

Ep.49 - Menaka Abel

Tue, 2/8 6:24PM 23:33

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

michigan, request, support, state, food, ed, people, dewitt, ingredients, offer, foods, expansion, menaka, lasagna, question, innovation, holland, growing, responding, business

SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Menaka Abel

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 00:28

Hello, my name is Ed Clemente. I'm your host today. It's my pleasure to have Menaka Abel with us, she's the Chief Financial Officer for Request Foods. Welcome to the show, Menaka.

M Menaka Abel 00:39

Thank you, Ed. Thank you so much for inviting me to the podcast and giving me an opportunity to share the Request story. It really is an honor to be here.

E Ed Clemente 00:48

I liked your story when you presented it, and we're gonna get into like your relationship with the MEDC, and how that you know dovetails into what Request Food's vision is too, because I think that's a great story for the state. But in a quick thing, if you just met somebody who met you at some Christmas party or something, and they go, what is Request Foods do, what would you tell them?

M Menaka Abel 01:11

Sure. So Request Foods is based out of Holland, Michigan, we have been in existence for over 31 years. We are a contract manufacturer of frozen foods and soups, mainly entrees. And we provide these to major retailers, wholesalers and food service providers. So what we primarily produce, are lasagnas mac and cheeses and soups. So out of say 650 unique products, about half of it comprises of soups, mac and cheeses and lasagnas. We've consistently been ranked as a tier one private label manufacturer, privately owned and operated second generation family business. And we employ approximately 1000, a little bit over 1000 employees. Very diverse employee base. Just a wonderful company, which with a rich history in Holland, Michigan,

E

Ed Clemente 02:19

You know, it's funny, I didn't even know that but it's a family owned business.

M

Menaka Abel 02:23

It is, I say second generation, but the roots Request really goes back to Bilmar Corporation in 1938, which was one of the largest turkey processors in Michigan. And Bilmar was sold to Sara Lee, and then our founder of Request, Jack DeWitt. So Bilmar was owned by his father Marwin DeWitt, and Jack started out Request. And sadly Jack passed away three years ago and now Request is led by his son Steven DeWitt.

E

Ed Clemente 03:04

Yeah. You know, and I think that's what's nice I think a little bit about the Midwest is there are some kind of big companies that are still owned by family members, especially on the west side of the state and especially food industry, like you probably know that better than I do. But there's quite a few different types of food manufacturers on that side of the state isn't there?

M

Menaka Abel 03:23

Absolutely. There are. And, you know, Ed when people think of Michigan, I think automatically they think of the auto industry. But we have a very strong ag sector in Michigan. And there are a lot of private businesses that's in the ag food business as well, and it's just a very thriving part of the Michigan economy.

E

Ed Clemente 03:50

Yeah, I mean, I'm when I was in the legislature, I was always impressed by the diversity on the types of things that are either raised or grown or manufactured in the state. You know, I always thought we were something like third and diversity in the country for states for, I think California, Florida, maybe are ahead of us.

M

Menaka Abel 04:00

M Menaka Abel 04:08

That's right, I think we're second in diversity for ag products.

E Ed Clemente 04:13

Yeah, no, it's a it's something you know, you think of automotive or you think about tourism, but agriculture is huge. [Absolutely.] Your side of the state with the Lake Michigan there, you get a lot more diversity of climate too. which allows a big variety of different things grown on that side.

M Menaka Abel 04:28

Yes. And we're very focused on using local suppliers, for our ingredients and the proximity as well as the quality and those relationships play a big part of our existence and expansion in Michigan.

E Ed Clemente 04:47

And I mean, it's funny, I mean, even how you got here, it's like your path is sort of unusual. It's, I think, you know, it's funny, I said this in other interviews, but I'm always impressed with leaders that sort of didn't start out in Michigan because I've lived in Michigan my whole life. But you can't you want to just kind of give a little bit about how you got here.

M Menaka Abel 05:08

Sure, yes, I probably have a little bit of a different history than most. I'm originally from Sri Lanka, it's an island off the coast of India used to be called Ceylon, for us older folks.

E Ed Clemente 05:22

And Serendib way back.

M Menaka Abel 05:23

Yes, so I came to the US to attend college during a time when a civil war raged my home land. That was a really rough time for us growing up there and living there. I came to the US to attend college at Hillsdale College in Michigan. And that's how I came to Michigan. So professionally speaking, I have my CPA, a licensed CPA, earned that when I was working for Price Waterhouse. And since then, I've worked for a number of multinational companies, traveled internationally extensively. Most of my career has been focused in finance and international finance, but I also spend some time in strategy and sales. And about two and a half, three years ago, I came to Request Foods and have had the privilege of leading their finance and it functions. I also serve on two boards, that two very different boards, both nopt for profit one is the West Coast Chamber, which promotes their local businesses and so there's

a very symbiotic relationship with Request and their business community. And then the next is something that's very near and dear to my heart. It's a local charity called, not for profit, I should say call Kids Food Basket that supports under nourished, underprivileged kids, providing them with good nutritious food.

