

Economic Development in Detroit Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

David Blaszkiewicz

Interviewed by

Adam Mosseri

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Detroit, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

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Biography

David Blaszkievicz is a Southeastern Michigan native who grew up in and around Southeast Detroit. A former employee of Detroit Renaissance Inc., he now serves as the president of Invest Detroit. He is responsible for the organization's development and implementation of collaborative economic growth strategies. He leads efforts to strengthen relationships with the public, private, and philanthropic sectors to promote economic renewal and sustainability. Mr. Blaszkievicz, a graduate of Wayne State University, has more than 25 years of leadership experience in the Detroit business community, and works to better the City of Detroit.

Interviewer

Adam Mosseri is a member of Wayne State University's Library and Information Science Graduate student program. Mr. Mosseri works for Wayne State University as an information technology specialist and archivist, and as the Detroit Jewish News Foundation's M Jacob & Sons Fellow.

Abstract

This oral history interview is with Mr. David Blazkiewicz. Throughout the interview he discusses his connection to the City of Detroit, his life in and around the Detroit area and his involvement with Detroit Renaissance Inc., Business Leader for Michigan and Invest Detroit.

Restrictions

No Restrictions

Original Format

Wave Sound: 580,818 KB

[00:00.0] Begin Transcript

[00:04.5] **Mosseri:** Hello and today is Tuesday November 25, 2014 and I am here with Mr. David Blaszkiewicz in the Detroit West Conference Room on the 17th floor of the Renaissance Center Building at 600 Renaissance Center in Detroit Michigan. My name is Adam Mosseri and I will be conducting today's oral history interview with Mr. Blaszkiewicz as the interviewer. As a part of today's interview we will be discussing Mr. Blaszkiewicz's involvement with Detroit Renaissance and the City of Detroit.

[00:35.7] **Mosseri:** Whenever you are ready?

[00:38.3] **Blaszkiewicz:** What would you like me to say? [Laughs]

[00:41.3] **Mosseri:** My first question is when and where were you born?

[00:44.4] **Blaszkiewicz:** I was born in Detroit in 1968, June 3rd in our fair city and stayed in the...the region my entire...my entire life.

[00:58.2] **Mosseri:** What were your parents' names?

[01:00.9] **Blaszkiewicz:** My father is Raymond Blaszkiewicz and my mother is Rosemary Blaszkiewicz. Her maiden name was Rosemary DeLaurentiis. My father is 100% polish. My mother is 100% Italian and both grew up in the City of Detroit.

[01:16.4] **Mosseri:** Could you please spell your mother's maiden name?

[01:19.2] **Blaszkiewicz:** DeLaurentiis. D-e-...capital...-L-a-u-r-e-n-t-i-i-s.

[01:26.1] **Mosseri:** Thank you. When and where were you born?

[01:29.5] **Blaszkiewicz:** I was born June 3rd, 1968 and I was born in the city of Detroit. I believe it was Children's Hospital, but you know honestly I don't know...I don't know exactly if that's...that's the case, but I believe that's the case.

[01:43.5] **Mosseri:** Do you happen to know where are all of the places that you lived in Michigan as a child before you came to the City of Detroit?

[01:49.0] **Blaszkiewicz:** Yes.

[01:51.8] **Blaszkiewicz:** So I...started off...we lived in Inkster. City...uh...Western suburb of the City of Detroit and I lived there till I was about 15 years old. We moved to Dearborn Heights...at that point I lived there...uh...with my parents until I graduated high school. The...Within a couple of days of graduating high school I moved to Forest and 3rd on Wayne States campus and lived there...uh...for a couple of years. I moved after that to the Keen Building which is located on Jefferson, East Side of Detroit. Had a short stint in...uh...Ferndale and right before I got married moved back home for a short period of time, save a few dollars

and...uh...and got married...bought our first place in Plymouth...um...and then from Plymouth we moved to...[?]. I'm sorry our first place was actually an apartment in Northville. Then we moved to Plymouth and then from Plymouth to Novi. My wife has a part of our marriage covenant that says I have to live within four miles of my mother-in-law and so as part of that process she lives in Northville. We've a...we've pretty much...uh...you know run a ring around her at this point, so. Terrific woman by the way for the record, she is a wonderful, wonderful woman.

[03:16.9] **Mosseri:** And what is your in-laws names since you have mentioned them?

[03:20.5] **Blaszkiwicz:** My mother-in-law, her name is Angie. Angie McKnight.

[03:25.8] **Mosseri:** Could you please spell McKnight?

[03:27.3] **Blaszkiwicz:** M-c-...capital...-K-n-i-g-h-t.

[03:30.2] **Mosseri:** Thank you very much.

[03:32.8] **Mosseri:** How old were you when you began working for Detroit renaissance?

