

Ep.3.44 - Duc Nguyen Abrahamson

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SPEAKERS

Duc Abrahamson, Ed Clemente, Announcer

- 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, Ed Clemente, and welcome to the show. We're very fortunate to have with us today Duc Nguyen Abrahamson, she is the executive director of the Asian Pacific American Chamber of Commerce. Welcome to the show Duc.
- D** Duc Abrahamson 00:42
Hi, Ed. Thanks for having me.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:45
And I've know we've met a few times now. But I think that your organization is one of those really interesting ones. And why don't you sort of tell people quickly what the Asian Pacific American Chamber of Commerce is?
- D** Duc Abrahamson 00:58
Well, APACC will be celebrating 24 years of facilitating meaningful relationships between business owners with Asian heritage and US based companies and promoting the economic

advancement of the Asian American Pacific Islander Businesses owned by Asian Americans with heritage from China, India, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Vietnam, among other countries, Fortune 500 corporations, entrepreneurs, business professionals, cultural organizations and associations and political and government dignitaries have supported APACC throughout the years, and are the reason for our success. APACC is a collective voice for 30-plus Asian and Asian Pacific countries. We are able to do this through our strategic partnerships with Asian cultural associations throughout Michigan and nationally.

E

Ed Clemente 01:53

I don't know what other states are like, right? Is Michigan unique? Because we have a lot of manufacturing. So there might be more Asians. So like, why do we have 30? I didn't know it was that high.

D

Duc Abrahamson 02:04

Well, that's a collective voice for a multitude of Asian cultures. So we're talking about, there's different pockets everywhere across Michigan. What's very different from Michigan's Asian Chamber of Commerce as compared to maybe California or New York is yes, you are correct, we are heavily automotive based manufacturing, imports, exports. You know, not only are we the Motor City here in Detroit, but we also are a border state. So we do have a lot of import exports and manufacturing, here in Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 02:45

Yeah, because I remember even where I live, there's always was some kind of tier one or tier two Japanese companies, at least nearby where I live, because we're close to a lot of Ford and GM plants. [Yes.] But also I know that, like there's only five councils in Michigan and one of them is from Japan, which we're fortunate to have, I think.

D

Duc Abrahamson 03:07

Yes, well, yes. Yes, Shindo. Yeah, he's wonderful. He is a big advocate for APACC as well. And we do have a pretty large community of Japanese residents here in Michigan, and I do believe it has something to do with the Japanese companies that are here, such as Denso. I know that there is even a huge Japanese community out in Battle Creek, and you think out in Battle Creek, with Kellogg's cereal and corn. But actually there's a lot of Japanese businesses out there as well.

E

Ed Clemente 03:47

That's interesting, I know Denso we. We've mentioned them on the show before and we're going to try to get them on as a guest. And I know also Toyota has a large site out in Ann Arbor, too, for R&D, I think somewhere in York Township, I believe.

D

Duc Abrahamson 04:00

Yes. They're spread out all over Michigan. But there is a nice pocket in the Novi, Farmington area. And there's a nice pocket in the Troy area as well, where you can talk about the Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo area and the Battle Creek area. So you know, we have a nice spread throughout Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 04:25

That's really great. I'm glad you told me that because I didn't know all that. Who are your partners then? Or what other sort of organizations, as you know, I used to run a chamber of commerce too. And it's hard to do this just on your own. So you probably have some partners you want to mention.

D

Duc Abrahamson 04:42

Oh, yeah, we actually have a lot of strategic partners. We have partnerships with the Detroit Chinese Business Association, the Detroit Chinese Engineers Association, Thai American Association of Michigan, Indo American Chamber of Commerce, Taiwanese Chamber of Commerce of Greater Detroit, Japanese Business Society of Detroit, Association of Korean American Professionals in Automotive Industry, the Philippine Chamber of Commerce of Michigan, the Vietnamese American Association of Michigan, we're also affiliated with Asian community organizations like APIAVote, Association of Chinese Americans, the Chinese Association of Greater Detroit Council of Asian Pacific Americans, Great Lakes Hmong Association, National Federation of Filipino Americans Association, the Filipino American Community Center of Michigan and West Michigan Asian American Association. So like I said, we are a collective voice for 30-plus Asian and Asian Pacific countries. For us to do that we have to have these strategic partners throughout Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 05:54

That's really wonderful. I didn't know all that and kind of why we do the show, right, so other people can learn about it. And even though I might have butchered your name a little bit, you yourself are originally from Vietnam, right?