E Ed Clemente 07:04

Well, that fits into your job, too. [Absolutely. Absolutely.] Yeah. And as an Italian, I know you guys make lasagna. So I think I've had your lasagna. I don't know what stores you're in for sure. But I wouldn't doubt it. I've had it.

M Menaka Abel 07:17

Yes, we are in most major retail stores.

E Ed Clemente 07:23

Um, you know, you did skip over one thing, though, I think it's important. You spent a lot of time going to South America too, right,

M Menaka Abel 07:29

I did. I spent a lot of time in with my previous employer in Latin America, as well as Asia. So a lot of time in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia.

E Ed Clemente 07:43

Yeah, I always loved to know people's international backgrounds, especially for work, because it is sort of interesting. And it also shows you how Michigan is the state for International multinational corporations too.

M Menaka Abel 07:55

Absolutely and as I mentioned to you previously, Ed Request is a very, very diverse employee base. Many of our employees are from overseas. We have probably 1/3 from Asia, another third from South America. And so it's, it's very energizing to work in such a diverse work with such diverse work members.

A Announcer 08:26

You're listening to The Michigan Opportunity, featuring candid conversations with Michigan business leaders on what makes Michigan a leading state to live, work and play. Listen to more episodes at michiganbusiness.org/podcast.

E

Ed Clemente 08:42

So what is the strategy that you know Request Foods, they're doing to put you guys in this position to work with the MEDC.

M

Menaka Abel 08:49

So as I mentioned before, Ed, Request has been blessed with 30 plus years of continuous growth. But as Request prepares to enter its next phase of growth and expansion, we have outlined a multi-year multi-project plan that consists of, we're targeting almost 200 jobs and entails over 200 million in investment dollars. So this expansion consists of four main projects, an expansion to our current production facilities, a brand new manufacturing plant that is targeted to produce what we call ready to eat, single serve meals. A new space that we're entering in the cold storage warehouse to support warehousing within our frozen supply chain, as well as a pre-treatment wastewater pre-treatment center that is going to support these expanded manufacturing. In food, wastewater is a big infrastructure necessity. So as we looked at all of these expansion initiatives \$205 million in investment is not chump change, right? So this is where we partnered with the MEDC to compile a very competitive offer, in order for us to be able to expand in Michigan.. We did look at states outside of Michigan, as you know, the south is not bashful in pursuing food industry businesses. And we had some very competitive offers from South Carolina, looked at it very seriously. They were a great team to work with very nimble and very compelling offer. But the partnerships and the relationships that the DeWitt family has in Holland, and its commitment, not just to the local community, but to Michigan, I mentioned our relationship with our suppliers, our local business, as well as, you know, local governmental connections. We just wanted to make that investment in Michigan. So whether MEDC came into play was putting an incentive offer proposal together that made it possible for us to stay and expand in Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 11:50

And when, you know, you talked about that, but probably some of the challenges too, in this environment somewhat is workers too, right? How are you guys? I mean, I imagine you already pointed out how diverse your talent is already. Is that going to be a bit of a challenge? Or you think you got that under control?

M

Menaka Abel 12:09

That is going to be the challenge. And I think that's like the million dollar question for all employers right now is how do we attract new workers. And it's especially important to us because our incentives are based on net new job creation. So this has forced us to evaluate our hiring and retention practices with a new lens, because it's not just getting new people, but it's holding on to the people that we have. So we've looked at a couple main areas now we at Request offer a very competitive and compelling total compensation package, from a strong starting base to great benefits. We are also looking at making modifications to our hiring and shift scheduling to attract folks who prefer a part time or more flexible schedule, looking at

remote work for our salaried staff. We're also focusing on enhancing our training and education programs. We think that's really, really important at looking at giving folks the tools to be able to continue their career aspirations from apprenticeship to leadership programs. But I think that that's what really sets Request apart from other employers is our culture here. We have a we're a faith-based company, but we have an exceptional culture of teamwork, collaboration and support that is nurtured by strong family values. Every team member is a member of our family. They're not just a number. And I think that makes it very unique, that we're looking at the whole person and not just the professional individual. So we continue to, you know, work with places like Lakeshore Advantage like the chamber to be able to bring folks to West Michigan. West Michigan is a great place to live and work and raise a family.

E

Ed Clemente 14:24

Yeah, my friend just actually moved out to outside of Muskegon, and he loves it. And he's lived in this area his whole life, and he never really thought he'd live out there. And now he's like, I don't know what took me so long. The, you know, you you also sorta touched on a couple of these things. But you might want to elaborate on something maybe I didn't ask about, but is there any sort of future trends or disruptors that you see on the horizon? We've already talked about workforce and sort of the great resignation and you know, and how people are really reassessing what they want to do. And I'm sure that's been all accelerated because of the last couple years of unusual new normalcy.