[03:37.7] **Blaszkiwicz:** Well, uh, let's see. I began working for Detroit Renaissance when I was 22 years old. I had spent the first 4 years out of high school...um...in college part time in working for the parade company in special events. And...uh... in I think it was in April of 1990. I...uh...had...uh...quit my job at the parade company with the intent of accelerating my now 4 year part time program for...for my bachelors. I wanted to step that up. It was within a day or so of uh...of uh...putting in my notice that I received the call from Detroit Renaissance. At the time, in 1990 they were still operating a whole series of special events. Including the...the Detroit jazz festival, they were doing the Detroit Grand Prix and the freedom festival and fireworks at the time. And I was asked to come over on...on a contract basis to...to do some work for the Detroit Grand Prix. After completing that work I spent more time here doing events I just kind-a carried over into the freedom festival and fireworks. And then after that they asked me to stay on for another contract for the Montreux Detroit jazz festival and before I knew it I was spending...you know...basically all of my time at Detroit Renaissance. There was a change in 1992/93 where they began to go through...um...a um...essentially a reorganization of Detroit Renaissance. New leadership...Bob McCabe was retiring and new...new leadership was identified and started in the tail end of 1992. A guy by the name of Bob Keller who had worked for in...in Baltimore on their revitalization strategy was hired by Detroit Renaissance by the board...uh...to come in and to refocus if you will the agenda around three things; economic development, physical development, and public policy.

[06:04.0] **Mosseri:** You had mentioned a Mr. Bob McCabe. Could you please explain what his position title was and what he did up...?

[06:09.7] **Blaszkiwicz:** Sure Bob was the...the president and CEO...I...I don't know if that's exactly correct he might have been executive director, but he was the...the head of...of Detroit Renaissance. Detroit Renaissance was I think formally created in 1970. But it was in 1972 when it really got its legs. Bob McCabe had worked for the federal government, I believe it was through housing or through HUD...he was brought on by the group that was formed of CEO's here in the area early on. Like I said 1972, and was in that position really for...for the next 20 years.

[06:53.2] **Mosseri:** What was the type of work that you were responsible for while working for Detroit Renaissance?

[06:57.7] **Blaszkiwicz:** Well it started off that I was essentially in operations related to special events. So I helped to build the race track when we had a race track in the downtown area. I worked on operations related to the freedom festival, the fireworks and the Montreux Detroit jazz festival. Which was everything from managing...um...food and beverage pieces, to entertainment components and the like and I...I had done that for a couple years. From 19...Actually for 3 years from 19...through 1992 when Bob Keller showed up his instructions to us on the operating team was to find good homes for the events. At that time Bob McCabe had been working on...a...finding a home for the Detroit Grand Prix. I believe it was IMG that picked up...that...which is a marketing company...picked up that...uh...that event. And we were in the process in finding good homes for the jazz festival and the freedom festival and...and fireworks. Ultimately the jazz festival was placed with music hall and the freedom festival fireworks were placed with the...with the parade company. Today the jazz festival I think is independent of music hall but they're both still operating here which were still really excited about and the fact that the grand prix is back is also terrific. It moved to the island...I am bouncing around here forgive me...but moved to the island. I believe it was in 1992, so for 92 and 93 it ran a couple years on the island may even been 1991. But it was...it was terrific to see all of those things continue on, again the internal focus of the organization was on economic development, physical development and public policy. So a whole new agenda was created around those activities in...in 1993.

[09:15.9] **Mosseri:** What drew you towards applying for a position and to work for Detroit Renaissance?

[09:20.1] **Blaszkiwicz:** So I had never really applied for a position. [Laughs] Great question; I wish it hadn't been that formal, but my...my own personal life has been one of serendipity. I...I started here doing these event contracts and the way I got hired, when Bob Keller came...came on he asked me as we were working on finding good homes for the events. He asked me to...to write a white paper on stadium funding and I had worked with a gentleman by the name of Glenn Lapin on...on that particular piece and then he'd asked me to write another paper on transportation funding and had put that piece together. Shortly after that Bob had c-come into my office and said "like the work why don't you just stay on, we'll make you a special projects

person” and timing was fantastic cause’ I was just finishing up my...my undergrad at...finally...at uh...at Wayne State. So I just stayed on through that period. It wasn’t long after that...had another visit from Bob in the office...every time he showed up, new things would happen... and on this visit he said, “What do you know about accounting” and I said “I know how much I don’t like it” you know as a general category. He said, “Well you got a day and a half to learn the system, we just let the book keeper go” and at this point I was a little panicked but worked my way through the process, thoroughly screwed it up and then figured it out and after a little period of time I got that managed. He came back and said, “I would like you to take on our, basically our treasury management responsibilities and the administrative responsibilities for [the] organization. So I became secretary treasurer of the company and just kind-a worked in that capacity as their director of finance and...and secretary treasurer...you know for a number of years. Essentially that’s probably the 94’, 95’ timeframe all the way up until 2001.

[11:34.3] **Mosseri:** If you remember, where were you working prior to coming to work for Detroit Renaissance?