D

Duc Abrahamson 06:07

Yes, yes. I was born in Vietnam. In 1975.

E

Ed Clemente 06:13

Why don't you talk, because that's a significant year and not ironic that that year happened? Yes.

D

Duc Abrahamson 06:18

Yeah, actually, I was born in March of 1975. Five weeks later, the Vietnam War ended. And my dad comes home and tells my mom pack the kids, we're leaving. And they ran. They literally ran, my mom packed two bags, one of food, one of clothes. And then she swaddled me in a blanket and safety pinned me to her shirt, and she ran. And while they were running on the shore, my mom gets pushed over and stamped over. And she's trying to do a push up to keep me above the water line so that I don't drown. For some reason, some miracle my dad, hears her, picks her up, puts her on the boat. It's a small fishing boat that fits about 1000 people. It was very small. It was not a running boat. It did not work. The only thing that worked on it was the radio, which the whole time they were sending out SOS signals. We were very lucky. A ship from Denmark heard our SOS, came and rescued us and took us to a refugee camp in Hong Kong. And from there, we ended up in North Carolina, doing processing paperwork and such. And then we were sponsored by St. Vincent DePaul in Detroit, and brought to Michigan. And Father Thomas was, at the time, the priest at St. Vincent DePaul, he found us a apartment in Royal Oak. And we had church ladies come by to teach us English. And they didn't speak Vietnamese. We didn't speak English. But they came over to try to teach us anyways. My dad was very lucky to find a job with General Motors. My mom worked very hard and hustled. And she became an entrepreneur, she opened up two bridal salons. And she struggled, she struggled a lot. And I grew up as a child of an entrepreneurial parent. And I saw, you know, all the struggles that she was going through and all of the hard work that she went through. And I think my position here with APACC kind of brings me that full circle. My role at APACC allows me to help connect business owners with Asian heritage with resources and creates a community that supports each other.

E

Ed Clemente 09:21

And so how did you, what was your path after all of that? I mean, obviously, you probably weren't on a traditional path. And I think I told you when we talk on the prep call, my mom or dad didn't speak English either in the beginning. So I mean, that's always a bigger, hard thing for the first generation of folks.

D

Duc Abrahamson 09:39

First generation, I don't know if it's hard because it's all I know. It's all I know. But I do you know, that I, as a child, was the translator for my parents and my grandparents. There were a lot of things that we went through that was the first generation, we didn't know what we were doing when we were doing it. I remember applying for colleges and one of my teachers told me that I should be able to check that I'm a minority, I had no idea that I was a minority. And I didn't know what that meant. I really didn't know what that meant. I was lucky enough to go to Wayne State University. And I grew up in a predominantly Caucasian white neighborhood. And I was very lucky, I had a great circle of friends, very accepting neighborhood and school districts. But when I went to Wayne State University, the diversity there was phenomenal. And I was able to join an organization called AAPN, the Asian American Professional Network. And that opened up my eyes to the possibilities of finding a community that supports each other, and sharing those resources of that first generation of going through and, you know, finding those resources, not just about translation, but hey, what do I need to do to get to that next level? What type of internships do I have to do? What connections did I not have in the past that I

actually do have that I can tap into? And, again, I think that that lent me in a great direction to where I am now, and provided me skills and opportunities to know what there's lacking out there, what this community needs, and try to fill that gap.

E Ed Clemente 11:52

So how did you, I don't think we ever discussed, but I don't know how long you've been at the organization. But how did you get to there, I guess?