M

Menaka Abel 15:08

Right. And I think, you know, the food industry experiences change so much. And the trends are continuously evolving. And you will, you can see just from the ingredients, the type of meals right from plant-based meat alternatives to organics and kosher. So we are responding to our customer demands for those types of food in our manufacturing processes. We're constantly looking for automation, a higher level of automation, given the labor shortages that we're experiencing. And throughout the supply chain, whether it be with packaging, ingredients, energy utilization, and wastewater, trying to be as green, as efficient and optimizing those resources and really responding to our customer demands. I think what, again, what sets us apart is how nimble we are in responding to those trends. So I don't know if I mentioned this before Ed, at Request, we have an R&D team that works with our customers to develop new recipes and ingredients and come up with these innovative solutions that track with the food industry trends. Not many contract manufacturers offer those value added services.

E

Ed Clemente 16:48

And I would imagine in today's world when you talk about sustainability and food, and you've mentioned how you want to use as many local sourced sort of products as possible. And not to pick on lasagna some more, but lasagna has a lot of ingredients. So I would imagine, you know, my mom used to make lasagna all the time when I grew up. And I know how much we had to go shopping together to find all the different things that needed to go in. Quite a bit.

M

Menaka Abel 17:13

Yeah, yes, we make our pastas fresh in house and source a lot of their produce, you know, produce locally for for it as well.

E Ed Clemente 17:24

Well, you're gonna be surprised, but we're getting near the end here. And I just had a couple questions for you.

M Menaka Abel 17:30

Yes, of course.

E Ed Clemente 17:32

So you obviously have had more unusual career than most people how you got here and how you, you know, ended up in Michigan. And but if you could maybe go back and talk to yourself and tell you what advice you'd give yourself, or even what you give somebody mid-career to as you're reorganizing sort of the HR opportunities at your own, you know, facilities now.

M Menaka Abel 17:54

Yes, and, you know, this is something I continuously try to impress upon my, my son. And it's around the concept of change, and responding to change with innovation and continuous, a continuous improvement mindset. And I keep telling him, nothing changes, if nothing changes. So if nothing changes, we stay the same, right? We don't grow and we don't get better. We need new ideas, if the last 18 months taught us anything, it was how the world can change in the blink of an eye. And the agility and innovation that we needed to respond to that was what defined success. And so innovation and continuous improvement determines really how successful an individual or a company can be. And so I would encourage young folks to pursue innovation, think differently. It's okay to question. It's okay to challenge. It's okay to experiment and try new things, I did. And one of my favorite authors, Peter Drucker said, if you want something new, you have to stop doing something old. So that would be my advice.

E Ed Clemente 19:25

Well, you know, that's always my actual favorite question for everybody. Because it's always a different answer from somebody. Because we don't get that opportunity to go back and talk to ourselves. We really want to help someone out if we can, you know, as we move through life, and, you know, you summed it up nicely, because I think that, you know, change, if you're not doing anything, you're not growing. So, yeah, it's growing somehow in whatever direction.

M Menaka Abel 19:55

And I think that's what we, with our expansion plans here at Request, that's what we're doing.

We are changing. We're trying some things that are new and all in the spirit of innovation, continuous improvement, diversification in order to be able to provide our customers with nimble, innovative solutions.

E Ed Clemente 20:22

And your last question, I know in Sri Lanka, I don't think they get much snow. But what do you like best about living in Michigan?

M Menaka Abel 20:30

I just love the Michigan summers, you just can't top Michigan summers. And I honestly love the seasons coming from a tropical island where it's 90 degrees all year round. And while it sounds wonderful, there's a beauty about the seasons and Michigan seasons. So wonderful. I love the topography of Michigan, you know, from the Pictured Rocks of the U.P. to the lake shore and Lake Michigan, it's just gorgeous. And there's also there's also something to be said about the people of Michigan. There's an authenticity and a warmth in Michiganders that you don't find elsewhere. So I love this state that is now my home.

E Ed Clemente 21:19

Yeah, and I appreciate that, as a minor in geography, that use the word topography. Because I love the topography of Michigan, it's usually not something people really appreciate, because it's such a weird sort of area that makes us really unique as a state. Anyway, so once again, I want to thank Menaka Abel, she's the Chief Financial Officer for Request Foods. And I want to thank you again for taking time and giving us all your great advice. And thank you for making Michigan a great state to be your company in too.

M Menaka Abel 21:56

Thank you Ed for having me here. And as we talk about the MEDC and the role it played, I just wanted to use this opportunity to thank the team at the MEDC that made it happen for Request Foods. I want to give a shout out to Julia Veal, Jeremy Webb and Bill Kratz of the MEDC. I would be remiss if I didn't give a shout out to our legal counsel, Warner, Norcross and Judd who really helped us through this process. And we also had so much support from our local partners, Holland Charter Township, The Michigan Ag Department, Ottawa County, Lakeshore Advantage. It really took a village to pull these incentives together and everyone supporting the growth of Request Foods and it's just just a great story. And I wanted to say thank you to the team as well and to you Ed, for giving me the opportunity to be on this show.

E Ed Clemente 22:56

Well, you guys got a great story and keep up the good work and we'll be looking for your next expansion.

M Menaka Abel 23:01
Great, thank you so much.

E Ed Clemente 23:03
Join us next week to hear Wayne State University President Roy Wilson and the university's unique mission, as well as his international life as a doctor and his upcoming new memoir book.

A Announcer 23:16
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.