

Ep.2.11 - Wafa Dinaro

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Wafa Dinaro

A Announcer 00:02
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 today, Ed Clemente, and welcome to the show and we have actually a longtime friend of mine, Wafa Dinaro. Welcome to the show. Wafa.

W Wafa Dinaro 00:38
Thanks, Ed. I'm excited to be here.

E Ed Clemente 00:39
And you are the Executive Director for the New Economy Initiative, which has been a longtime favorite foundation of mine, even when I was in the legislature. But just for those who don't know what it is, what do you kind of tell people if you go to a party, and no one knows what you're talking about what you do?

W Wafa Dinaro 00:56
Yeah, so we are we are an organization that works with foundations to raise money to grant

Yeah, so we are we are an organization that works with foundations to raise money to grant new and existing nonprofits that support entrepreneurship and business growth. Essentially, our entire goal in life is to support small business in Southeast Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 01:15

So I know the catch basin sounds like it's mainly the Detroit metro area, but can you elaborate on that a little bit?

W

Wafa Dinaro 01:23

Yeah, absolutely. We've been very focused on doing work in the City of Detroit. And that's really proved to be successful and it's been very fruitful. And because of the success we've had in growing the small business ecosystem in the City of Detroit, we're really looking to move outside the City of Detroit, and grow and expand the ecosystem in Wayne County.

E

Ed Clemente 01:47

I know you've had a lot of background in this, but why don't you talk most recently where you came from? I know you're very involved with Wayne County government. Why don't you give a little plug about what you did over there, too.

W

Wafa Dinaro 02:00

Yeah, absolutely. So I was the Economic Development Director for Wayne County and a big part of NEI's push to move into Wayne County as a result of some of the work that I did while at Wayne County. We, as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, we saw some really big gaps in the small business ecosystem and the business support organizations, mainly outside the City of Detroit. Detroit had a very, very vibrant business support organization, community, very healthy ecosystem. But as soon as you got outside of the borders of the City of Detroit, businesses that didn't have a lot of places to go to get support to be able to apply for things like the PPP, the grants, the different loan programs that were available. So we really started to see the gaps because of the pandemic.

E

Ed Clemente 02:52

And I imagine you work directly with the County Executive Warren Evans.

W

Wafa Dinaro 02:57

Absolutely. Warren Evans is was driving the ship and Warren Evans has been just an incredible leader for the county and has really gotten the county to a place where they are financially secure. You know, before Warren Evans took leadership in Wayne County, Wayne County was

on the brink of bankruptcy, and he really was able to steer the ship and Wayne County is doing incredibly well now.

E

Ed Clemente 03:25

Well, now we're gonna get to the part how I really know you. [Yes] Back when I first got elected to state rep, my next door neighbor, so we're all located the legislators are located in House Office Building. And my next door neighbor was a guy named Gino Polidori, who was the State Rep and former Fire Chief for Dearborn and you were his staff person at that point, I believe when it first started.

W

Wafa Dinaro 03:51

I was. So Gino was my State Rep. I was living in Dearborn at the time, I grew up in Dearborn. And Gino was probably the only person who I would have worked for at the time. He was so incredibly nice and not a politician at all. I mean, he was just genuine he was straightforward he was just an incredible person. And he really wanted to see good things for the State of Michigan. He really wanted to see good things for the City of Dearborn and he was Dearborn through and through. He was just an incredible person. And he was a great boss to which really helped.

E

Ed Clemente 04:33

Yeah, I really got along with Gino pretty well, we we hung around together even down in Dearborn and he used to come to my family's restaurant quite a bit back then, Clemente's.

W

Wafa Dinaro 04:43

Was that your little Italian caucus that you guys came up with?

E

Ed Clemente 04:48

No, he had his own Italian caucus. I'm a Down River guy. Dearborn doesn't like to be part of Down River sometimes. But the thing too is I think he graduated from the prettiest High School in Michigan. Why don't you tell people what that high school is?

