

# Ep.2.23 - Dale Robertson

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Dale Robertson

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- 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, Ed Clemente. And we're glad to have today with us Dale Robertson, he's the President and CEO of the Grand Rapids Public Museum. Welcome to the show, Dale,
- D** Dale Robertson 00:38  
Thank you Ed, happy to be here.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:40  
So I can call you Dale, I just want to make sure. [As long as I can call you Ed.] That's fine with me. So let's talk a little bit about the museum because the name really doesn't say what it is, right? So what do you kind of tell people who just see a museum, public museum, iut could be anything. What do you tell people what it is?
- D** Dale Robertson 01:00  
So the Grand Rapids Public Museum is really what's known in the museum field as a general museum. But specifically for us, we're history, science and culture.

E

Ed Clemente 01:12

Yeah. And so does that mean, you're actually broken out into like three sections that way? Or is it just sort of interspersed throughout the place.

D

Dale Robertson 01:19

It's really the three defining themes for all the exhibits, the ones that we call a core, we really don't want to use permanent anymore in the museum world, because even something that you think of as permanent, is constantly being reinterpreted, just like history is being reinterpreted as science is continuing to evolve and change. And, and, and so it's, it's more of an organizing principle. We have, we have 250,000 artifacts and specimens by the most conservative count, and 97% of which donated by the people of West Michigan over 167 years. And, and so they, they tend to fall into those three major type buckets. And so that is the organizing principle behind how we take what we have, and then how we use it and display it as we interact with the public.

E

Ed Clemente 02:15

Yeah, and we're gonna get into a little bit more what's there. But I think one of the sort of core things that I think is one of the reasons I think we want to get on the show today, is the unique sort of school system you have there and the grants you got recently. Can you sort of touch on those a little bit first upfront?

D

Dale Robertson 02:36

Sure, if I could, if I can be museum-ey for a minute and talk a little bit about the history, because the history really informs the present. And, and I think it's a thing that we're seeing, even in the business community. Ford, for instance, you know, as they're looking towards the future with their electrification, has really gone back and grabbed hold of their history, and is using that to define and inform and even how they present themselves. So it's, it's not just a unique thing to one sector, I think it's, there's work here and value in the larger business community. So for us, our our history goes back to almost the exact time when Grand Rapids actually became a city. Grand Rapids became a city, got its charter from the state in 1850. We were founded in 1854. And our first affiliation just a couple of years in was with Grand Rapids Public Schools.

E

Ed Clemente 03:32

And Michigan was only like, 15 years old.

D

Dale Robertson 03:35

Yeah, right, correct. So very early, right, even in the history of the entire state. And so when when we begin to reassess where where we were, and where we are, we of course, went back in our history and you know, at our core, we're an educational institution. And so that informed us then and actually breaking some museum rules and putting artifacts and specimens in students hands, and then even copying something, frankly, that the Michigan Historical Museum did, which is allowing classes to come in and use the museum as their classroom for the entire week. And then that got us down the step of that, can we actually create a school?

E

Ed Clemente 04:14

And with that, you partnered with the Grand Rapids School System.

D

Dale Robertson 04:20

Public schools, absolutely right. So that's why that important, looking back our earliest affiliation, this had to be a Grand Rapids Public School. And so the Grand Rapids Public Museum is a Grand Rapids Public Museum School, but with partners. Grand Valley State University College of Education, that brings in expertise in place-based education theory, and then Kendall College of Art and Design, which is all about design thinking. And it's all done in this museum atmosphere, which is a very project-based orientation to how we do work as well as investigatory and, and interpretation, based on true and authentic facts.

E

Ed Clemente 05:02

Yeah, it's interesting. Recently, as you know, I did a tour both of your institution, but also Kendall because we had Dr. Eisler, who is the President of Ferris who's retiring, but he gave me a tour because I worked on it with him back when I was in the legislature. And we were able to sort of pair that up with the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. And they're sort of similar institutions, but different still. And just, for example, just to give a plug for the, you know, the not the museum, the school, Kendall school, but they do they work with like, even like a lot of that corporate infrastructure over there, too, which probably ties into what you guys do with your students too, right?

D

Dale Robertson 05:50

Oh, absolutely. I mean, one of the things that I, strengths of West Michigan, having only been here since 1999, is I think one of the things that we do really well here are our partnerships and public private partnerships. Partnerships within the nonprofit community, community-based organizations, so absolutely. I think that's part and parcel of just that West Michigan culture and spirit.