[11:38.0] **Blaszkiwicz:** So I was at the parade company. I had spent f-f-f...almost four...I guess it was 4 years....I graduated in 1986. Spent from right after graduation from high school, I spent my time at the...the parade company. There were a couple odds and ends jobs that I had prior to that. I worked for a carpenter; I worked for a carpet cleaning and installation company...you know...just the usual type...you know...manual labor type jobs for...for a period of time, but really not a great deal of...of experience outside...outside of that.

[12:26.8] **Mosseri:** You had mentioned a Mr. Bob Keller and a Mr. Glenn Lapin.

[12:30.1] **Blaszkiwicz:** Yes.

[12:30.7] **Mosseri:** Could you please explain what their positions were in the organization and what they did?

[12:34.5] **Blaszkiwicz:** Sure, so, uh Bob Keller came in as Bob McCabe was retiring and assumed the role as president and CEO of...of Detroit Renaissance. Again...may or may not be the exact title but that’s essentially...he was the lead of the...the organization...led the staff and...obviously reported to the board of Detroit Renaissance on...on the agenda. Glenn Lapin was a...a employee of Detroit Renaissance and Glenn’s background was in urban planning...had taken on a variety of different roles related to community and economic development, physical development in particular. He had worked on the creation of some creative loan programs...predevelopment in particular and had just been a...a longtime member of Detroit Renaissance.

[13:42.1] **Mosseri:** What was the very first project you worked on as an employee of Detroit Renaissance?

[13:46.8] **Blaszkiwicz:** So my first...well it depends on if we are saying as a contract employee or as an employee-employee. As a contract employee it was special events and the very first event I participated in was the Detroit grand prix. So that...in 1990 was my first race we were at...still racing in...on the streets of downtown Detroit and so I worked on...on building the track in the...in downtown area. My first professional role with the organization was really around project management and it started with writing some white papers on transportation and on stadium funding.

[14:31.5] **Mosseri:** What did these projects mean for the City of Detroit and to you as working on those projects?

[14:38.6] **Blaszkiwicz:** Well transportation...you know you can...I got-a shelf full of transportation studies that show basically all the same thing. We have horrible public transit in the City of Detroit and so I am not sure that any of the work that we did to summarize all of this other work or that the fact that we created a positioning paper advanced the ball necessarily...everybody recognizes that as a challenge. I think what we were trying to do is get the...the team and the board in particular focused on that as a...as a strong opportunity. Stadium funding, again this predates, significantly predates the construction of Comerica Park, but it was along the lines of building new infrastructure. Having that seeded in a central district of the downtown...if you had to ask, obviously that's kind-a where it ended up. I...I s-s-strongly doubt that my white paper on stadium funding...you know...moved the needle significantly, I think the direction was already chosen and things were moving in that direction...it was really again an opportunity to begin to focus particular elements of...of financing around making that happen so that's...glad to have been engaged in the process but I doubt seriously that that had any real impact on...on the momentum.

[16:09.2] **Mosseri:** Do you remember how long these projects took?

[16:12.2] **Blaszkiwicz:** The projects themselves...I mean the papers themselves were just within...I would say several weeks, maybe within a couple of months. There is obviously researching, best practices, and looking at other examples around the country and that's fairly typical for what we...we do when we're trying to get a good sense of future direction. But that would be about it. Now when you start looking at the implementation around the outputs those are years in the making and one of the things we've learned over time is that you need to be tenacious and you need to have that...that patience in this town. I think everybody likes to believe that their town is unique I think there's...there's certain qualifications to...to working in this town. If you want to be successful in one of those is tenacity. So uh I...I just think patience and tenacity are...they may sound counterbalanced, but I think you need both of those.

[17:18.3] **Mosseri:** What do you think makes Detroit unique?

[17:22.6] **Blaszkiwicz:** Well [sighs] there's a lot...I think there is a number of things that make Detroit unique. One is its people...I...I would just start with the resilience of...of the population

here and even if I could say it this way the grittiness of its population it's...you know...the tenacity of the people that are here. That's...I think...a special feature and...and one of the reasons why I think we are beginning to see a resurgence that were seeing today is that...I saw a great t-shirt that said, "Detroit verses Everyone" and that's sometimes what it feels like but it...it...it really does have a special people here that...that are really committed to this community and are...are going to see this be ultimately successful and just have no other option in their...in their framing.

[18:22.8] **Blaszkiwicz:** There...there are other things though that I think make Detroit, maybe not wholly unique but certainly special...the level of corporate engagement that we have here and the level of philanthropy that we see in this community have been absolutely terrific. Having the quote-un-quote Big 3 greats start...but today we are spending a lot of time talking about DTE, Blue Cross and their commitment to campuses here. We certainly are talking a lot about Dan Gilbert and his investment in...in this community. There are just folks willing to sometimes defy gravity, to defy logic on...on its face. But, but certainly have their own logical approach to a...to a...to investment. Some of them economic, some of them other and I think that those communities make it...make it special.