W

Wafa Dinaro 05:03

Absolutely. Actually, I graduated from Fordson High School and this year is the 100 year anniversary. So it's a big year for Fordson High School. It was built in 1922. It was, you know, I didn't know you're going to ask me about this, otherwise, I would have come prepared with some historical facts, but it's an incredibly beautiful building. And my favorite part of that building is the library. There's some artwork, there's tapestries in there, there's hand carved

tables and chairs. It is a beautiful, beautiful building. I highly recommend anybody go and visit it during non-school hours of course. It's like a museum. It's it's gorgeous. It's an incredible place to go to school.

E

Ed Clemente 05:47

Yeah, I didn't even, actually, I've never been inside. I've only seeing it from the outside. But I know everybody that's gone there loves it. And I know that you also, one other plug we're going to put in, but for who replaced you, your friend from high school, right? And she's doing really well now to Fayrouz (Saad.)

W

Wafa Dinaro 06:04

Yes, yep. When when I left working for Gino to move to Washington, DC Fayrouz took over for working for Gino.

E

Ed Clemente 06:14

And your name is not a common name. So you actually speak a different language? Probably you grew up with that language, right? Didn't really speak in Arabic.

W

Wafa Dinaro 06:24

Arabic is my first language. I always tell people I speak Arabic and a little bit of English. So Arabic is is my native tongue.

E

Ed Clemente 06:32

And were you born here? Were you born overseas? I've never you told me once I forgot.

W

Wafa Dinaro 06:37

I was born in Lebanon. I came here when I was three and grew up in Dearborn amongst a lot of other Arab speaking people. And it was just an incredible, it's an incredible community. I loved growing up in Dearborn. I loved you know, being able to speak Arabic and be able to eat at some of the best restaurants in the state, and I will argue with anybody about that. Dearborn has the best food in the state.

E

Ed Clemente 07:07

Well, you know, from there, I know you said you went to U of M, but then what took you on the path, you have a really unique path that kind of qualifies you in a lot of different ways for this job, but you went from U of M to where then?

W

Wafa Dinaro 07:21

So I went from U of M to I moved out to DC. I got a job with the Department of Defense and then went to grad school at Georgetown. I got a Master's in Public Policy, and while I was in DC, working for the Department defense, I got to travel the world. I got to live in Southeast Asia and the Philippines and Jordan. And it was just an incredible time. I was young, I was traveling the world it was it was great. But eventually I had to I wanted to come back home and Michigan was calling my name. And you know, I had to leave all that behind to come back home.

E

Ed Clemente 08:02

Well, I know you've had a very interesting past, and we appreciate you doing this. So how did all this lead you to get into economic development? First of all, because that's what the MEDC is about so...

W

Wafa Dinaro 08:13

Yes, so it was, I kind of stumbled into into economic development, it was never really a career path that I had thought about. It was never really something that I felt in my bones, where, you know, a lot of economic development folks say, you know, this is what I've always wanted to do. I wasn't really one of those people. It was, I started working for Wayne County actually doing real estate work, selling off some of the excess property as a part of, you know, getting the county back into better financial standing. So I sold, I started working selling the excess property. And from there, I started work dabbling into some of the Brownfield work and I got pulled into exclusively taking over the Brownfield work for Wayne County. And from there, it was just, you know, this looks interesting, I'd really like to start working on some of this economic development stuff. And eventually, I took on more and more responsibility and eventually became the Economic Development Director for Wayne County. So if you would have told me this thing in college, I would have said nah, economic development is not really my thing. But I absolutely love it. It's so impactful. It's so important, and it's really one of the most rewarding one of the most rewarding careers because you see immediate, immediate results from your work.

E

Ed Clemente 09:39

Yeah, it's funny economic development is sort of like the invisible hand for almost everything. But it's not like people usually get degrees in it. You know, my, my undergrad was in public administration, and then my grad school degree was in organizational leadership, but they both really were foundationally involved in economic development, but you just don't really know it till you actually hear somebody who does economic development.

W

Wafa Dinaro 10:06

Yeah. And, you know, economic development is it, I wouldn't even say it's an invisible hand, because you see it everywhere you see the the impact of the work everywhere. And you see

because you see it everywhere you see the the impact of the work everywhere. And you see how important and during the pandemic, it was all of the economic development folks who got together and said, small businesses needs support, let's figure out how we can support them and let's figure out how we can keep them alive and going. And you know, how we can weather the COVID-19 storm. And I think a lot of businesses survived because of economic developers and organizations like Wayne County Economic Development, the MEDC, and all of the other, and, of course, the New Economy Initiative, which did a lot of COVID work. So a lot of these all these economic development organizations were really instrumental in saving the businesses that could have died because of COVID.

