

# Ep.3.15 - Katy Locker

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## SPEAKERS

Katy Locker, Announcer, Ed Clemente

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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 00:29

Hello, I'm Ed Clemente. Today, we have a special guest, Katy Locker. Appreciate you being here. Katy. I know you're the CEO for, I know, there's a couple of names in here, but I know Bridge Michigan but also the Center for Michigan and then BridgeDetroit, too, right? [Yep.] Yeah. So, why don't you to do a better job than me? And sort of explain each one of those maybe separately that might help us get a better idea?



Katy Locker 00:57

Sure. I'm happy to. I am the CEO of the Center for Michigan. The Center for Michigan is a nonprofit that was formed 16-17 years ago, and really 2011 I think, I'm going to get it wrong. [That's all right.] And it was formed by Phil Power and he was really concerned about divisiveness in politics. It's kind of funny to think about it years ago, that was his big concern, and so he said let's create sort of a think tank, he called it a think and do tank, to work on this and that nonprofit started publishing a newsletter. And that newsletter employed journalists because Phil Power's background is that he owned a group of local newspapers that served Michigan, and he hired as the first CEO John Bebow, who is a journalist. So they started publishing a newsletter. The newsletter, what was then called Bridge Magazine, and is now today called Bridge Michigan really became the tool that we think is the most powerful thing we do to connect Michiganders with information about what's happening in our community and making Michigan better. So Bridge Michigan is now our really signature product of the Center

for Michigan. And it is a nonprofit news organization. We could talk a lot more about what it is. And it's been around for, this fall, 12 years. In addition, we learned a lot from building out Bridge Michigan. And three years ago, we helped BridgeDetroit to launch. It's editorially independent of Bridge Michigan. But it's the same idea. How do we provide quality information for Detroiters by Detroiters just as we're providing quality information for Michiganders by Michiganders?

E

Ed Clemente 02:57

Yeah, and I did know Phil, when he ran the Observer and Eccentric back in Lavonia way back in the day, because I used to be a head of a chamber of commerce down river. And we used to do a lot of interaction with them just because of media, they'd be announcing a lot of our stuff, even though they covered a big broad area. You're right. He had 10 newspapers or something.

K

Katy Locker 03:20

I think it was even more than that. [Was it?] It was a lot in the end, yeah.

E

Ed Clemente 03:24

Well, I remember when he created the Center for Michigan. So before the Bridge Magazine part was created, he came in and testified, I think with John when he just hired John. And so there in a couple of committees. But you know, it's funny, you talk about the polarization then. I just listened to a podcast talking about the founding fathers, and was mainly about Hamilton and Burr. And it was the same complaints. There was polarization. So I think it's part of America in a way. But I think what you guys do is pretty critical, especially because of the concept. And maybe you could even touch a little bit about how the medium has changed maybe of media too, and I'll get into your background, but you've been there how long now? Not too long, right?

K

Katy Locker 04:19

I have been working with Center for Michigan as an employee for about three years. I've only been CEO for about six months.

E

Ed Clemente 04:26

Okay, okay. So anyway, I'm gonna get more to your background. But let me suggest that you explain the medium because basically, you're just online right now?

K

Katy Locker 04:39

Yeah, that's right, yeah. Bridge Michigan is one of the largest nonprofit civic news publications in the country. So as measured by audience and membership, but it's all online. Over 120,000 people subscribe to our newsletters. So you can subscribe at [bridgemicigan.com](http://bridgemicigan.com) And you get

a daily newsletter with a summary of the news that will take you to our stories. You know, the big traditional newspapers do something similar now too, you can sign up to get that daily newsletter. Ours is totally free. Because we're a nonprofit is totally free. There's no firewall. The biggest thing you have to put up with is we are a nonprofit. And part of how we exist is that we ask folks who value us to make donations and we take donations from \$5 to \$500. To more than that, but a portion of how we run is through folks who read us and donate. But we make sure because our mission is to serve Michiganders that we're available. So over 600,000 people in an average month will come and read our content. We employ editors and journalists that most of them have been at traditional newspapers at some point in their life. I think we all know, I think folks who would listen to this would know, the journalism industry has shrunk dramatically in the last few decades. It is less than half the size in terms of number of journalists working than it was at the turn of the century. And there is no sign of that slowing. So we are very proud employers of journalists who cover business education, environment, health and politics, the key civic information for Michigan, and we are doing that every single day. Our reporters are producing five, six stories a day for Michiganders to learn more. And something similar is happening obviously at a smaller scale in our partner newsroom at BridgeDetroit, also fully online, also free to anyone who wants to read it at bridgedetroit.com. And we find people through the newsletter but also people find us because they're Googling important topics in Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 07:04

Yeah, I'm going to, at a later question, I'm gonna ask you more about how you think the medium of the internet affects news in general. But I also want a little bit about you and your background, how you got here. I guess I'll go way back but you were born in Detroit? I thought I read that.