[19:25.0] **Blaszkiwicz:** I think on the...on the down side and this has changed, but I think on the down side the lack of strong political direction or clarity on prioritization from the public sector...and this is wholly my opinion on that...has...has made it challenging if...if we wanted to look at investment in the neighborhoods as an example. It became very difficult to have any sense of what the priorities were in particular neighborhoods, what neighborhoods were priorities from the cities prospective. A...a lot of that has changed and again we see the community coming together and circling around particular pieces. One plan in particular that I would point out, would be the...the Detroit Future City plan which was released in 2012, but here you have the public sector, the private sector, and the philanthropic community all working on an output document that began to look at Detroit and its decline. You know...mid-50s we were 1.8, almost 1.9 million people...today we are around 700,000 and on that basis we've lost wealth, we've lost population, we've lost retail, we've lost commercial...manufacturing... just kind of across the board we have lost a number of things. So as you begin think about rebuilding city how do you really construct that? This is for the strong public sector really comes into play and again this goes back to its people and its community and engagement. I think that having a strong private sector, a strong philanthropic community and then working with the public sector led to this particular output.

[21:19.5] **Blaszkiwicz:** Today, we have Mayor Dug...Mayor Duggan...who has in his own right...proven his...his strength and folks desire to see some change. Here we had a write in candidate that...that did incredibly well through the voting process, but it is just an absolute leader when I comes to setting future priorities and I think we're all very excited...were still in the honeymoon phase and so everybody excited...right...but we're all very excited about the prospects of the future because we're seeing real discipline being added to the prioritization

around the geography. I mean keeping in mind Detroit is a very large city. It's a 140 square miles; nearly 138 in change and to try to take all of that on simultaneously is a remarkable challenge. So, having that approach is...is really important you can't take everything on simultaneously and you won't be successful. So as far as what makes us unique, I...I think that those probably the...the biggest pieces.

[22:34.8] **Blaszkiwicz:** I think it's also important to note what doesn't make us unique. If you look at other cities...we just spent some time with the mayor's team and...and others down in New Orleans and if you put side by side these two cities it is remarkable how the decline has paralleled e-each other. You can look at St. Louis, Pittsburg, Philadelphia...I mean there's a number of cities that have had these declines a lot of them related to either the economy...industry or what have you and...Philadelphia from worst to first...kind of...kind of city...population...a center city in particular. New Orleans has had a great deal of revitalization and invest made after the horrible event of Katrina, but they have had these turning components some of them have been more organic than others and that's I guess where Detroit differs. We...we...we had these same kind-a declines but we've been I think further in making...behind in making...that turn and especially with the recession we just went through and the...the massive loss of manufacturing jobs...that further delayed us...pushed us way back and now we've caught our breath, we've made our turn and we're starting to run as fast as we can, so.

[24:05.8] **Mosseri:** Great.

[24:07.00] **Mosseri:** What is the Detroit Investment Fund?

[24:11.2] **Blaszkiwicz:** So the Detroit Investment Fund is a series of tools that we use for investing and commercial real-estate and I'm just going to say generically jobs in the city of Detroit and in the region. It really depends on the tool. Today we have 9 different tools with more in the wings...focused again on these two categories. I...I...And let me break it up for you in pieces. On the real-estate side we get involved from the very early stages what we would call predevelopment. This is where we're investing in potential project but the dollars that we're investing look at not the viability of the project but the elements that we got-a complete to get to financing. In other words...do we have to complete our architectural engineering, do we have to complete our legal work, do we have to complete maybe the acquisition of certain other parcels to get the project t-to the point where it's financeable. And...and then we take that all way down the continuum...we'll finance through construction and then we provide gap financing. Well what does that mean? That means that the owner of the project is bringing certain dollars to the project you have the traditional sources; the banks and others that provide capital and then often what we're left in the city are, gaps of financing and so our job is to figure out how do we fill those gaps? What are the appropriate tools and then how do we get all of this stuff closed simultaneously so that we can move forward with a project. To do that, we had to create a whole variety of different...different tools. On the jobs side we get involved with emerging companies all the way to what has been Detroit's bread and butter; manufacturing, wholesale, distribution,

and logistics companies. But, we have companies through a program called the first step fund that may even be pre-revenue. Meaning that their beyond an idea but before actually generating money through the business. We have an early stage venture capital fund called Detroit Innovate that focusses obviously on early stage companies but tends to be technology driven companies...high growth opportunities in that space. We have retail programs that focus on urban retail. So these are actually the retailers themselves that get financing...we...we are financing everything from the tentative improvements in space...inventory...just a whole variety of different things to...to ensure the success of independent retail...it very, very difficult space to...to participate. Hard to find what I'd...I'd call traditional sources. So we end up creating some tools there.

