances, even shorter than that sometimes from year to year. So how do you kind of adjusting? Is that a big challenge?

J

Jen Nelson 11:35

So this, I just had this conversation actually today and I said, you know, economic development is a space where you have to be comfortable with change. You have to be comfortable with priorities shifting, market shift, you know, priorities shift locally, regionally. So you have to be nimble. And I think that's really important. So it's when you're in this role, or working for economic development, you have to be comfortable with change and shifting priorities, which I think keeps it really exciting. And one of the reasons, you know, I wanted to come back to MEDC because you can actually see and feel the work that you're doing. It's really tangible. So it's really exciting to be part of that, and helping our state grow. So yeah, you know, Ed I think that, you know, MEDC from sometimes from a headline perspective, it's viewed as, you know, just kind of hunting for larger, you know, significant investment and job creation projects, which is a part of what we do, and an important part, but there's so much else that we do at MEDC. You know, we focus on small and medium sized businesses, we we're helping our communities. We are connecting opportunities from a talent perspective, I think you just had Kerrie Ebersol Singh on a podcast talking about talent. So there are a lot of things that MEDC is doing, in addition to kind of these large headline projects with large investment and job numbers. So I think that's really important for people to realize, and from an operations perspective, for me, one of the things that we did with our recent realignment here at MEDC, as we said, you know, micro and small business, tech and non tech are really, really critical to Michigan, right? They're the the singles and doubles that we're hitting all the time. And once in a while, we'll get that

home run, but all these singles and doubles. But we had to align our people within the organization and stand up a small business department, but then also ensure that we're dedicating resources to small business. So if that is, you know, part of our strategic plan and a focus area for us, my job is to ensure that we have the resources and the tools and the people to support delivering, you know, for small businesses as an example. So yeah, it's really exciting to see where we're MEDC is heading and getting into some newer spaces in a more holistic, intentional way, such as small business. And, you know, these are these small businesses are the ones that we see on Main Street, right? And, and we're visiting and we have, you know, family and friends that are working at them. So from, you know, Alpena to Traverse City to a Owasso to Calumet, I mean, just all over the state. It's, it's really tremendous, the work that we do.

E

Ed Clemente 14:33

Yeah, and, you know, the macro picture, obviously, can only survive, if there's a micro story sort of behind it a lot of times, and, you know, I always think of the economy as more of a mosaic where you can see the picture, but it's made up of all these little tiles too, right that helps create that visual, so that people sort of understand. So you know, I guess the term people use a lot now it's like ecosystem's, right? And vertical integration and things like that where, those are all going to lead into the small business sort of opportunities. And they should be thinking strategically as well as how they can tap into these things.

J

Jen Nelson 15:16

Well and I think, you know, going back to it's an and conversation. It's large and small, it's and communities and, and talent. It's, it's and, and, and sometimes we get to this or, where we just focus on one thing and then, you know, then few years later, we shift to another that's kind of that pendulum. But I try to keep it more of as and conversation from an economic development perspective, so small and large, because as you pointed out, you know, right now we have 11 large transformational projects in our pipeline, with about \$74 billion in potential investment and roughly 27,000 direct jobs. That's, that's excellent, but what this also does is it you know, the existing supply chain in Michigan will have opportunities, our main street businesses, right, and our communities, because when you when you attract these projects, it's not just about that particular companies, with a supply chain, the communities and the people here that will all benefit from that investment here in Michigan. So keeping that top of mind when we're talking about our successes, and really connecting it back to, you know, the holistic view of economic development, which I will say, I think MEDC does well, not every state has community development, business development, marketing, talent, kind of you know, all under one umbrella. So I think that makes us unique and provides us with a competitive advantage as we're trying to attract and grow business here in Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 16:44

