

Ep.2.8 - Michelle Bekkering

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Michelle Bekkering

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, I'm your host, Ed Clemente and we're very fortunate to have someone actually in Washington, DC, and that's Michelle Bekkering. She's the National Engagement Director for the US Global Leadership Coalition. Thank you very much for being on the show today, Michelle.

M Michelle Bekkering 00:43

Ed, I'm delighted, thanks for letting someone from Washington DC join.

E Ed Clemente 00:47

I think you're our first guest ever from the heart of our country, so thank you for being on the show today. Let's start with something simple. But you know, the US Global Leadership Coalition is a bit of a mouthful. So if you were to bump into somebody who had no idea, never heard of it before, what do you kind of tell them real quick? So, you know, just over a quick question?

M Michelle Bekkering 01:08

Sure. Well, the US Global Leadership Coalition is a nationwide bipartisan organization, and we're dedicated to America's global leadership. Why do we invest in this? Why do we support this? Because we understand the return on the investment it has here at home, both on our economy, as well as our stability and security.

E Ed Clemente 01:32

And, and I know that you tend to have a lot more, sort of like three big kind of pillars, but I know business is one of them. And that's kind of what the show is about economic development. You want to elaborate a little bit more with the business angle of what you guys go.

M Michelle Bekkering 01:49

I'm glad you asked that because I think often times when we're having discussions around foreign policy or national security, right, we think of the military, we think of our top diplomats. But USGLC, one of our pillars is, as you mentioned, the business community, right? So when we're talking about why does it matter for Americans that we are involved in diplomatic or development initiatives overseas? We do that because we're informed by, right, the business community, right? What does it mean for trade? What does it mean for job creation? What does it mean for each state to have America have strong bilateral and trade ties overseas? And we couldn't be informed by that if we weren't working with the business community, who so personally feels the effects of this.

E Ed Clemente 02:46

Yeah, and in fact, you know, I know there's quite a few Michigan, has quite a few large international players, obviously the automotive industry, but furniture and food production, and I know food's a big one for you, because you're actually a Midwest person. You're from Iowa originally. So I mean, you know how important food is and growing of crops? And why don't you touch a little bit about those products? Because I know, you guys focus a lot on that. I've been on a couple of your calls where you've talked about food and international trade with food even.

M Michelle Bekkering 03:19

Absolutely. And Ed I'm glad you brought it up because if you didn't, you know I would have. I like to think of myself as Iowa's ambassador. Yes, listen, I'm a proud Iowa farm girl, right? My parents still live on the family farm, you know, growing soybean and corn. And to your point, I think when you grow up in communities like that, and I know as you mentioned, Michigan's a strong agricultural state. We recognize right, America feeds the world, right? Our Heartland feeds the world. And increasingly, when I look back at the 20 plus years I've spent now in international development, I see so clearly, that correlation between food and hunger and malnutrition, and what we see overseas through rising conflict and insecurity. And so it is always really important to one, look at what is the role, you know, food is playing and in America in some ways, our agricultural commodities have been such a strong diplomat for the

American people, right? We are generous, you know, we are helping with those initiatives to make sure there's food security, and we also recognize the business aspect of it right, and what it means to a state. So if I look at Iowa, if I look at Michigan, what I'm constantly looking at in my line of work in my advocacy, is how much of your exports of your goods of your services of your commodities, how many jobs is that creating in the state right? How much of your GDP is based on that? And I'm always impressed. I look at a state like Michigan 19% of all your jobs are created by trade. Right? And Michigan is such a leader, right? If I look at the country itself, Michigan is I believe the country's sixth highest, or excuse me, it's the state economy that's had the sixth highest growth. Why is that? It's because of your agriculture. It's because you're a leader in manufacturing and research and development, right? And this is important, and it is something we keep in mind when we're looking at what is that global landscape?

E

Ed Clemente 05:40

And, you know, you say those, like the global field, but you were actually working, and weren't you, I don't know your official title, but I know you were pretty high up with USAID, right? Can you explain what that is? Because I think a lot of Americans don't know what USAID is, and you are right there at the forefront of that, especially internationally.