E

Ed Clemente 06:13

Yeah. When you walk through Kendall, I remember every floor or major room, he would say who the corporation was that sponsored that room. And a lot of obviously, were the furniture companies. So I know what Herman Miller's there. Steelcase, there's another big one

companies. So I know, what, Herman Miller's there Steeicase, there's another big one. [Hayworth.] Hayworth, yeah. And so there is sort of that uniqueness I think to Grand Rapids, say versus Detroit. Detroit's is so diffuse and diverse, Grand Rapids is kind of focused always about what the, you know, how they get good corporate sponsorship. And I think that probably helps you with your institution a lot.

D

Dale Robertson 06:52

Yeah, no question.

E

Ed Clemente 06:55

The, why don't you talk a little bit too, because I'm going to tease this probably in your headline. What is the XQ Super School Award? Sounds like something from Marvel Comics, but what is it?

D

Dale Robertson 07:07

So this was one of the just great experiences, I think, for all of us here, but particularly for the for the school. So an entity known as the Emerson Collective, which is organized by Laurene Powell Jobs, created this, something called the XQ Super Schools Project. And the whole theory, the goal behind it, is to rethink high school. And, and so they launched this competition, a nationwide competition, where they would award 10 innovative schools \$10 million each. And so we entered. You know, and it turns out there's like, say, 750 of us, and it was a series of steps that you had to go through, answer different things, participate in different workshops kind of thing. And, and it was it was very intense, very thorough. And so we applied as this partnership, and the Grand Rapids Public Museums School with the Grand Rapids Public Schools being the ultimate recipient, won, one of the inaugural 10 XQ Super School designations, which not only get the designation, but you get that support money to help, which really was helped us launch, helped the school launch. So it was a, it was a major accomplishment. And I really think it speaks highly of us. Again, we were the only school that was a partnership. And I think that things [Oh really?] Oh yeah, all the other schools were standalone, and they all had to be public schools, right? But still, we were the only the only partnership. And and so that was seven years ago. And now we just this year, we graduated the first the first high school class. So you know, and it was an it's a 90% graduation rate, which is really impressive.

E

Ed Clemente 09:08

Well, you sort of smoothed over this, but I think we should highlight it. That's Steve Jobs widow, right?

D

Dale Robertson 09:16

That correct? Yes. Yeah. And accomplished in her in her own right, but both Steve Jobs and Lorraine were, are very committed to education.

E

Ed Clemente 09:29

Yeah, I mean, if you read his book, you might have and, you know, I think my favorite part is the how the function must follow form versus the other way around. And that's where the Kendall Institute probably is involved and, and things that are aesthetically pleasing, which also falls into you know, like, the big thing I think he's the most famous for is probably the, you know, the Apple phones. But he, from what I remember he told his engineers, before he went public, he just showed him this little boxy thing before anyone knew what it was going to be. And said, this has got to do, it's got to be a phone, it's got to be a computer, it's got to be, you know, all these things. And they had to do it. So that means, it was definitely function following the form he wanted because he knew what would sell and that was his partnership with Wozniak, right? Where Wozniak was kind of the computer guy, but he was kind of like, the futuristic visionary guy, right? [Yep.] And she does that, it sounds like with schools, too, because schools obviously, are going through a lot of changes, COVID probably accelerated a lot of that.

D

Dale Robertson 10:39

Yeah. And I think, right, I totally agree with it. I think part of what it's that saying that look, schools have been operating pretty much the same way for years and years and years. And, you know, I know, at least from my myself, I mean, I enjoyed my time in school, but I wasn't necessarily built for a desk in a row. You know, and I know that there's others like me in the museum school, you know, I mean, the museum becomes your entire classroom, that's, you know, the sixth to eighth here and then the ninth is connected to the archives, where you just, it's the curate your own experience over there. And then for a person who learns like me, you know, kinetic, a little tactile, you know, visual, you know. I mean it's, what a way to go and to be able to, to connect, right and, get the most out of that educational experience for yourself. As you chart your own path.

A

Announcer 11:38

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E

Ed Clemente 11:54


Your path, by the way, you are a downriver guy, but you're in Grand Rapids and it's kind of unusual how you got there. But your path and I, we should mention how we first met was both of us got jobs kind of right out of college. You you had a I think you went to James Madison at Michigan State. And I was out of Ferris at that point. And we both got hired by a State Senator, as we both know, Jim Desana, and it sort of put us on that path, who was a guy that's kind of really pushed us to do a lot more than I think other staff at that time in the legislature, I think.

D


Dale Robertson 12:24

 Dale Robertson 12:34


Yeah, he was he, yes, he put us both on that that path. In fact, if you remember, we were both term limited.

 Ed Clemente 12:42


Well, yeah, because the leadership, but also he told us ahead of time.