D Duc Abrahamson 12:01

Well, I started off very traditional Asian, where I was pre med and I worked at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak as a nursing assistant. You know, I think that the stereotypically the three areas of study is engineering, medicine or becoming a lawyer. After working at the hospital, I realized that patient care was not where I fit very well. I was very lucky to to find a job at a small nonprofit organization called the Epilepsy Foundation of Michigan, back in 2006. And from there, I've been working in nonprofits ever since

A Announcer 12:54

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E Ed Clemente 13:10

What exactly are some of the things that the Chamber does? The only thing I see sometimes when you guys have an annual dinner or something, but I'm sure there's things you do all the time. So what are some of the normal, because I know it's probably different than what my chamber did for?

D Duc Abrahamson 13:24

Well, of course, I think our biggest fundraiser is our annual gala. And it is a great time. We have that at MGM Grand in Detroit, about 600 people are there and it's a fabulous time. But some of the programs that we do that are really important to what we do is our East-West Business Connection. That event is our supplier, meet the buyer. So we invite corporate buyers to meet minority owned businesses, suppliers, and we don't restrict it just to the Asian American Pacific Islander community, we open that up to all minority owned businesses, and they're able to be there and pitch to corporate buyers, such as General Motors, Stellantis, Lear, Magna, the Big Three and the tier ones and the tier twos, but we're also talking about being able to pitch to Wayne State University or Comerica Bank. We have a great community of supplier diversity here in the Detroit and Michigan area where they're seeking minority owned businesses to fulfill needs within their organization. And I think because of COVID and because of supply chain disruptions, a lot of bigger corporations are filling those needs that they have with minority

owned businesses. And they're finding that what they need to do is diversify the services and the supply chain that they have to make sure that there's that constant so that there's not that disruption that there's somebody able to step in. And I think in the past there was a big heavy lean on the larger corporation, the larger suppliers. But with everything that has happened in the last four years, there are a lot of organizations, big corporations are finding, yeah, we're going to have that. But we're also going to have these smaller organizations fill in the gaps where we can, and these organizations then grow to become those bigger suppliers.

E

Ed Clemente 15:48

Once again, our guest is Duc Nguyen Abrahamson, and she's the executive director for the Asian Pacific American Chamber of Commerce. You kind of touched on my next question already, whether you knew it or not. But what kind of future trends do you see? You know, because obviously, you're doing a lot with international trade and things like that. What kind of trends do you see from your perspective.

D

Duc Abrahamson 16:12

We deal with a lot of international trade. But we also deal with a lot of the small businesses. There's still a need for those small businesses to grow, still a need for resources for the small businesses. So APACC has what we call the Small Business Action Committee. And this committee seeks to develop a variety of value added education and resource opportunities for small businesses and APACC members. They're working on a workshop for 2024, where you have an opportunity, these entrepreneurs will have opportunities to have one-on-ones with professionals, whether it's an attorney, accountant, social media experts or IT experts to talk to them and kind of give them a one-on-one in regards to where they are at in their company and how they can take it to that next level, and what they need to do that to grow their business. Not only that, we also have other programs for our bigger corporations that might have employee resource groups. So this program will facilitate inclusive and collaborative meetings of ERG leaders from APACC members and companies to exchange and effectively collaborate on key ERG issues and help stakeholders within the APACC network.

E

Ed Clemente 17:49

Can you help me with ERG?

D

Duc Abrahamson 17:51

ERG is employee resource group. So companies that might have an Asian employee resource group or a business resource group, basically, is a community within that corporation, that company. So let's say Comerica Bank has a large Asian ERG, and they get together and they talk about resources that they have, how they can uplift each other, how they might be able to educate within the company and corporation, how they can find resources for each other and mentor each other throughout their time at Comerica Bank. So you're looking at a minority group that is looking for a community and within that company, they've created that community for you. [Oh, that's pretty interesting.] Yeah. And APACC is here to facilitate that for

those ERG groups where we'd love to connect those ERG leaders within let's say Comerica Bank, and General Motors, and Stellantis, and Ford, and connect those leaders together and share resources and best practices and how to uplift each other across corporations.