M

Michelle Bekkering 06:01

Yeah, so I spent the last four years at the US Agency for International Development. I was actually nominated by President Trump and then unanimously confirmed by the US Senate. So for those of your listeners who might not know USAID is the world's largest bilateral donor of development and humanitarian assistance, right. So we work overseas to reduce poverty, again, to you know, feed people, to really hit so many of our development goals. But what I learned at USAID and in the programs I oversaw was this, there is a remarkable link between our foreign assistance and our economy and stability here at home. What do I mean by that? I oversaw our economic growth and trade portfolios, as well as our private sector engagement. And when I looked back, at US assistance globally, I can tell you right now that 11, out of the top 15 trading partners of the USA, of the US today, were former recipients of US assistance. Those initial investments we made in building up their countries, you know, building up their abilities and their societies has paid off multitudes now, in what trade, the trade we're able to have with these countries. You know, this in Michigan, when I look at Michigan, and you look at the top five countries, you know, you trade with three again, we're former recipients of USAID. So why is that? We really believe that USAID in this in the added us here, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. What do we know? We know that for every dollar we spend overseas in building up a country, right, helping them develop their economy, socially, politically, it means we often times, we'll save \$16 on the back end, if we were required to come into an area and address a conflict through military means. You know, those are, those are numbers you can't ignore, right? And so we believe in development and diplomacy. We understand this forward investment of creating, frankly, not only a secure and stable world, but also recognizing that it affects and benefits everyone.

E

Ed Clemente 08:27

You know, you also sort of, you might have to explain the acronym W, D, I, could you give it to me just say what it is.

M

Michelle Bekkering 08:35

I'll give it to you, the spirit is there. So the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, and this is just, Ed, its one of my passions. So WGDP, so what is that? So in 2018, under the Trump administration where I worked, we actually launched the first ever whole of US government approach to globally, economically empowering women. Why? Again, we did the research, we said, you know, what are ways that we can meet our development goals? You know, we looked at the National Security Strategy and recognized again, those investments and what they meant for our security and prosperity here at home. And we really something I had known for years because I had a strong background in women's empowerment and equality, which is any investment you make in women and girls, pays dividends. There's a multiplier effect. Why? Women, when we when we looked at the work we had done overseas, we recognized that when we were investing in women, they were turning around investing in their families, which in turn, helped their communities and their countries. So through WGDP, we work together in concert with the whole of government, and we said let's set aside, let's focus funds. We created the WGDP fund, and let's focus not only resources, but programs specifically on economically empowering 50 million women by 2025. And we did that by ensuring one, women had access to opportunities to be in the formal trade that women entrepreneurs had access to credit and then finally, that the regulations and legislation that existed allowed an open playing field for women to be part of the global economy. And in already two years, we had already exceeded our expectations and our metrics for those those annual impacts we hoped to have.

E

Ed Clemente 10:39

And you know, just this is you only have to give a few seconds on this, but I had to bring it up, you were with the National Security Council, too. How did, that must have been interesting. How did that happen?

M

Michelle Bekkering 10:52

It was fascinating. So earlier in my career, this will date me now. But I had the great opportunity, I worked in the National Security Council under, then the National Security Adviser, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, and this was of course under the George W. Bush 43 presidency, and I will tell you this, it changed the entire course of my career. So when I started out as this Iowa farm girl, I knew I loved politics, I knew I loved government and early on in my career, as I mentioned, I had an opportunity to serve at the NSC under Dr. Rice. And at that time, I worked in the Europe and Eurasia Directorate. And it was a very important time in America's history. Why? It was just recently after 9/11 and so there was this awakening and this consciousness in America that what was happening overseas had an absolute direct effect on us here at home. And unfortunately, in the events of 9/11, right, it was on our citizens, it was our homeland, it was our security. And so under Dr. Rice, I learned so much about this idea of the Freedom Agenda, of really enhancing America's leadership abroad. And the reason we were doing it is because we recognized first, we wanted every human being to have dignity, that every human being should have the right to have an open and free society. And we also recognize that this was important for global security and stability. And so it was at my time at the NSC where I

started really looking at political transitions. How do we look at countries, at that time for me, it was the former republics Ed, the USSR, you know, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Belarus, and looking at them and saying, how do we work with these countries now to shore up their democratic institutions, their economies, to put them on the path that they can one day be stable, prosperous nations, and partners of the United States.

A

Announcer 13:04

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E

Ed Clemente 13:21

Why don't you explain a little bit about each state that you work with? You have like a little board? Is there any people you want to mention? I know Michigan, I full disclosure, I'm actually, I'm one of your advisors, I think, for whatever for the state of Michigan, but I know you have some other really big names on there, too.

M

Michelle Bekkering 13:35

Ed, I would, I would say you're one of the biggest names.

E

Ed Clemente 13:38

Ha ha ha, I don't think so, but I appreciate it.

