

Ep.2.38 - Matthew Asada

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Matthew Asada

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 we're very fortunate to have Matthew Asada with us. He's a Public Diplomat in Residence at the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy and he's also a previously a Deputy Commissioner in General of the USA Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai. Welcome to the show, Matthew.

M Matthew Asada 00:50

Thanks for having me Ed.

E Ed Clemente 00:52

And this is not the first time we've talked, but I know we don't we met a little bit in Dubai, of course, I know you're very busy at the Pavilion when I was there, but we really appreciate all the great opportunities, you've given both Michigan and our groups with Global Ties Detroit. But what do you start out, because you have multiple titles here. What do you tell people right now, what you do, and then also say what you did previously with the Deputy Commissioner position?

M

Matthew Asada 01:24

Sure, so I'm a Foreign Service Officer, I've been in about two decades. And as an American diplomat, my job is to represent the country overseas, to advance American interests and to protect American citizens. And it's really an honor to be able to serve as one of the approximately 15,000 members of the Foreign Service from the US Department of State that are currently here in the United States and at our embassies and consulates around the world. Right now, and right now, I'm at the University of Southern California as a Senior Visiting Fellow as what we call our Public Diplomat in Residence. It's a unique position that was established in about 2004, to have an American Public Diplomacy Officer come to the university to be able to teach public diplomacy to the next generation that's coming in to the service, as well as to be able to research and to do a little writing as well. It's a two year assignment out here in sunny LA.

E

Ed Clemente 02:33

Yeah, it's, well, you came from one sunny spot to another sunny spot but I would imagine LA's a little bit better climate.

M

Matthew Asada 02:41

That's right, there is a lot that's similar between Dubai and Los Angeles, including, you know, fantastic beaches in both. But I think, you know, one thing that's really exciting about being in Los Angeles now, is that again, in the United States, is second largest city, with the third largest diplomatic, or shall we say, Consular Corps in the world. With a fantastic, you know, port and infrastructure system, obviously home to the media and entertainment industry, a strong robust educational sector, high tech. It's just great to be able to see a little bit about our country, in addition to representing us overseas.

E

Ed Clemente 03:23

Yeah, I think at USC, isn't that the big Hollywood, isn't there a big school for people wanting to get into the business?

M

Matthew Asada 03:29

School of Cinematic Arts, there's obviously a great business school here. But you know, it's part of my journey. And I think that's one of the things that's really exciting about being with you here today. I mean, my journey to Los Angeles, it started four generations ago when my great grandparents came to the United States from Japan, Japanese Americans. My grandparents were born out here in California, unfortunately, during World War Two, they along with it about 120 other 1000 people of Japanese descent, were interned in internment camps. And after that my family left the West Coast went out east. My grandpa joined the Postal Service, my dad ended up joining the US Army. So I'm the third generation, my family, to do some type of public service. And it's just a little bit fitting that I'm able to return to California, where my family started out in this country 100 years ago.

E

Ed Clemente 04:30

Yeah, of course, everyone knows that history, it's pretty tragic part of American history and think it's finally getting a little bit more publicity that it deserves more and more, hopefully, each year. It seems like I hear more positive things about what's going on with it. But the other thing too, is your dad's job also gave you a stint here in Michigan too because I'm sure you've lived all lived in a lot of places. So what was your stint here in Michigan?

M

Matthew Asada 04:58

Yeah, that's right. So again, as an Army brat as we say, I followed my father in the army around the world, including an assignment in South Korea where I went to my first World's Fair and we can talk a little bit more about that later but actually, after South Korea, we moved to Rochester, Rochester Hills, in fact, and that's where I went to high school, Rochester Adams, its where my sister also went to high school. And again, from playing sports there, to kind of going back on school breaks, I've always maintained my ties, you know, to those friends and family in Michigan. And it's part of my journey, as well, to here in LA as well as to meeting you guys out there in Dubai when we had the two delegations from Michigan come through, including one from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation.

E

Ed Clemente 05:51

Yeah. In fact, that was with David Newhouse, was he part of that?