K

Katy Locker 07:22

Yeah, yeah. Grandmont number one. Blackberry until I was four years old. And then I was raised in Midland.

E

Ed Clemente 07:31

Yeah. So you've been all over the place. You're in West Branch, Ferndale, Oscoda, Holly. You've moved around quite a bit.

K

Katy Locker 07:38

Well, I've lived in Detroit and in Midland, but I'm a true Michigander and I've had lake houses in various places. And then I went to law school in Ann Arbor I went to U of M.

E

Ed Clemente 07:52

But that was post, you went to Cornell, right?

K Katy Locker 07:55

Yeah, I have an undergrad and Master's in Public Administration from Cornell.

E Ed Clemente 08:00

I saw that it was an NP. One of my Bachelor's is in PA. I used to be a city manager actually, at one point.

K Katy Locker 08:08

I thought about being a city manager at one point.

E Ed Clemente 08:10

Ah, it's got a high turnover rate. Let me warn you. [Yeah.] So let's talk a little bit too about primarily the two foundations you worked for, and you can put in plugs for both of them, because I'm sure you still have great relations with both. But I think you were at Hudson Webber at first, and then the Knight Foundation?

K Katy Locker 08:32

That's right. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, my interests, from the point that I decided to stay at Cornell and get my Master's in Public Administration was really public policy. And then I spent the very beginning of my career in state policy at the California court system. And so when I landed in Detroit and started doing policy, I had the incredible good fortune of meeting Dave Egner, who was then running the Hudson Webber Foundation. I went through a process but he invited me to become a program officer for Hudson Webber. And I ended up working with him for five years, including when he was running the New Economy Initiative, and I was vice president of programs for Hudson Webber. So it was my introduction to philanthropy. I never imagined I'd stay in it for over a decade. But Hudson Webber is exclusively dedicated to Detroit projects, and is the Hudson's department store for people who have been around in Michigan long enough. It's the family's legacy.

E Ed Clemente 09:37

Who's the Webber?

K Katy Locker 09:38

J.L. Hudson did not have sons to take over. He had, I think they were nephews. So Richard Webber and his brothers were really the predecessors to Joe Hudson Jr, who was not actually the son of the original Joe Hudson, who was really the leader in Detroit for decades, he just

the son of the original Joe Hudson, who was really the leader in Detroit for decades, he just passed in the last couple years, but an incredible leader. He was on the board for years together with his brother Gil and great opportunity for me to work with great civic leaders and members of the board. I did that for five years. And then I just really wanted sort of a wider lens. And I had the opportunity to join the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which is a national foundation, but has eight cities in the US where they have local program directors, because the Knight brothers started Knight Newspapers, which became Knight Ridder Newspapers. And so any place that they owned newspapers have extra investment from the national foundation. And I ran the Detroit giving for night for five or six years. And that's when I really got introduced to nonprofit civic media. Although I actually had already met John Bebow and Phil Power when they were starting the Center for Michigan, they came to Hudson Webber. But we started to work more closely together. And it all happened. So yeah, 11 years in philanthropy and I left in 2019 just needing a break from it. Did they own the Free Press or the News or do they own the JOA? I couldn't remember. They owned the Detroit Free Press. It proceeded the JOA, yeah.

E

Ed Clemente 11:24

And Dave Egner, obviously still very important guy in the region. [Yeah.] He testified in my committee when he created the New Economy Initiative. It was pretty landmark. You might know this, but how many foundations? I think they were like four or five or maybe eight, I can't remember.

K

Katy Locker 11:34

It was 10. And I think in the end, it ended up having probably 12-13 foundations, a mix of local and national all, I think it was founded basically about 2008. I want to say. [I know exactly.] To some extent, but really with that recognition, I'm sure you've talked about it on this podcast of the overall economic picture, particularly for Southeast Michigan, which is where New Economy Initiative was working, needed to get a broader perspective on what the new economy was not to be solely reliant on autos. And so that was the vision for what was at first, I think, a \$50 million or \$100 million fund that they built out, it grew over the years, they had multiple phases.

E

Ed Clemente 12:32

Yeah, I think it was housed at the Southeast Michigan Community Foundation.

K

Katy Locker 12:36

Yep. It was. Yeah. Yeah. Mary Wellen was the leader of that.

E

Ed Clemente 12:40

Yeah, I used to work with her, Mary. Yeah. But you know, the name of my committee, you probably don't remember, but it was called the new economy and quality of life committee.