E

Ed Clemente 19:11

Yeah, in fact, it's funny the first time we met or I should say, I didn't meet you, you're on a panel for the US Global Leadership Council, which you're a member of, and so am I, but it's kind of like, your message was interesting there too. I knew a little bit about the organization. But that's I'm so glad you could take time to do it today. This next question is a little bit more deeper. It's up to you, unless there's something else you wanted to bring up about future trends, I didn't know if you had one more point, I couldn't tell.

D

Duc Abrahamson 19:46

You know, I'd love to give some statistics. In 2023, Asians make up 6% of the US population, totalling 21.1 million, with a remarkable 103% growth from 2000 to 2023, we are the fastest growing minority group in the US and in Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 20:13

And I know Michigan, that was always, I remember in the legislature that was the group that was growing the fastest always. And I know even from my days when I was at liquor control, just to get back to your youth, I would often have people's children come and interpret, for hearings, because there sometimes wasn't a person that could translate [Right.] their language. So it was always across the state. You're absolutely right. I mean, I had people from all different sort of minority and ethnic groups across the state. So it's kind of interesting. I'm glad you pointed out all those other ones around the state too. So the question I have is, you're probably one of my more unique guests, probably ever, in the way you came here for sure. And so what advice would you give your 17 year old self because you had a career that wasn't traditional, that's for sure. You kind of had to work your way through the system here. So what advice would you give your 17 year old self, I don't know if you went to a Royal Oak school.

D

Duc Abrahamson 21:14

I was very lucky. I went to Birmingham schools, I grew up in Birmingham school public district. I think that the advice that I would give my 17 year old self is don't worry about other people's expectations. There's always expectations coming from a multitude of areas, especially growing up Asian, there's an expectation of, you need to become a doctor. There's a meme out there where it says an Asian parent would tell you, I want you to be happy and be a doctor. And I think that my parents are very proud of me on where I landed and what I'm doing now. I think that I think that any parent, they want certain things for their children, they want them to be happy, they want them to be successful. But I think also the children growing up now, there will be jobs that we had no idea are available, that would be available. I don't think that this job was an opportunity when I was 17. So for me to seek happiness, go find what makes me happy go towards my passions rather than certain other people's expectations. I think that that was

my greatest barrier myself, having expectations that I put on myself that I thought that other people had those expectations of me. And no matter where I ended up or what I ended up doing, my parents were proud no matter what I did.

E Ed Clemente 23:07

That's a nice story. Good. I'm glad. They still live in the area?

D Duc Abrahamson 23:11

My my dad lives in Bloomfield Hills, and my mom lives in Huntington Beach in California.

E Ed Clemente 23:18

Okay. Well, your last question is you've lived here long enough now, what's one of the more favorite things you'd like to do in Michigan?

D Duc Abrahamson 23:26

I think that Michigan is one of those states where you can do everything. There is so much that you can do, we have water activities, we have snow activities, we have sand dunes, we have hiking trails, we have phenomenal greenery and the colors of the fall. So I spend a lot of time outdoors and doing these activities and I think that certain people, some pictures that I might post people are like, Oh, are you in Colorado? I'm like, No, this is Michigan. Welcome to Michigan. I do paddleboarding during the summer, I do hiking and I love the smell of the fall leaves and a bonfire during the fall. I have to admit I hide myself inside during the winter months, which are long, but there are rock climbing gyms that I partake in. So I love those activities that keep me active all throughout the year.

E Ed Clemente 24:39

We'll get you into snowshoeing.


D Duc Abrahamson 24:42

I've tried that, I've tried that. When I was younger, it was so much fun. You forget about the cold because you're having so much fun and you're exercising and you're heating your own body. But I feel like as I get older, the cold feels more. It's a little bit harder.


E Ed Clemente 25:06

Wow. I want to thank you again it was Duc Nguyen Abrahamson, very good. And she's the executive director of the Asian Pacific American Chamber of Commerce and Duc, you did a

great job. You've covered a lot of bases. Thanks again for doing the podcast today.

 Duc Abrahamson 25:25

Thank you for having me, Ed, it was a great time.

 Announcer 25:30

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