Yeah, and I would even say, I don't know if you sort of entioned it in your list there, but tourism. Even though tourism is not a traditional sort of hardcore business, but it is in Michigan. Because I mean, honestly, anyone that's not from Michigan, you know, we're one of the top tourist states in the country, and that with the rise of sort of digital nomads, there's never been a

better opportunity for people to want to work here. I'll give you a good example, is one of the guests I interviewed came through Quenton, he is Eric Roberts, he's up a he does a startup sort of incubator up in Traverse City. But two of his board members or advisers were two people that worked for Google. And they had a little bit of Michigan connections, but they both moved their whole families from Silicon Valley to Traverse City. And they're still working for Google. And I mean, so I don't think there's been any time in history when anyone could do those kinds of things so far away from home base.

**J** Jen Nelson 17:45

Right, which is really, really cool, which is why it's also important, right, that we have the amenities that people want in these communities. You know, as an example, I know Alpena, which I think some of our team was just up there. But there's a new restaurant and market-rate apartments above the restaurant, but it's the Red Brick Tap and Barrel, that MEDC helps support. But again, it's ensuring that we have these restaurants and places that people want to go. So if they do want to live here, but work for Google, they still can take advantage of some of that, you know, kind of big city life and these small, smaller towns.

**E** Ed Clemente 18:24

Yeah, there's an I think the generations, both Millennials and Gen Z, are much more excited about making an impact in their community and in a way, they're more civic minded than my generation was. But I do believe they, they have a much stronger conscious about, you know, the circularity of manufacturing and sustainability and all those kinds of things and local government, you can do that a lot easier.

**J** Jen Nelson 18:49

Right. You know, Ed I was thinking about this, too, when we're talking about tourism, and it made me think of outdoor recreation too, as in, you know, an industry that we're really focused on at MEDC. Working with Brad Garmon, at the outdoor rec with the Outdoor Rec Office. And that's a tremendous opportunity for Michigan and a lot of people think, okay, outdoor rec, that might just be more of a northern role, but I would say it's, you know, it's statewide. But, you know, going into that northern role again, I mean, that's where, you know, kind of I'm from obviously, and I relate to but, you know, I think folks in the U.P. or people view the U.P. as a place where it's, you know, primarily tourism, hospitality and, you know, timber. But it is, I was just up there for a week and it is fascinating, everything that's happening throughout the U.P. from an advanced manufacturing, a defense, semiconductor perspective. All these, you know, companies up there that are just doing so much for Michigan's economy, and it's, it's just really nice to see. And I think we have to talk more about how diverse actually the economy is in the U.P. as well. So Calumet electronics is one of those right, in the semiconductor space. Just really great company and I am really excited to see their their growth throughout the upcoming years.

**E** Ed Clemente 20:12

They're on my horizon for potential guests. I just, I just haven't locked them in yet, so I'm



they're on my horizon for potential guests. I just, I just haven't locked them in yet, so I'm working on it.

J

Jen Nelson 20:18

Yeah, their CFO is is phenomenal, so I recommend you connect with him.

E

Ed Clemente 20:22

Yeah, and, you know, is there any other sort of partners or stakeholders you wanted to plug while we're in this process? Because we're going to just down to the last couple of questions for you.

J

Jen Nelson 20:32

Yeah. You know, we can't do our work without the our regional and local partners. So if it's Marty Fittanti and you know, at Invest U.P., if it's Randy Thelen at The Right Place, Jennifer Owens at Lakeshore Advantage. JoAnn Crary at Saginaw Future, Maureen Krause, at the Detroit Regional Partnership. I mean, I could go on and on and on about all of our partners throughout the state, but this is definitely a partnership. And one of the things that we're doing to from an organization perspective is ensuring that we're regionally relevant. We recognize that you know, a project in the U.P. is going to look very different than a project in Detroit or in southwest Michigan. So how can we make sure that we understand the region's priorities, and we as a state are helping to advance those priorities, and not be a barrier to that? So really excited? Working with our partners on that as well.