 Dale Robertson 12:45

That's what I mean, he told us ahead of time. You're you're here, for I give you a chance to get your feet in the ground and make some contacts and figure out your path, but you know, you're here four, five years, maybe.

 Ed Clemente 12:57


Yeah, there wasn't much coddling in that era. You were pretty much on your own pretty fast. And you like me, you left home probably at 18 and never looked back. So yeah. Why don't and then after that, you went to go work for the Detroit Chamber I think.

 Dale Robertson 13:13

Right at the Detroit Chamber, right at the very early years of the Mackinac Policy Conference.

 Ed Clemente 13:17


Right. And that's when that thing really started taking off when you were there. Like it was a lot smaller conference in the beginning.

 Dale Robertson 13:26

Oh, even when I came on, I was I was maybe the third year, maybe fourth. And yeah, there were more guests at the hotel who weren't part of the conference than were, but that's when that oh, upward trajectory really began to go. That was under Frank Smith, he was the president.

 Ed Clemente 13:41

Right, and I remember someone you might not remember. But Mary Jo Kripowicz, she was the one running it back then.

 Dale Robertson 13:47

**D** Dale Robertson 13:47

Yeah, that was after I had, [Oh, she ran it after you.] Yeah, I had moved on at that point.

**E** Ed Clemente 13:52

And she was an intern for Jim Desans, I might mention as well. So, you went from there to Blue Cross then right? [Blue Cross Blue Shield.] And why don't you, it's kind of interesting, how big was your territory when you work for Blue Cross?

**D** Dale Robertson 14:08

Well, when I came over to West Michigan, the territory was, so it was Sales and Marketing and Customer and Provider Service. In like 52, 51, 51 or 52 of the states 83 counties. So it was essentially the west side of the state and and the U.P.

**E** Ed Clemente 14:29

Yeah, it's pretty big territory. So you had a lot to deal with. And then how many years again, have you been now at the museum?

**D** Dale Robertson 14:35

I've been here since 2008.

**E** Ed Clemente 14:37

And do you have any other sort of sponsors or partners or stakeholders, because I know you're also doing an interesting growth project too at the museum, right?

**D** Dale Robertson 14:51

Yeah. So when I took this job in 2008, we were at 68,000 annual visitors, and then 2019, you know, just before COVID, we were up to 259,000, [Huge] and 30,000 student visits a year. And frankly, we were turning school tours away because we're just plain running out of room. Now, you know, one of the reasons for, the main reason is we're able to invest with passing a millage in 2016. And we're already on this path. So this really allowed us to invest, is to then take all of our tours and programs that we offer for schools and align them to curriculum with pre- and post-work. And then addition to using the actual artifacts and specimens within those those lessons with the idea that you know, those visceral kind of experiences, you actually hold a, you know, a 3000 year old Babylonian clay tablet in your hand, for instance, which we have one of those. You know, those kind of visceral experience, create the stronger hooks for future information to land on. And so it just began to grow and grow and grow. And we began to bring in more traveling exhibits and make sure that they were aligned and proper way. So we really need to expand in addition to that, there is the whole project in town to restore the rapids,

actually put the rapids back into the Grand. [You're right on the river.] We are right on the river. So we received a special designation as an Opportunity Site. So how do you most people are going to interact with river restoration from the banks, so we'll be that Interpretation and Education Center. And so all that combined to, we're we have a project to redo the entire bank, so it'll be full accessibility down into the river so we can have lessons and interactions and make it fully accessible to all the community. And then in addition, just to expand and enhance the space within the museum so we can handle the the educational demand, which at our core, being an educational institution, we're really happy about. And that will allow us to, to really be on point with with Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 17:13

And before I ask you your last couple of questions here, but you, I tell you my favorite part was actually, after when I toured the museum, it shocked me how big it is. First of all, you had that really cool old street of the old Grand Rapids. But the thing I probably liked the best was the taxidermy area. I just found that so fascinating that you guys, the city of Grand Rapids, or the museum used to have a full time taxidermist

D

Dale Robertson 17:42

Sure, we were actually a department of the city up until 2006. [Oh, right before you got theree.] At one point in its history, you know, this was some years, even back then, their city employee taxidermists, because we had a really very robust, and still do, have a very robust Natural Science Collection. So it doesn't turn, includes the taxidermy, but we have our geology collection is actually phenomenal. And again, just collected over years and years and years of generous West Michigan people, just, you know, donating those really, in large part.

E

Ed Clemente 18:18

So I know you've already touched on quite a few future trends you think, but is there any other ones you probably wanted to mention, where you think the role of like a museum will be or with students.