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Matthew Asada 05:56

That's right, he was leading a delegation, there were nine companies on there, including Automation Alley, some representatives and it was really exciting because Michigan was one of about a dozen cities or states that lead either cultural or trade delegations out to the Expo 2020 Dubai. And it's exciting to see some of those connections that they made. I know that at least one of the companies is in touch, continued contact with an UAE-based company. And stay tuned hopefully, there'll be some exciting stories coming out of that here in the near future.

E

Ed Clemente 06:33

Yeah, and let's put in one other plug for you while your stint here in Michigan. You also worked with at that point, Congressman Peters, and that was US Senator Peters, what do you do for him?

M

Matthew Asada 06:44

Yeah, so it's funny when I was a just still an undergraduate, I was able to intern with a couple of Michigan members of Congress. So we had Dale Kildee and his Pontiac office, we had Senator

Michigan members of Congress. So we had Dale Kildee and his Florida office, we had Senator Carl Levin, actually in his Warren office and that was just a little bit taste of, you know, congressional and elected politics. But about a decade ago, I had the opportunity as an American Political Science Association, Congressional Fellow to serve with then representative Gary Peters in Washington, DC, in his DC office. And I was looking after US Canada and all the trade and travel initiatives that we were working on at that time and that [we] continued to work on and one of the most exciting things was helping support the efforts for the new Gordie Howe bridge. I think we always talk in the foreign service about building bridges but here, literally, we are working to build one of the most important trade and travel crossings in North America. And so from that time in 2010 and 2011, I mean, these projects, as you know, they have a long gestation period, both in developing the political support, but actual in the physical construction. But that was one of the things that I did and it was building on something I had done actually, in Afghanistan. When I was serving there on a German military base. We, the United States, through the US Army Corps of Engineers, it actually built a bridge between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, to again, promote the trade and travel between those two countries over the historic river Amu Darya. And so building on those lessons of building that bridge, the most difficult part, which was actually the facilitation of the people working the bridge and build, building trust and cooperation so that we could open that new crossing. That's kind of what I focused on there with and Representative Peter's Office too, looking at how we could bring together some of the elected members of Congress as well as from the city and state level, Michigan and Detroit, with their counterparts there in Windsor, as well as Ontario. And I think that building those political ties and the people to people relationships are so important so that we can take advantage of that physical infrastructure, like the new Gordie Howe Bridge.

E

Ed Clemente 09:18

Well, it's funny two points there. One is, I was in the legislature when that was just starting to build up. And I did the original Public Private Partnership legislation, but it got changed eventually, when Canada kind of took over most of the responsibilities. But the other thing I was going to mention, you know, I still am on the board for Global Ties Detroit, like I said, we met you there. But right now we have a new delegation coming in from Ireland, Northern Ireland, and also the Republic of Ireland and they're coming here to Detroit, because obviously they're having challenges on their border crossing now because of you know, the EU and the Brexit. So they want to learn how we deal with cross border traffic especially in trade because it's such a heavy traded border for them as well. So that's just coming up, not not too far from now this month, they think they're coming in. But another a couple of things, you've mentioned already a couple, but you've been like three countries, oh, go ahead, you're gonna say something.

M

Matthew Asada 10:14

If I could just say that, you know, these lessons that Detroit has learned, again, from managing these border crossings and taking full advantage of them with Canada, is quite astounding. And I remember that, you know, that congressional district, it had a rail link, it had a road tunnel link, and then it had the bridge. I mean, and it had a ferry. So actually, all the ways of crossing the international border were in that one district which was why it was one of the most important for facilitating trade and travel. But those lessons, I mean, one of the things that the Department of State, the US Department of State is focused on right now, as well as USC Center on Public Diplomacy is what's called Subnational Diplomacy. It's the efforts by cities and

states to engage internationally. So whether it's trade delegations like MEDC, whether it's people to people exchanges, like Global Ties, or whether it is again, building those new infrastructure crossing, that's really important. And so I'm very excited that in October of 2022, the Department of State Secretary Antony Blinken named former Ambassador Nina Hachigian, who had been serving as the Deputy Mayor of Los Angeles, as the new Special Representative for Subnational Diplomacy. So to look at how we can better support cities and states because the lessons of Detroit and Windsor are just as applicable, frankly, to here in San Diego and Tijuana. And so I'd like to see again, those lessons across the northern border, but then again, how can we apply them to the southern border as well to facilitate that legitimate trade and travel?