A

Announcer 11:04

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E

Ed Clemente 11:19

What is the New Economy Initiative, you explained sort of what it does, but I know from its inception, there's a lot of people involved in making it be created.

W

Wafa Dinaro 11:28

Absolutely. So like I said, we're foundation funded and our, you know, we've had a lot of foundational support over the years. The New Economy Initiative is housed at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan. But we're also funded by organizations like Kresge [Foundation,] Kellogg [Foundation,] the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, William Davidson, JP Morgan, Hudson Weber and the Ford Foundation. And those organizations have really come together and are collaborating to make sure that NEI and organizations like NIE continue to support the small business ecosystem, and continue to support building small businesses in the area. I mean, over the last 12 years, NEI has made \$130 million in grants and this is all funding that's come from these foundations. So they really, none of this work could be possible without the foundation supporting NEI. And it's it the work has been, has been instrumental in keeping the small business ecosystem going in Southeast Michigan. And this has really become a model for not just other places in the state. But nationally, what these foundations have done with the New Economy Initiative is is a model that's that other parts of the country are trying to replicate.

E

Ed Clemente 12:51

Well, I mean, just from that list you just read to the foundations, it's sort of like a who's who of foundations, because a lot of those foundations actually do a lot outside of Michigan too, even though I think every one of them was headquartered here, except for maybe the bank one, Chase. But I think all the other ones are fundamentally started here in Michigan.



W

Wafa Dinero 13:11

Yeah, I mean, all of these foundations have some kind of investment in Michigan and want to see some kind of, want to see growth in Southeast Michigan specifically. But yes, they are a combination of national and local foundations. But they are all invested in Southeast Michigan small business. And most of them are invested in Michigan as a whole and the small business ecosystem in the state as a whole.

E

Ed Clemente 13:38

Yeah, I remember, even when the sort of grand bargain was going on, I don't know if you're back in Michigan yet, but they played a very pivotal role in moving to have a lot of the challenges that Detroit was going through at that time.

W

Wafa Dinero 13:53

Yeah, and I don't think we talk enough about how important it is for the for those like public private foundation relationships and collaboration. I think there's, you know, a lane for each one of those, but I mean, everybody should be moving in the same direction, and there needs to be collaboration. And I think the foundation in our region has done a great job of collaborating and coming to the table and bringing the stakeholders that need to come to the table to talk and the foundations have really been filling in the gaps that government can't fill, and that the private sector can't fill. So the foundation has been really pivotal, the foundation world has been really pivotal in filling in those economic development gaps across the region.

E

Ed Clemente 14:42

Yeah, I had a professor once who told me government is does the legitimacy and private sector does the urgency. So that does leave a gap because they're both not exactly doing the same thing. But that's sort of where NGOs or foundations, higher education, individuals sort of like, you know, individual funders even sometimes step up and do stuff too. And I think that's, if anything Michigan, the Detroit area, are pretty famous for public private partnerships now. Fact Tte bridge, the new bridge being built, actually is a good example of that. So, so anything else where you see on your future horizon, like for these small companies, or, you know, these, you know, where do you think the future is going to be for them?

W

Wafa Dinero 15:32

I mean, the future is in small businesses. I think the future's looking bright, I think small businesses are starting to look, it's starting to look brighter for small businesses. I think we're really, I think, in the final phase of COVID, and I think we're finally getting back to normal and small businesses employs over 50% of workers in this region. And I think it's important for us as NEI, as a New Economy Initiative, and as economic developers to continue to support small businesses because they are a big, they're big employers, there are a large segment of the employers. And I think it's just as important for us to put the resources into small businesses, as we do and to some of the larger organizations like, you know, the big autos and some of those larger organizations that bring in four or 500 jobs at a time. It's just as important for us to