E

Ed Clemente 21:24

I should mention that every one of those partners you mentioned was a previous guest. [Really?] Yeah. I'll have Marty, Randy, Jennifer, Maureen, Saginaw, JoAnn Crary, yeah, they were all on at one point. Yeah, systemically, we're trying to cover the whole state, right? [Right.] So, last couple of questions for you, though, if you could go back and talk to your 17 Upper self what would you have told yourself? Because I mean, what city did you grow up in? It's even smaller, right? Was it a small town grew up in?

J

Jen Nelson 22:06

Marquette.

E

Ed Clemente 22:07

Oh, you did grow up in Marquette, I thought you said a little north.



J

Jen Nelson 22:10

A little bit north of Marquette, but about 14 miles north of Marquette really kind of in the middle of nowhere, really beautiful, but I think it was a population of like our family and deer, you know, that's what it consisted of. But, I yeah, Marquette is where I grew up.

E

Ed Clemente 22:29

So what would you tell yourself, if you're going into high school, or in the college again?

J

Jen Nelson 22:33

Yeah, I would say, you know, definitely branch out. And if it if it seems like a little bit uncomfortable, maybe take the risk. Keep things in perspective and live in the present. I think we can get caught up in, maybe this is just me, but I think we can get caught up in, you know going so fast and looking at the next thing and not just living in the moment. I think as you know, Ed, this could be a whole nother podcast, probably not for Michigan Opportunity. But this actually came real for me. About nine years ago, I was 36 and I was diagnosed with breast cancer. So, and that was, that really kind of puts things in perspective. And, you know, to ensure that we're enjoying all aspects of our life. I love to work, but I really love you know, my time and time with my family and my friends. And it is a constant, it's constantly on my mind, and I'm always trying to balance it. And if I come out of balance a little bit, I try to correct it. So, you know, I would say just, you know, take the risks, try to live in the moment and not, you know, not just, you know, kind of on your phones or, you know, kind of looking for the next best thing. Just appreciate, you know, what we have and where we are.

E

Ed Clemente 23:56

I think actually before phones, I think everybody had more downtime. [I agree.] Even time to like not sure what you were going to do, which is actually where you had good discussions. You know, instead of being constantly wired or connected you, when you had downtime, you just talked about stuff. Sometimes if you're just outside watching a baseball game or whatever. [Exactly.] Yeah, it's a bit of a challenge. So you might have already answered this question, but you might have a secret spot. Maybe you don't want to tell us your secret spot, but what's your favorite spot in Michigan or festival?

J

Jen Nelson 24:32

Favorite spot in Michigan is in Curtis.

E

Ed Clemente 24:36

Yeah, Between The Lakes.



**J** Jen Nelson 24:38

Yes. So my husband's family they have a place on North Manistique Lake. We're actually heading up there. So yeah, we love being up there. As soon as I really cross the the Mackinac Bridge though Ed, I just feel like weight has been lifted like off my shoulder. It's just like, I'll roll the windows down and you know, some fresh air and just Yeah, so I love spending time in the up and especially in Curtis.

**E** Ed Clemente 25:03

I used to have property in Germfask, that's why I know we're it is. [Oh yeah?] What is it, Six Curves Rd, or whatever it is. Ten Curves Rd., right. Yeah, it was right off of there.

**J** Jen Nelson 25:12

I was actually on Ten Curves Road the other day, and I was trying to count the curves and I got 11. So, I don't know...

**E** Ed Clemente 25:18

I just know it wasn't straight.

**J** Jen Nelson 25:19

I know, I'll have to drive it again.

**E** Ed Clemente 25:22

Well, anyway, again, going to thank you very much, Jen Nelson for being, she's the COO, as well as the Customer Experience Officer for the MEDC. Thanks again, Jen for doing this as with a lot of fun, and thanks for taking time to talk to us.

**J** Jen Nelson 25:36

Thanks, Ed. This was great.

**A** Announcer 25:39

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