D

Dale Robertson 18:28

But I think the other thing here is that part of what we began a few years ago, was putting our collection online. And so it can be accessible 24 hours a day, you know, the muse may hit you later when you get home, right? The root word for museum being muse. And so the next step then, is that then connecting into digital literacy. And by taking our our collections and by putting it out there and partnering to put it on an accessible platform, so not only you can consume content, but you can use our content to create new content and share it, right and collaborate with others, particularly out of a school setting, educational setting. I think that's that's one of the very important waves in the future, and then even connecting with a town, where we can take photographs, even from our own collection. So you're standing on the Blue



Bridge right across from, you know, what did the river look like when it was logging? Well, you know, you can scan and pull up, you know, actual photos from our collections and get a view of what it was like from that very spot 100 years ago.

**E** Ed Clemente 19:40

Yeah, well, obviously, technology is digitization process is changing everybody and obviously, the museums are going to have to keep up to keep probably kids attentions and also it's just make sense to move in that direction.

**D** Dale Robertson 19:55

The key thing here is that right balance,so the digital doesn't take over, right.? It actually enhances and helps fulfill that real experience that you're that you're in. So you still get the proper feeling and experience that you need, but the digital enhances it but doesn't take it over. And I think that's the danger of flipping that and then missing the whole point, and then having it fail.

**E** Ed Clemente 20:22

And COVID, I think has shown record numbers for people even wanting to travel and do stuff, and Michigan's, I think we're probably the most attractive state in the Midwest right now. And so people did miss that tangible experience. Last couple things is, what quick advice would you give your old 17 year old self back at Roosevelt High School, when you were in the marching band?

**D** Dale Robertson 20:48

I was in the marching band. You know, I think it's, it's really a couple of things, you know. It's the how you do something is as important, if not more important than, than what you do. And it's that, it's the listening. It's very important to, to listen and to, it's that old lawyer thing too. Get the facts, right, and then be able to synthesize that through through what the reality of the of the world is, Right? And and how are people going to, how are people going to going to take it? It's the, we were talking earlier, even Steve Jobs, right? How people are going to really use that phone. You know, what is that practical purpose. And so you got to be able to synthesize, I think things through that. So how you do something, understanding your entire surroundings and all the inputs, and then what the impact is going to really be on people.

**E** Ed Clemente 20:50

I remember. Thoreau has a quote and and probably screwing it up or paraphrasing it, but he says, 'It's okay to build castles in the sky, as long as you build a foundation under them.' And that's kind of what you're hinting at is that, you know, you being an attorney as well, whenever I would, when I was on the bench, I mean, the foundation, it would always, like, you'd always have to make sure you understood where people were going, why are they asking all these

questions? You're building a foundation, that will make sense at the end, right? And so it's an interesting process. And I know this is gonna be a quick question for you. But who's your favorite historical person that you admired from leadership?

**D** Dale Robertson 22:31

It would have to be President John F. Kennedy. He's the first president I remember, and I know my mother told me, she put me in front of the TV when he'd point, I'd point, when he laughed, I'd laugh. And so, I mean, there has been that attachment since then. But I think the takeaway is, he was an aspirational leader, Right? Let's get to the moon at the end of the decade, and he told us why we needed to do that. But the other important piece too, was his profiles in courage, right? And that is, you know, the true measure of character and greatness and commitment is to be able to do the proper thing at the proper time for the proper reasons, even if maybe it's not within your own selfish, personal best interest. It's in what's for that greater good for the others that surround you and for the longer term benefit. And that takes wisdom and some judgment to be able to go through that and that then goes back to even what we're just saying before about laying that proper foundation.

**E** Ed Clemente 23:38

Yeah, the old axiom, build legacies, not monuments, right? [Yeah.] And your last question, I know you have four kids, but they're a little older now, but where do you guys like to go in Michigan?

**D** Dale Robertson 23:51

Well, my wife is from Traverse City and grew up in Southern Leelenau County, and so that has that's, that's our favorite spot of course. In addition to go, you know, I still like to get down to Downriver and see my friends there, of course. So between the two, that's our homes.

**E** Ed Clemente 24:12

I don't think you ever visited me downriver, but that's okay. So anyway, I want to thank again, our guest today, Dale Robertson. He's the President and CEO of Grand Rapids Public Museum. You did a great job today, thanks Dale for taking time to do this.

**D** Dale Robertson 24:27

I appreciate it Ed, thank you for having me.

**E** Ed Clemente 24:30

Keep up the good work of the museum and good luck in all your future projects. [Thank you.] Make sure you join us next week for our guest Angela Flood, she's the Director of Business

Planning and Economic Development at the American Center for Mobility, where they deal with a lot of things that move.



**Announcer 24:48**

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