E

Ed Clemente 11:56

Yeah, and let's plug in a little bit, I just want to get to some of the other countries you're at too, but you're in, I think, India or Pakistan, I can't remember which or both.

M

Matthew Asada 12:08

I was, my first assignment actually was in Lahore, Pakistan and that was back in 2004. And then I had the opportunity to serve twice in India, both in Calcutta at the Consulate, as well as in the Embassy in New Delhi.

E

Ed Clemente 12:25

And I know they probably make you learn some languages, but how many languages did you have to pick up? Or at least briefly know.

M

Matthew Asada 12:34

So I'm fortunate that, and again, Michigan Public Schools, and here's another pitch for Oakland County and Rochester Hills that we had a great German language program. In fact, a shout out to my teacher, Frau Barner, Janie Barner, she encouraged me and helped, me supported me on my journey to acquire the German language. My sister went through that as well. And we went through a great high school exchange program. So this is where, again, to those school boards, as well as those principals and superintendents, these high school exchange programs are so important. They may not be easy, there may be challenges, but it's important that it's done at that local level. So I've had German, frankly and fortunately, before I came into the Foreign Service, but then in the Foreign Service, I picked up a little bit of Hindi and Urdu and Dari, from my assignments in South Asia. And if I could just leave, again, your listeners, one of the pieces of advice is that wherever you are, whoever you are, whether you're a student, a high school kid, or working professional, the importance of acquiring a language, not just to acquire language for languages sake, but to be able to do business to be able to understand culture. That's what's incredibly important. So again, shout out to all of our teachers, our foreign language teachers in the school system back in Michigan.

A

Announcer 14:01

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E

Ed Clemente 14:17

Can you give people sort of like a minute explanation of what the Expo Dubai was, and then also another Michigan person who was involved with you somewhat while you were there, too?

M

Matthew Asada 14:28

Sure. So the World's Fair, or the Expo is something that's been a passion project of mine. And again, the first World's Fair was held in London in 1851. And since then, you know, the United States has hosted about two dozen of these, but the last one in the United States wasn't until 1984. And so we kind of, you know, we didn't do it here at home, but we continued to do it around the world. And as well as the world continued to host these things as well. And so, as I said, my father was assigned to South Korea. I went to my first World's Fair in 1993 and Taejeon. And then I caught the Expo bug. And then in 2000, when I was interning at the US Consulate General in Frankfurt, I went to the World's Fair that Germany was hosting in Hannover. It was the first one that they had ever hosted and I was shocked to find where the US pavilion should have been. There was a grassy field and because of challenges with congressional funding, the United States missed that World's Fair in 2000, all together. And so ever since then, I went to all the big ones. They're about every five years 2005 in Japan, 2010 in China, 2015 in Italy and then finally, I had the opportunity as a Foreign Service officer to help shape and create the US pavilion at that Expo 2020 Dubai. And that was a five year journey for me, half of the time in Washington, DC then we moved out to Dubai in 2020. Then we had the global COVID pandemic, it got delayed a year. But the World's Fair, if you want to think about this, it's I mean, Epcot was inspired by the World's Fair. So every country has a little pavilion. And it's not a trade fair. But it's a combination of a cultural, a history, a science, we have speakers, I mean, it's really how do you present that country on the global stage. And we were fortunate in Dubai to have that strong cultural program. We had 40 performers, we had 50 speakers, including Fares with MySwimPro from Grosse Pointe, who was able to join us talking about, you know, swimming and sports diplomacy. We had 175 events with different business persons, about an event a day, remember, this is a six month long, 183 day event. So we had a strong commercial program, welcoming, you know, Global Ties, welcoming MEDC. And then we also had that political delegation, again, more than 5000 people from 100 countries came and were received by our Commissioners General. So we mentioned another Michigander Ambassador, John Rikolto, Jr. he was the Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, as well as our Commissioner General when we kicked off the project. And when we finished the building in November of 2020. And then in September of 2021, Bob Clark joined us as the new Commissioner General and served during the fair itself. So whether it was the to Youth Ambassadors from Michigan that were serving as our pavilion guides, and greeters, or whether it was our speaker, or whether it was our Commissioner General or whether it was someone like myself, we had a lot of Michigan representation there at the US pavilion in Dubai.