[27:04.4] **Blaszkiwicz:** And then we have some tools and resources that bridge both spaces. So we have what we call new market tax credits...it's a new federal tax credit that we can use to enhance or provide equity to...to projects. We can use that either on the operating side...the business side...job side or we can use it on the commercial real-estate side...lot of flexibility with that particular tool. We have TIA or technical assistance that we can provide to...to companies...which has impacts on both real-estate and on the companies themselves. So again tools that...that help to ensure the success longer return; just a whole variety of different bits and pieces. I am gonna take it one more rung down if that's okay. So you've got these tools and resources we go to where the opportunities are and in the case of commercial real-estate we really focus in on particular geography's. We've been focused for the last...I would say 13 years on the corridor...this is the Woodward Corridor I'm referencing...from the river all the way up to the New Center area...Central East...to say freeway to freeway but the reality is...is its broader than that...its Cork-town, its Eastern Market, its Lafayette Park, Woodbridge...as...as a general rule it's the areas that surround kind-a the lodge and 75 corridors as well. But that's when our particular area focused today with the new framework that's been put out on...on Detroit Future City we are...we are now venturing off into the neighborhoods. So were in on the East Side and West Village, we're at South West Detroit, we're in 6 Mile and Livernois kind of spaces...taking that next wave and really excited about it. I mean the fact that we can now move to the neighborhoods is a...is terrific. So of...again wide variety of tools some of them very geographically focused. When we talk about the business side though we really do go where the opportunities are and on the business funds that we've put together many of them are regional. Especially our entrepreneurial tools...so we're kind of four county...Wayne, Oakland, Macomb and Washtenaw Counties as a particular area. The tools can tech-technically do things in the State of Michigan... many of them, but our focus has really been kind-a hyper-focused on Detroit...general focus on the region with the ability to go wider in that if we need to.

[29:47.7] **Mosseri:** What year did Detroit...the Detroit investment fund begin?

[29:52.1] **Blaszkiwicz:** So an easy question with a complicated answer. The first fund that was created...was created by Detroit Renaissance where I started...in 1995 when it was called the Detroit Investment Fund. And it was a private equity fund that was started with essentially the

membership of Detroit Renaissance. So Detroit Renaissance member companies and individuals...I think there were 27 of them off the top of my head. They had raised approximately 48 million dollars...there was...actually there was a total of 52, but a portion of that was set aside for a very specific project. So I am gonna to say roughly 48 million dollars that started that first fund. I went...I had the pleasure of working on that...that original fund...that was part of that Bob Keller original agenda...that was put together in 1993. As a concept it was recommended by the board in 1994 and formed and funded in 1995, so it was...sounds like a couple years but it was really a relatively short timeframe and this was a double bottom-line fund and it was at the time pretty innovative. There were a few of them out there but not a ton and the bo...double bottom line...today we hear a lot about the triple bottom lines, but d-d-double bottom line was you generate a return for your investors that's...that's one of them and the other is, in our case it would advance...kind-a the social or economic development components related to the cities revitalization. The triple bottom lines that we hear about add a third component which is a grain component most typically to...to the fund. So, we formed this double bottom line fund in 1995 and went off to go do its work but it had a few bumps and bruises that it took, it came out of the gate...investing primarily in operating companies had a fairly rough go of it...was making us switch to real-estate although still blending between real-estate and commercial investment and in 2001 the Detroit Investment fund was making a leadership change I was asked to go down the hall on an interim basis...go down keep the ship steered straight for a little while and were gonna find new leadership, and I ended up never leaving. So that was...that was terrific and...and we had some work done with the Detroit Investment Fund we brought in a guy named Mike Monahan...Mike was the president of Comerica Bank...took a...spent through (under) [?] on his way to retirement and a another guy named Chip Miller...Chip was executive vice president at Standard Fed. ABN AMRO and he, was retiring after I think a few mergers had occurred over there. We were fortunate; those were the...the two folks that were hired by the board to investigate the best possible future for the Detroit Investment Fund. So what came out of that was a recommendation to make deals bankable. Sounds pretty simple right you know you wanna leverage that owner equity position as we talked about till we merit banker traditional financing. In other words, play the role of the gap. Don't be the bank. Don't be the equity. Play the gap role and it's an appropriate role for us to play. So we were asked to stay on at the time, Roger Penske was chairing the fund...he had asked both Chip and I to stay on and after some hem-in and haw-in we...we absolutely both agreed to...to take that on and I th...I will tell you at the time Chip and I both thought it would be a short term kind of investment in the...in the process. We'd get all these dollars deployed in a short run and here I sit 13, almost 14 years later. Just enjoying...enjoying what's been built. So the Detroit Investment Fund was the first fund...we were then asked to take on...as Business Leaders for Michigan was emerging out of Detroit Renaissance...they were going through their own organizational change. We assumed some of the non-profit tools they had around predevelopment, land acquisition, and the like...brought those kind of under our care and feeding they were still maintained physically at Detroit Renaissance but we were managing them.