That's why we had him come in. But you gotta remember too, this is the backdrop of almost the second worst crisis since the Depression, with the housing bubble, and all that, and that's why I think it was created because it was sort of like the phoenix, like, the foundations had always done a lot of stuff, but they stayed in their lanes more. And I think this is a pretty creative solution to start opening up entrepreneurship and things like that. [Yeah.] Yeah, it was a fascinating time, because everybody was looking for any way to succeed out of that mess. [Yeah.] Yeah, go ahead.

K

Katy Locker 13:25

I just said, the beauty for me about 11 years in philanthropy was that exposure to so many different leaders and ideas, and so I got to learn so much more about what was happening in the city, the region and the state and it set me up well, to be able to then be part of the Center and Bridge Michigan, because I have tons of overlap now, when the reporters are talking about various stories, I usually am like, Oh, I know that person because we used to do something with them. And even though I do not do any part of our reporting or editing, I enjoy engaging in the discussions and being able to talk to them about what's going on.

A

Announcer 14:04

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E

Ed Clemente 14:20

So couple things. And because we're MEDC. I know you've got one reporter pretty dedicated to sort of economic development issues. And yeah, why don't you just mention, because I think that that's pretty important. Because economic development is a pretty complex topic, period. I've been doing it my whole career. And it's kind of hard to explain to anybody what it means sometimes. But that's good you have a dedicated reporter doing it.

K

Katy Locker 14:50

Yeah. Paula Gardner, who's a really experienced Michigan reporter. She's been at a number of newsrooms across the state joined us when we launched Business Watch. We have different dedicated newsletters and beats for a variety of topics. But we launched Business Watch right in 2020 when no other news was happening. But she's done a great job of writing about COVID's impacts on business. So Paula is our dedicated business reporter and editor of Michigan Business Watch. And it means every single day she wakes up to pay attention to the issues that are happening in the state. She does work closely with MEDC, because she is writing about the kinds of investments MEDC is making regularly. And applying the lens that a reporter applies. And so as I understand it, we have a pretty good relationship with MEDC, because she works to describe an investment, compare it to investments across the state in history, maybe compare it to what's happening in other states, she's gonna report on where we focus on being nonpartisan and balanced. So she's going to report if a community has some criticism, which

she's also going to report, why people are supporting it. And each of our beat reporters becomes really informed about the topic to the best they can, of course, and then really figures out who their sources are. We're very proud that our reporters know Michigan. And they work collectively, even though Paula is our business reporter. She is edited by our senior editor, David Zeeman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning editor who had a long career with the Detroit Free Press. And then they all work in partnership, if it's a political story that somehow has a business lens, Paula is going to be partnering with one of our three capital reporters.

E

Ed Clemente 16:49

Yeah, that's one of the things that's nice about Bridge is, almost embedded in almost every story, there's like three or four other stories that you can link on, that are similar to that topic, but they might be off on a little different tangents.

K

Katy Locker 17:02

Yeah, that's the part I find the news interesting. I think all of us that have been in policy are news junkies. But the thing that I've liked, as I've learned a whole new industry is, it is a new industry and nonprofit news is different than for-profit news in lots of ways, alike in others. And we have a team that thinks about once we get you to come and read that story that maybe you found through our newsletter, but maybe you saw on Twitter or Facebook or through Google, how do we get you to see that we have other content and become a regular reader, trust us, understand who we are, and come back and then in our best hopes become a donor as well.

E

Ed Clemente 17:42

Yeah, and I think that's sort of the transition, I guess, to the digital age is that in some ways, people can be more in their silos. But in others ways, it can be much more holistic with hyperlinks and things like that, that it's almost like going to a Wikipedia site sometimes. And you start going down the rabbit hole, like, Oh, that's pretty interesting. I love traditional newspapers. But it was also, what was on the top of the fold and front page. And, editors still had to make those decisions. Now, it's almost like you could find content for a lot of different topics in the digital era, I would guess.

K

Katy Locker 18:25

Yeah, you can. I think that the question that continues to come up and will come up for a long time is you can go down a digital black hole, right, you just follow links, you Google something. But there's a lot of efforts by a lot of people, good and bad actors, to get your attention. And so how do you know that you're at a trusted source? How do you know that you're at a source that has journalistic ethical principles defining what you're reading? So we are nearing 12 years old, BridgeDetroit is nearing three years old. And part of our goal is to have more people understand that this does apply journalistic standards to all of our reporting. So you can trust us, you can know that we're reporting for Michigan, we are nonpartisan, we reveal all of our funding sources, and our funding sources have no influence on our editorial. It's the trick of

doing that kind of research online or listening to a podcast or finding something on Google, you still have to pay attention to your sources. And we're very intentional about our mission and our values being serving Michigan, and not serving investors and not serving any political interests.