invest in the small businesses that are bringing in 5, 10 jobs, but there's a whole lot of them, and they're really supporting our communities, our neighborhoods, our main streets. So moving forward, we're going to continue to support our ecosystem, continue to build the business support organizations, and continue to make sure that startups, who want to come to Michigan, there's a clear path, that they can go to any of these business support organizations, and there's no wrong door, because they're all collaborating, they're all working together. And we want to make sure that Southeast Michigan is the place to start your business. So if you are a tech startup out of Silicon Valley, you want to come to Michigan, if you are, you know, a widget maker from Nashville, you also want to come to Southeast Michigan. We want to make sure we make it easy for small businesses to start to grow, and to thrive here in Southeast Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 17:35

Plus you, beyond that, you also work a lot with I think underserved populations that don't normally get the chance, right?

W

Wafa Dinaro 17:42

Yes, absolutely, that is our biggest focus. We really want to make sure that communities of color, underserved communities, have the same support services that some of the more affluent communities have. And we want to make sure that, you know, the the person who can make the ethnic dish or those cupcakes has all the support they need to build up their business and, you know, be able to thrive and eventually hire employees and continue to grow here and stay here in southeast Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 18:16

Well, your last two questions, and you can elaborate this one, I say you get a chance to talk to your high school Forrdson Tractor Wafa back then, what would you tell yourself maybe differently to do this time? Or what advice would you give to anyone you know, who is like in that kind of similar path.

W

Wafa Dinaro 18:34

So I would say, don't limit yourself into what you think is out there. Don't limit yourself to a certain career path. Stay open, stay curious, and pursue what your what you think you like, but don't be afraid to pivot, don't be afraid to change direction, and go after, you know what you think will be fun. And if it's not go after something else. And I think that was a very millennial answer so?

E

Ed Clemente 19:06

Well, you know, I think that, you know, it's very similar when we asked that question to a lot of guests, but I think everybody would like someone to have been able to talk to someone like themselves who they are now. But it's kind of hard to find that person sometimes when you're

in high school, because you're usually, that's like not a top priority. Oh, what am I gonna do in the future? I don't know, I wanna hang out with my buddies right now or whatever. But yeah, it is a different sort of scope. And especially because, you know, English wasn't your first language too. So it's even a bigger challenge, as you know, especially coming to a new country, your whole family or whatever. You know, that was the same for my family somewhat, you know, it's, we just want to just be happy we're here, but then all of a sudden, oh, there's a lot more I can do too, right? The last question for you is pretty simple, but you already know the answer, but what do you like doing best in Michigan? Like if you, do I know you have kids, so where do you guys like going or what places do you like go in, or do you have any festivals, those kind of things?

W

Wafa Dinaro 20:11

So, we love, we love the Michigan weather. My favorite is summer. I love the Michigan beaches. I love going to the west side of the state to Sugar Beach. It's kid friendly. it's beautiful, you know, the water, the sand is warm, but the water is just a little cold, which is great. And you know, July and August. I love Lake Michigan. Lake Michigan is my favorite place to be. And if I want to go anywhere, it's quick, I can take my three kids in the car, it's a short drive, I don't have to hear them, you know, I don't have to hear them for too long in the car. So, its easy. Then we get to the beach, and they can run around and have fun. And there's a splash pad over there, so when they get tired of the sand, we go over to the splash pad. That's really Michigan beaches are my favorite.

E

Ed Clemente 21:06

It's a lot easier on your toes too not having all that sand in there. Well, with that, I want to thank again Wafa Dinaro, its very nice of you to come on the show today. You're the Executive Director for the New Economy Initiative. And congratulations on your new job, I should mention you've only been there a couple of months now or maybe more now.

W

Wafa Dinaro 21:26

A little bit more, but basically.

E

Ed Clemente 21:28

Well that's really great. And I'm so glad you're in that position. And I know you're going to do a lot of great things. And we'll hopefully hear from you in the future too, but thanks again for coming on the show today.

W

Wafa Dinaro 21:37

Thanks for having me Ed.

E

Ed Clemente 21:39

Join us for a special release episode with Martha McFarlane-Faes with the State Historic Preservation Office about the future of preserving Michigan history.

A

Announcer 21:50

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