[34:32.8] **Blaszkiwicz:** In 2010 we formed our own foundation called Invest Detroit and it was really to group all of these tools together and to create a single umbrella entity. Th...The reality is folks don't care about the Woodward Corridor Development Fund or the Detroit Investment Fund or whatever fund we...we have by name. What they want to know is that do we have resources, that is gonna solve their issue, do we have resource that's gonna bridge the gap in their particular project or are there things that we can help them on the business side that are going to solve other challenges that they're experiencing and...so we went to...this was a discussion around a house of brands or a branded house and obviously we ended up with a branded house we put all of...packed all of our tools underneath that we actually ended up moving all of those nonprofit tools as Business Leaders was emerging from Detroit Renaissance to us and then we started creating our own tools and resources under that umbrella. In 2011 we went for a designation under the Department of Treasury called CDFI...co...It's a...it...it allows you to apply for public loan tools and grants. Its...it...CDFI stands for Community Development Finance...Financial Institution and again it's a designation you've gotta go through a...a pretty extensive process to get qualified as a CDFI and then you renew that every...I think it's every two years or so that you've gotta renew this statues of that CDFI. But that was an important designation for us to...to pick up it allowed us to access different tools and resources. Around that same timeframe we also started what they called a CDE...Community Development Entity...that was eligible to put in an application for new market tax credits and so we went through that process and then submitted for...for some of these, tax credits and were successful. So...you know...you look at us today and it looks like a whole bunch of bits and pieces but there behind all of that cloudiness...there really is some order and some specific intent behind those tools.

[37:03.3] **Mosseri:** When did Detroit Renaissance become Business Leaders of Michigan and why did the name change?

[37:09.3] **Blaszkiwicz:** So, I would have to double check on the exact date but it had to be around that 2010-11 time frame is my guess.¹ Again that...that...have to verify that but that's about right and the reason is really once again we are catching up to where the rest of... [Laughs]...rest of the United States had already moved to a large extent. The history had been that these civic CEO driven organizations focused primarily on their downtowns or their cities...their major urban cities...were formed...this happened a lot in the 60s and 70s in particular although you can find a much longer history of that kind of...you know...engagement of CEO's with their cities. The organizations across the country were starting to make migration. In fact I wrote a paper for Paul Hillegonds who was a president and CEO of Detroit Renaissance for a period of time as well, terrific...terrific guy...I think to add that value statement to it. Paul had asked me to do a paper on these other CEO organizations best practices, where were they going and directionally and this is...I'm guessing 98', 99' somewhere in that time frame...directionally we had already seen a great deal of broadening in the agendas, broadening in the geographies, in...in many cases we saw the CEO's civic organization merging with the chamber like organizations...smaller

business mixing with the bigger businesses and becoming a larger regional organizations. So what...what was going on here was that BLM had started off as Detroit Renaissance focused specifically on the city; really on its core...the city itself. Then it moved to kind of a regional focus as Detroit Renaissance and then over time moved to a statewide CEO driven organization and that's where Business Leader for Michigan came in. That was under the leadership of Doug Rothwell. Doug today is the president/CEO of Business Leaders and its predecessor Detroit Renaissance; so he took it through that trance...that transformation into this new organization.

[39:46.7] **Mosseri:** Thank you.

[39:48.1] **Mosseri:** What was the impact of Detroit Renaissance when you worked there in the late 1980s and early 1990's and what is the impact of Business Leaders of Michigan now?

[39:58.2] **Blaszkiwicz:** So very different agendas. And I will add if you don't kind of a middle point to that. The...the first side of that if we talk about the late 80s and the early 90s we have to create some context for what the organization was doing. This organization really started to look at physical development in fact the building that were looking, that were sitting in here, the Renaissance Center was a kind of an outgrowth of...of the work that in started 1972 and the business community obviously wanted to make a substantial investment in...in the community. Try to reignite some of the development in the...in the community. So when we got to the early 80s the economy was in a horrible state it didn't make a lot of sense to peruse these physical developments and so what the organization did is it kind of reoriented itself to showcasing the city. This is my way of framing it, not necessarily what...what the...the minutes would reflect in their...in their history. But showcasing meant how do we highlight this city and its...all of its glory so that we can get both national and international recognition for...for this community and that became theses international events. When Grand Prix Racing was brought here...it was brought as Formula 1 Racing, an international racing event that brought people in from around the globe. The Montreux Detroit jazz festival was intended to really showcase Detroit's long history with jazz and reflected another kind of nationally or internationally recognized...internationally recognized jazz festival in Montreux, Switzerland. The freedom festival and fireworks obviously a great way just to celebrate community and international community...being our friends in Canada. But all ways to kind of highlight the city and put it...it in a good framing and the like and I think that just kinda carried on through the 80s as it was very difficult to take on some of the physical development elements that were a part of its history.