E

Ed Clemente 19:41

Yeah, in the old days, they would have said the wall was supposed to obviously exist between advertisers and content. But also, I always get nervous when I read stuff on my feed, like on my phone because it's sponsored. [That's right, yeah.] Because then I'm like, Oh, I wonder who's really paying for this. So you always wonder about those things, but you've already come into my last few questions here for you, but any other future trends you see for your industry as you go forward?

K

Katy Locker 20:10

You know, for the industry, I would say, part of what made me want to step into the role at the Center and in leading these publications is that for-profit media is shrinking. And for-profit media, which has respected, incredible journalists working for it also is having to use more of that sponsored content. More content that is not civic news is sports and entertainment, which is valuable, but isn't what's driving our policy. Those models are going away in a lot of local communities, there's nobody. So I really believe nonprofit civic news is the future. That is the trend across the country. We have been around for 12 years and my job and as I take over from the founding CEO, and as our new board chair takes over for the founding board chair, Phil Power is to build this out so it's here for for generations, I think everybody should be watching in their local community who is funding their news, and if there's a nonprofit media partner in their local community, to be sure to support it. We've already talked about it, Ed, but I'm am concerned about people's silos of information and how do you make sure they're getting that broad perspective. The only thing I'd add towards the future is really how much response we get to our climate change reporting. We have a incredible reporter Kelly House who just won Michigan Press Association's Reporter of The Year award. And she does all of our environmental coverage. Anytime she writes about climate change, we get such a response. Michiganders, I think are rightly concerned about what's happening to our environment as a result of climate change. And also speaking, to the name of your podcast, the opportunity Michigan might have, given that other places may see even more extremes from climate change. So we're paying attention to that and investing in our environmental reporting beat because we know how important it is.

E

Ed Clemente 22:21

Yeah, it's interesting when we had Neil Hawkins on, [Yeah.] and he talked about how it's almost ingrained in the private sector now, for the ESG, how you attract talent is people who are millennials and Gen Z. That's what they are looking for, to get a job, right? They don't want to go to a company that doesn't have their view on the holistic world somewhat, but it's a changing world. It's very interesting. So the last couple of questions for you, and this is one where you can talk to the young Katy at Midland High School. I don't know if you went to Dow. [Oh, I went to Midland High. I was a chemic.] Midland High. Okay, good. Oh, good. I know there's always a big fight between the two. [Yeah.] But what would you tell yourself? Because



your career, I mean, you probably had really good grades, you got into Cornell. So maybe your path wasn't like mine, for sure. So what would you tell yourself now at 17, or someone today, what they should go into?

K

Katy Locker 23:29

You know, what I try to tell young folks that come and talk to me is I sure didn't know what I was going to do. You know, 17-year-old Katie would never have said, Oh, 11 years in philanthropy and then you're going to run a nonprofit news organization. But what I do know is that from that moment when I realized I was interested in policy, I focused on getting the skills. So I got my MPA and then I got a job in public policy out in California, and then I got a law degree because I could see the value of it. So I just kept building the skills and being open opportunity, what felt like the right thing to do, and I followed my gut quite a bit. And had I written a plan and been really rigid about it. There's so many opportunities I never would have had. So I just I feel like once you have that skill set and once you know what your passions are, you have to be a little bit flexible about what's possible.

E

Ed Clemente 24:34

Yeah, I always like to think of myself as a compass heading I didn't know existed. [Yeah.] Because I was pretty sketchy in a lot of my jobs. The last thing is you've lived all around the state and you've come back you lived in beautiful California for a while. What do you like best about the state?

K

Katy Locker 24:56

I think leaving is one of the things that allows you to appreciate it. And twice, I moved to California and twice moved back. Ultimately, I know I'm a Midwesterner. There's just a style and a friendliness. I happen to live right next to downtown Detroit. And I love that when I go out for a walk on the Dequindre Cut, my neighbors and strangers say hello to me, say good morning, wish me a good day. And I go to cities on the coasts, and I don't have that experience. I also love cities. I've lived in Detroit now for almost 20 years. But I like that Michigan has this great urban experience, and I can get arts and culture and I'm going to the Tigers game on Friday night. And then I can drive not very far and have some nice lake life and experience that too. So I'm a true lover of Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 25:50

Well, it's a great state. I agree with you. And I want to thank again our guest, Katy Locker. She's the chief executive officer for the Center for Michigan, Bridge Michigan and BridgeDetroit. And thanks again, Katy for all the good work you guys do and keep it up. And thanks for doing the podcast today.

K

Katy Locker 26:07

Thanks Ed

THANKS, ED.

**E** Ed Clemente 26:09

Join us next week where I guess we'll be Herb Drayton. He's the executive director at Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses here in Detroit.

**A** Announcer 26:19

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