M

Michelle Bekkering 13:41

No, and one of the I would say the strength, of the USGLC is that we are focused, right? We are built upon our membership in the states and Michigan is one of our primary, our proud members. And so what does this mean? So, like everywhere, we recognize that sometimes when we sit in Washington DC, right, we can be in the bubble. And so if we're going to advocate on issues like foreign policy on international development, it's really important for us to be just directly tied into the voters, into the states, what matters to you? And so in Michigan, all of our work and advocacy is really founded on the strength of our advisory committee. I think many of you know our, our state chair who is Hank Meyer, I know that's a household name here.

E

Ed Clemente 14:31

Just shopped there last night.

M

Michelle Bekkering 14:32

There you go, see? and Quenton Messer Ed, I know you know, Quentin well, right, the CEO of MEDC and again, I just want to thank both you and Quinton for having me here on today to talk about this. We also have elected officials, right, Lieutenant Governor Gilchrist. We have corporate members, we have Marian Reich, I know she's with Global Ties Detroit. So we have a big membership Tom Cooney, he's the Vice President over at General Motors. This is important to us because again, we need that business acumen, right? We need the elected officials to tell us why this matters for the state. And I would be so remiss if I didn't mention our strong veteran community right now through USGLC, we have the Veterans for Smart Power Initiative. This is 30,000 American veterans, many of whom are in the state of Michigan, who again, serve as not only as advocates, but are advisors on why it's so important, specifically, from a military perspective, why we should be investing in development and diplomacy.

E

Ed Clemente 15:42

And, you know, one other aspect too, I know the Nezar Jamal is like your key point guard here for Michigan, but he does quite a few, I think he does the Midwest, right? I think he's got several states. But I do know that, you know, your organization has really helped put on some great seminars, as I mentioned, I've been on a couple of them myself, and we try to help work with you guys to help with our congressional delegation. And we should also put in your former co-chair, who passed away recently was Senator Levin, who I'm sure you knew personally, probably because he did a lot with the military and a lot of other things, but he was just a great outstanding person, as well, as a great diplomat too.

M

Michelle Bekkering 16:25

Absolutely, and can I say that I was remiss for not mentioning him myself, not only to the state of Michigan, but to all of us in the country.

E

Ed Clemente 16:35

Yeah, I worked with him quite a bit, you know, in his capacity, but he was really sort of a moderate sort of Democrat that really cared about the country first, you know, and he was well respected here in the state. And so, I'm down, we're getting close to the end, but I still got a couple big things. I want to make sure, one thing I like to ask all the guests is, what trends are disruptors, you've touched on a few of them, but obviously working out of DC, you probably see it very differently than we do in the state. So anything you want to...

M

Michelle Bekkering 17:06

I'm gonna say two things that come to mind, one from sort of my professional perch in DC, but also one that's really of personal importance to me. So let's start with trade. Let's start with China, right? We're all coming out of a global pandemic, right? What did we see? Economies everywhere were affected. Global supply chains were disrupted, we're still building out of that. And throughout all of this, we were starting as Americans, and especially I will talk for someone

who again, was in the US government at that time, we were really, even before COVID, starting to look at our trading landscape, and really looking at the trade imbalances we saw. And always trying to be forward-thinking, especially in the business sector, as you have to be in your organization, really worried about as Americans, right, either as manufacturers as commodity traders, are we losing our edge, right? Especially when you look at a country like China, right? Who might not always, in our estimation, play by the same rules, when it comes to currency valuations, et cetera? And so one of the things I think, as Americans, but also global community, we're all thinking about is what is the future of trade, right? What is the future of business and manufacturing? And I'm specifically thinking about the idea when we talk about so often, can we bring all of the jobs home? Can we just produce all materials in the United States? Let's onshore everything. When the optimist in me would like to say, yes, but the realist in me says, it's not going to be possible and frankly, we couldn't afford as American consumers to even buy those products, right? What is business nowadays? When you look at trade, it's really a partnership, right? I need some of your supplies, you need to mine, guess what, here's our end product. So one of the things we talk about a lot is the idea of instead of offshoring, can we ally shore? How can we work more closely with our global partners? I'm thinking of the automotive industry, right? You've got the big three there, right? How are we working with Japan, with South Korea, with Australia, right? When we're looking at semiconductor chips or or any project we're looking at and saying, can we sort of reorient who our trade's with, who our trade is with, and who we're doing business with? And so I think this idea of bringing in more into the the discourse, this idea of, instead of just offshoring or onshoring, let's talk about the medium. And as someone who really believes strongly in bilateral relations, you know, this idea of ally shoring to me, it's something we need to give much more attention to. And then on a personal note, it is something that I was really proud of the last four years the administration is, we really took targeted measures to look at what is the future of the American worker? Right? As I started to mention, you know this in Michigan, we are increasingly becoming an automated country with automated industries, high tech, AI. What does that mean though, for the American worker, anyone who's been in a factory for 30 years to someone just starting out in trade schools? Are we, not only as education systems, as the government, but specifically as corporations and businesses? Are we looking at how we one, help those workers who may have been in an industry for a very long time gain or evolve their skills so that they can still be in these industries, in good paying jobs will also bringing on, you know, the next generation of our skilled trades workers. And this is something I think we need to give more attention to.