[42:25.5] **Blaszkiwicz:** So that brought us up to the early 90s. Change in leadership always means...especially in smaller organization...major change in agendas and Bob Keller came in and again it was focused on economic development, physical development, and public policy. Bob Keller viewed those as a three legged stool and that...that became the...the drivers which meant that by definition we were going to move beyond just...just the elements that were put in place and in fact divest ourselves of these special events and focus on rebuilding...if you

will...community. Today, Business Leaders has really been...has become a very significant public policy focused statewide organization. The Michigan turnaround plan I think has been a strong influencer to...to public policy here in the state if you look at what's happened around tax structure and...and the like business environment elements and how we are focused on a comparative basis I think that...that organizations have done a terrific job of-f...first of all refining-defining that agenda and then just doing a terrific job on the implementation of that agenda, so; that continues on, they just ran a new version of the Michigan turnaround plan and kind-a the next wave and I expect that they'll continue...have strong discipline around that...that implementation.

[44:08.6] **Mosseri:** What do feel is the greatest accomplishment that you achieved while working with Detroit Renaissance?

[44:15.6] **Blaszkiwicz:** Wow, that's lots to choose from there...that's a terrific question. I think sometimes it's the simple things that keep on giving. The creation of some of the smaller loan programs, especially the ones that focused on early stage development...physical development...I mentioned one of the funds Glenn Lapin and I both worked on the...the predevelopment fund that was created...it was created with support by a...a...a foundation here in the area called Hudson Weber. And they seeded this predevelopment fund Glenn kind-a started the process, I got engaged I think right after its funding and then we shaped that tool that is still a very successful tool today and I think you can trace a lot of the growth and development in midtown and downtown to the investments that were made two decades ago.

[45:24.7] **Mosseri:** You had mentioned a Mr. Glenn Weber. Could you please...?

[45:27.7] **Blaszkiwicz:** Glenn Weber?

[45:28.2] **Mosseri:** Um-hm.

[45:30.2] **Blaszkiwicz:** Glenn Lapin?

[45:33.1] **Blaszkiwicz:** Sorry.

[45:34.5] **Mosseri:** No it's...it not a problem...um...I believe I must have misheard you then. I thought, you had mentioned working with a Mr. Glenn Weber.

[45:43.1] **Blaszkiwicz:** Nope. Hudson Weber was the...was the...was the foundation that ...that helped fund, a fund that Glenn Lapin. I might have said, I absolutely might have said Gl-Glen Weber but I apo-apologize if that's the case.

[45:55.4] **Mosseri:** No. Not...not a problem. Thank you for the correction.

[46:00.4] **Mosseri:** What was one of the most memorable projects that you worked on with Detroit Renaissance as opposed to the greatest accomplishments that you had while working with Detroit Renaissance?

Blaszkiwicz: [Breathing]

[46:19.8] **Blaszkiwicz:** Let me think about that for a second because we had...just a terrific amount. I...I mean honestly...I think that for me; from a programmatic perspective was the creation of the Detroit Investment Fund. Working on that was...I got to work on that directly with Bob Keller that was a project that...that I took on and I...I think that's had...obviously it has had a great impact on my career and future and that was the basis for everything that Invest Detroit today.

[46:55.1] **Mosseri:** My final question for you is what projects would you like to see fully realized before you decide to retire and what do you see as your next step?

[47:05.5] **Blaszkiwicz:** So that's a terrific question. For me what does success look like its...its truly the revitalization of the city...well what is that mean, that means really the repopulation of the city of Detroit. New retail, new commercial, new opportunities but the best way I think that gets translated and the heavyif...heaviest lifting that we have to do today is around Detroit's neighborhoods. If you look at Detroit's history we had these strong neighborhoods...lot of annexation that took place during the 20s and 30s...but this strong communities that have always been a...a part of the backbone of this...this great city and when you drive some of our challenged neighborhoods today it's hard to envision the...the absolute revitalization of those particular areas. To me it...it really...you can have different commercial components you can have different things kind-a come in and out but it ultimately, for me success is gonna be measured by the vibrancy of the neighborhoods.

[48:21.9] **Mosseri:** You mentioned this vibrancy of the neighborhoods and the revitalization of them. Which communities do you see as being the backbones for this revitalization?

[48:33.3] **Blaszkiwicz:** Well I...That's a simple question, but a tough...again a tough answer. There are so many historic neighborhoods across th-this city...I don't know that if we selected three of them that would be at least in my mind what success looks like. I think when we talk about success for this city we really do need to see all boats raised by a...by a...by a tide that is moving in and t-that everyone has an opportunity to benefit from. If you start thinking about density from...from our perspective that means really increasing this...same at the may...the mayor's put out his...he's got one metric and that is the increase in population. I think from our perspective we would follow that same basic belief that this is really dependent on population. When you start thinking about that means in neighborhoods it mean a diversity in incomes, it means being able to rebuild much of the commercial corridors, it means close proximity to jobs, good public transportation, but more generally good mobility. It's all of those elements; it's what you see in highly functioning cities today. We have a lot of those ingredients in place but we have to have that as a benefit to the entire community not just to kind of the midtown-downtown areas. We have to see that expand and grow to include all 140 square miles.