E

Ed Clemente 18:06

E Ed Clemente 18:00

And just on two side notes. I remember the Statue of Liberty head in the, it was a really nice pavilion, you guys did a great job with it. And there were some tough competition there. I know the Saudi Arabia, they put a lot of money into there's too and the but one thing too, we also have someone here from Michigan. She was one of your people there yet a lot of youth there. Her name was Sarah. And then another person named Samira, who's now involved with the IVLP programs. But so there's two people cross paths are already here through Detroit since we've done the Expo.

M Matthew Asada 18:42

Well, I need to give a shout out too to another, Amina from Troy, Michigan. So we had several that were serving as our Youth Ambassadors there and again, the Youth Ambassador Program where people between the ages of 18 and 29, many of them speaking more than one language, they serve for three months or six months, they greeted visitors. Again, we had one and a half million visits to the US pavilion again, you remember this is during that global pandemic, I mean, Expo 2020. It was the biggest event in the world. 24 million visits during that six months. You know, at that time when the Tokyo Olympics, which only opened up a couple of months beforehand went without any visitors, here Dubai opened to the world. So it was a success for Dubai. And it was a success for the United States as well. I'm so glad that we had so many people from Michigan participated in it too.

E Ed Clemente 19:34

And you also mentioned Ambassador Rikolto did something unique too while he was there with you about, I can't remember the exact program but you said he was very, you know, important to making that workout the accords.

M Matthew Asada 19:46

Yeah, so one of the things that was a very big success during that time was the Abraham Accords. Again, this started in, was initiative of the Trump administration. This is something that Ambassador Rikolta was very much a part of that the UAE and three other countries, again, normalize relations with Israel. And while Israel had already been planning a little bit to, you know, have their Pavilion in the Expo in Dubai, it allowed them to go much bigger and have, again, a larger business program, a cultural program. And it resulted in a historic visit by the President of Israel, to the UAE, the first ever, and that was during Expo 2020. They raised the Israeli flag and every country had its National Day. And we were so excited for the United States to have our national day in March and to have a second presidential delegation. So representing President Biden and led by Secretary Gina Raimondo, from the Commerce Department's in here, just a little shout out to the Commerce Department, again, their export assistance centers, the foreign commercial centers, service, they did some great work. I mean, they're the ones that made that pitch to the 50 states, said hey, lead a delegation, come out to Expo. And what they did was they had something called Tradewinds, and it was a largest overseas trade delegation that the Department of Commerce leads. And this year in 2022, it

was to the UAE and more than 100 American companies joined that event. So just one example of how the federal government, in partnership with its local offices, and local businesses are trying to support American industry and American business.

E

Ed Clemente 21:32

And before, I've got a last few questions here for you, but I wanted you also, I know usually ask about future trends but one, they're specific for you about when the next Expo is, you're involved in that coming up. And then also, I think, what you're doing for your papers you're going to be publishing, I think that's sort of interesting, too, if you could, I'm going to give you what you have to answer maybe, versus, but I think they're both really good subjects. So if you could just touch on both of them.