E

Ed Clemente 20:58

Yeah, you know, and I know, we're almost out of time. But I wanted to also let you plug a couple of your national board members, I know that one of my favorites, Colin Powell passed away too, not too long ago, another really fascinating, great leader. And but I know you've had quite a few of the Secretary of State's too, I don't know who's on your coalition now, I'm not sure.

M

Michelle Bekkering 21:23

I and again, what a loss for the nation, what a loss for USGLC to lose our long term, you know, lead Gen. Colin Powell. So to your point Ed, so our board is, again really represents I think the foundation of USGLC. We have a lot of CEOs from Fortune 100 to 500 companies, so we've got that business sector. We also have a National Security Advisory Council, this is so important,

right? These are former three- and four-star generals, who again, give us that important sort of background on you know, if we're not investing in diplomacy and development, what's that going to mean? So we have a lot of names, you will know of, right? Admiral Stavridis, General Anthony Zinni, and then of course, our diplomatic corps. We are so proud that we have almost every living US Secretary of State right now involved in our leadership. So of course, my boss at one time, and then Secretary of State Condi Rice, Madeline Albright. And so this is really important to us, it is high level, and that matters for a reason, because they were recognized from the highest levels of government, from the military, from businesses, that what we're doing at USGLC, it matters.

E Ed Clemente 22:52

And your last question is more of a personal question, but if you could go back, maybe talk to, if you could even do a short commencement speech, or go back and talk to your high school self, what advice would you give yourself this time for any sort of people in that talent group workers you just mentioned?

M Michelle Bekkering 23:10

Where do I start with giving my teenage self advice Ed, that's an open question. No, you know, the thing I will say, and it's something I maybe didn't grasp until a bit later in my life, is how important it is to pursue opportunities that are a little bit outside of your comfort zone. So I grew up in rural Iowa, right, I understood politics, I understood, you know, state government, but it wasn't until I was actually in college, that I for the first time was introduced to the idea of why don't you study abroad through my college in Iowa, I had a unique opportunity to spend a semester in Amsterdam in the Netherlands, studying at a university there. It changed my perspective, it changed my idea of what I wanted to focus my career on. And it also made me much more open minded and understanding of the world around me. And I think Ed, to be very candid with you, I've got a six year old now, and I think this generation is already so much further than our generation is as far as understanding global connectedness, technology, right? All these things that I'm still learning. But it's going to be different for this generation, right? They are already, as a curriculum, you know, learning other languages, being exposed. But I'd like to tell people, especially, you know, kids who are in high school now, kids who are starting college, in today's world it is more interconnected than ever before. My chief suggestion and tip to you is learn about the world, expose yourself. Because no matter what profession you are in here in the United States, there will be a relation.

E Ed Clemente 24:55

Yeah, every international trip I come back, not only learning something new but also appreciating America at the same time, and appreciating their culture as well, which you can only get by boots on the ground over there.

M Michelle Bekkering 25:08

Ed, I couldn't agree more. I have even more love and respect for my country, to your point, every time I come home. I've lived overseas, you know, I've run programs overseas, and every

every time I come home, I've lived overseas, you know, I've run programs overseas, and every time I come home, I am even more thankful for the rights and privileges we have in our own country.

E

Ed Clemente 25:27

Yeah, I'm so thankful all the time. But I want to thank you again, once again, our guest today was Michelle Bekkering. She's the National Engagement Director for US Global Leadership Coalition. Thanks again, Michelle for taking time, I know you've got a busy schedule, and I appreciate you taking time to talk to us today.

M

Michelle Bekkering 25:44

Ed, the pleasure was mine. On behalf of USGLC, thanks to you and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and we're just delighted to be working with you all.

E

Ed Clemente 25:54

Join us next week where I guess will be Brandee Cooke-Brown, she is the Executive Director for 100k Ideas, and it's based in Flint.

A

Announcer 26:03

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