[50:11.5] **Mosseri:** Well how do you see the Detroit Investment Fund and Detroit Renaissance contributing towards the cities growth? Moving forward?

[50:20.5] **Blaszkiwicz:** So, well Business Leaders today...formerly Detroit Renaissance...will continue to provide good direction on public policy good agendas around Michigan's turnaround primarily focused on the commercial sector, I think...Invest Detroit will do I think what it's...what its really positioned itself to do and that's to focus on targeted geographic areas for revitalization and in...in all respects that means commercial retail and residential and I think on the jobs side we're going to continue to invest in the very early to very light stage companies. We'll probably continue to add new tools to support that growth and development but that is our intent we think that we're...we're having a positive influence on the market and the more that we can get out there and work the...the more we can be a part it's success. That...I think it's gonna be more of the same for us right now.

[51:24.8] **Mosseri:** You had mentioned Michigan turnaround...you have mentioned that a couple of times. What does that mean to you? What does Michigan turnaround mean?

[51:34.0] **Blaszkiwicz:** Well the first Michigan turnaround plan that was put forth by Business Leaders for Michigan was put out at time when we had seen a pretty significant decline in our commercial sector and it was really focused on and how do we make this a more attractive place for businesses as a...as a general rule. There are many other aspects to the plan and some very specific programmatic outputs that they put in there, but the general focus was on creating a...a very strong business environment and I think that they have been very successful in implementing the specific aspects of those plans that...that the items they identified in those plan and as I have mentioned they just...they just put forth their next wave or next version of the Michigan turnaround, which gives us our next list of instructions to focus on there. I do think it's important that...that we continue to make good forward progress on the commercial side because there's always a strong balance between the commercial and the physical kind-a components.

[52:42.1] **Blaszkiwicz:** Jobs are just fundamentally important to...to development.

[52:49.9] **Mosseri:** Is there anything else that you would like to mention about what it was like for you working with Detroit Renaissance that we haven't already covered?

[53:00.4] **Blaszkiwicz:** No. I mean it was a real...it was a terrific honor to be able to work for an organization one with the history that it had. Two, while we didn't really did talk about this the...the board membership that it had when you think about folks like Roger Penske, Max Fisher, Al Taubman, Peter Stroh...I mean to...to be in the same room with...with these really terrific minds and leaders of...of industry and...and corporations it was a...it was a terrific honor. There was a lot that I have l-learned just being allowed to be a fly on the wall for the early years and then to actually participate in some of the programmatic stuff it was terrific...a terrific experience. They've always provided me with opportunities beyond what...[Laughs]...what I thought I was capable of at the time and I am always going to be most appreciative of that

opportunity. As I mentioned on the front side of this discussion this really has been a career of...of opportunity and serendipity and Detroit Renaissance really made all of that possible.

[54:13.7] **Mosseri:** I do have a follow up question for you.

[54:15.1] **Blaszkiwicz:** Um-hm.

[54:16.7] **Mosseri:** You had mentioned being in a room with gentlemen such as Max Fisher and the like. What was that like for you coming into a room with that...

[54:26.4] **Blaszkiwicz:** Well the first...

[54:27.2] **Mosseri:** That kind of stature?

[54:27.4] **Blaszkiwicz:** Well the first few times kind of going into a room like that was incredibly intimidating and again these were folks that...that I had read about that I had done case reviews in...in class on...on a number of these folks that the...the legend of some of their deals, etc... investments what have you. It...it was intimidating and then you...you...I had the p-pri kind-a the privilege or the pleasure of learning what great personalities some of these folks had...if you know of course part and parcel to their success in some cases, but a-a hugely diverse group of folk too. I mean we had the banks, the utilities, the auto companies, retailers...just a really diverse group of folk and then over time when you think about that from a resource perspective where else can you find those kind-a access points then with these kind of special organizations, so I mean, it truly was a unique and special time frame and I think it survived much longer than many of those organizations. Today Business Leaders...you know...same kind-a composition...in fact even larger they're probably up to around 80 members today of CEO's from across this...this state and we are truly blessed to...to have that level of corporate engagement around...around our own futures.

[56:01.8] **Mosseri:** Well thank you so much...

[56:02.8] **Blaszkiwicz:** Was my pleasure.

[56:03.0] **Mosseri:** ...for meeting with me today and you have, a very lovely...

[56:08.8] **Blaszkiwicz:** You do the same. Thanks so much.

[56:11.6] End Transcript

Footnote

¹ Business Leaders for Michigan was organized in 2009 out of the group formerly called Detroit Renaissance, when it expanded to include business executives from throughout the state, with a broader focus.

Economic Development in Detroit Oral History Project

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David Blaszkiewicz: Detroit, Michigan

By: Adam Joseph-Abraham Mosseri