M

Matthew Asada 22:03

Well, you know, one of the very exciting things that I'm doing while I'm here at the University of Southern California, is doing a bit of research on what we're calling these global mega events. So we've talked a bit here today about Expo 2020, Dubai, the World's Fair is one of those. Another one is the World Cup, soccer, and then the Olympics. And so Los Angeles is in this incredible position, that LA is one of 11 American cities that will be hosting the 2026 Men's World Cup in partnership with Canada and Mexico. So it's a trilateral bid, North American, and then it's also hosting the 2028 Olympics. Well, that's not it, the United States is also bidding to host the 2027 Mini World's Fair in Minnesota. And so that vote will be by all the member states of the Bureau of International Expositions in 2023. We'll see how we do but it's so exciting to be able to support Minnesota's bid to host the 2027 Specialized Exposition in Minnesota. Here at USC, again, I'm researching these global mega events, I'm researching that Subnational Diplomacy, how we can support cities and states. And one of the things that I'm working on, in addition to the teaching, is doing a little writing. And again, it's to help to tell that journey. So whether it's my family's journey across four generations, from Japan through those internment camps to the United States, and leading to me coming back to California, whether it's my personal journey, two decades in the Foreign Service, taking me from Rochester Adams to Kunduz, Afghanistan, or whether it's the United States' his journey, as part of this expo movement, and getting back into the expo business. That's the storytelling and that's the what I'm looking to help write and contribute to here in Los Angeles while at USC.

E

Ed Clemente 24:08

And one question too, I think you've touched on a little bit, maybe you didn't know you did, but you sort of I don't know at what point in your career, you decided that you knew what you wanted to do. But what advice would you give to like a 17 year old, I wish I would have gotten this advice, because I probably would have thought of going into international diplomacy too at some point, but I just wasn't an option for the environment I grew up in.

M

Matthew Asada 24:33

So three things, and I already touched on one of them. Again, learn a language to understand the culture. The second is understanding history. It's so important here, whether it's your family

the culture. The second is understanding history. It's so important here, whether it's your family history, whether it's your country's history, whether it's your company, or your institution's history, where has that company gone? Like, where did it start? What can it do better for the future? And finally, pursue your passion, Expo has been a passion of mine on what you call an 'expo junkie,' I've been to six of these. And, again, whatever it is, that's what's most important because your passion will shine through. You can take, you know, many different routes to get to where you want to be, but again, don't do it because you're told to do it, or you think it would be good. Do it because you want to do it. And that's where, again, the creativity, the excitement, and the inspiration will come out.

E

Ed Clemente 25:34

Yeah, and I know, you don't live in Michigan anymore but I don't know if you remember what you what your favorite spot was, even in high school back then. But if you have anything you remember, we'd appreciate hearing but what you liked about the state when you were here?

M

Matthew Asada 25:51

Well, again, I say again, history, I think is really incredible, whether it's the industrial history, whether it's a contribution to America winning World War Two, the geography is amazing. Again, never having lived in Michigan before and I still haven't been to the entire state, I have a great tour of the Upper Peninsula planned here at one point in time. But it's really that Michigan spirit, that 'can do.' That's what I think is most exciting to me. So I'm so looking forward to getting back to the state, hoping to go back in spring of 2023 to do a little bit more with Global Ties here on the Expo and Expo journey. But I really appreciate you having me on here today Ed, it's been great chatting with you. And I was so excited to meet you and all those guests that we had the US pavilion but especially the ones from this great state of Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 26:43

Well, I want to thank again, our guest today, thank you Matthew, first of all for doing this, but Matthew Assada. Again, he's the Public Diplomat in Residence at the University of Southern California and Public Diplomacy. And he was also the previous Deputy Commissioner for General of the USA Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai. Thanks again, Matthew. We appreciate it. You did a great job and hopefully a bunch of kids are going to hear this and go into careers that you recommend. But thank you.

M

Matthew Asada 27:11

Thanks Ed, its a pleasure being with you.

E

Ed Clemente 27:12

Cheers. Join us next week where a guest is Lindsey Rem she's the Vice President of Business Transformation for Barton Malow, where she brings up all the new technologies going into construction.



Announcer 27:25

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