Madelyn Plummer

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[00:00:26.740] - Jason Ilstrup

Welcome to the Downtown Down-Low podcast where we hear from our members every month and learn something new about downtown Madison. All right let's get into it.

[00:00:39.360] - Jason Ilstrup

Welcome to this edition of the downtown download Downtown Madison Inc's podcast. Talk about anything and everything downtown today. We are so lucky to have a board member and most importantly Deputy Mayor of Madison, Leslie Orrantia. Hello Leslie, how are you?

[00:00:56.330] - Leslie Orrantia

Hi Jason, I'm great. I'm great. Thanks for having me on.

[00:00:59.010] - Jason Ilstrup

Well we're very excited to learn more about what is a Deputy Mayor and who is Leslie Orrantia. Just a note, Leslie and I are friends so we're gonna make this a very friendly and cordial conversation. Are you ready?

[00:01:11.280] - Leslie Orrantia

I better be.

[00:01:12.290] - Jason Ilstrup

 Are you nervous?

[00:01:12.380] - Leslie Orrantia

Always.

[00:01:14.320] - Jason Ilstrup

Did you think I was going I be like, very taciturn and short with you?

[00:01:17.770] - Leslie Orrantia

I don't even know you anymore.

[00:01:21.220] - Jason Ilstrup

Well, this is starting off well for our viewers. I don't know if anyone is actually viewing, its listeners more than anything else. So, you have a really cool title, " Deputy Mayor." What is a Deputy Mayor?

[00:01:33.240] - Leslie Orrantia

 I do have a cool title. So, a deputy mayor is typically a liaison out of the mayor's office. So, you operate on behalf of the administration and coordinate functions for the city. So, my role specifically is economic development, transportation, and Intergovernmental Affairs. So, I both oversee the division of economic development and the Department of Transportation, trying to coordinate those. So, I was intentional in trying to craft that position with the goal of those two working a little bit more closely together with consideration to workforce transportation being a significant challenge and need for our region. But Intergovernmental Affairs is also federal lobbying. Obviously, we have a lobbying contract with the federal entity. I oversee that contract and that relationship as well as serve as the state lobbyist, and I help with some of the coordination and relationship building with the county as well as our region at large.

[00:02:19.020] - Jason Ilstrup

That sounds like a tremendous amount of work.

[00:02:22.860] - Leslie Orrantia

It is. I am tired, as many people say all of the… all the time folks ask me like, “How are you doing”, and I'm like, " Tired,” which honestly is honest. But at the same time kind of ridiculous because if there were no changes then you should probably find a new word.

[00:02:38.230] - Jason Ilstrup

 I'll say for a city resident, you are everywhere --because those are a couple of areas that DMI works in very closely, right, economic development and transportation, and it's so awesome to see you participating in so many meetings, inviting so many different community members to the table. It's pretty cool. What's your favorite part of your job?

[00:02:54.690] - Leslie Orrantia

That's a great question. It is probably that things are so multifaceted. I think my every day is very different and the variety, even in my last role working in the chancellor's office with city and county government and community partnerships was varied, and that's something that I think is a strength of mine, just this kind of generalist capacity and connecting dots where otherwise people don't either have the relationships or the understanding of different viewpoints to be able to connect those dots. And so that is both a privileged position but also a really great opportunity to align some of the work of our city in the best interests of our residents at large.

[00:03:28.770] - Jason Ilstrup

How do you bring different people together to connect those dots? I feel like the city government works well for some people, but not always for people that don't have as much access. I'm assuming one of the big things you're working on is how do you get access to city government. How do you do that?

[00:03:41.850] - Leslie Orrantia

Absolutely. I think I believe deeply in public service obviously or my entire career wouldn’t have been devoted to it.

[00:03:49.070] - Jason Ilstrup

You've made some very, very strange work choices.

[00:03:52.830] - Leslie Orrantia

 But that said, I think a lot of that really has to do with transparency. Right? A lot of the challenges that we as individuals might navigate in our day to day is because life is hard. But some of that is made harder if we don't have access to information or resources. And so, that's probably one of my biggest challenges in this role is stepping in and realizing that we don't have communication staff. I mean outside of a handful of units like Madison's police department, we don't have dedicated, formal communications trained staff, which means we have to do that, right, which is appropriate and necessary. But there's only so much time in the day. But as it relates to connecting different people, I was fortunate to step into this role with a wide range of relationships across sectors and across communities. And I think both that gives me a holistic understanding of some of the challenges and even opportunities and ways we can address some of the challenges that we're navigating. But it also means that I can connect dots or people that haven't otherwise been connected formally or otherwise. And I think one of the things I've relied on really heavily is my memory which increasingly it seems is compromised

[00:04:53.240] - Jason Ilstrup

Is it getting more full?

[00:04:54.050] - Leslie Orrantia

Yeah, I think we attribute that to old age, I have like four gray hairs.

[00:04:57.270] - Jason Ilstrup

 I'm not going to comment on a lady’s age here, yeah, while we're being recorded

[00:05:03.360] - Leslie Orrantia

But I think that has been really interesting and really helpful. But it's kind of like I feel like my brain is a CRM, right, like a Customer Relations Management tool where it's this network of relationships the network effect if you will. I realize I'm on DMI's podcast not thee Chamber's.

[00:05:17.590] - Jason Ilstrup

No, we love Zachary over at the Chamber and what he does to get eleven hundred people to his events is an amazing network.

[00:05:24.230] - Leslie Orrantia

 Absolutely. And to me, I think, I personally think that power is concentrated in four ways to facilitate change. And one of those four is actually political and social capital, right? And so, those relationships are hugely critical for both making change but also sustaining that change. And so, to me, my memory has been really heavily informative for what relationships we work on. What are the quick and easy wins across the issue areas that the mayor needs in order for our city to be seen as moving forward despite the typical slow pace of city government? And it's been something that I've really relied on heavily especially with consideration to my last role and the relationships I was afforded the opportunity to build there. That said, of course, lots and lots of work yet to do. And my memory does occasionally fail me, so we'll see where we go from here.

[00:06:11.030] - Jason Ilstrup

Well let's talk about that last role. I think that's super important. The community should know how already your part of this community had so many great, great networks and great contacts. What did you do prior to coming to the city Madison?

[00:06:25.640] - Leslie Orrantia

 I have, professionally, I would say spent a great deal of time here in the city of Madison and I've been a resident for a little over a dozen years and bought a house here ten years ago and absolutely took root at that point for a lot of reasons. I think there's a lot of unique things that Madison has to offer including obviously, my personal and professional opportunities I've been afforded here have been significant and have helped tie me down here. But I also think that I've found a place here in order to help facilitate change. And my last role I had worked--- actually I should start a little bit further back, maybe. I spent a number of years as a caseworker in south Madison serving the county and even other regions across the state. And that has heavily informed how I think critically, how I build relationships that are a lot more representative of our larger population, how I ask critical questions and even how I leverage my relationships with folks in relative power to push back and ensure that decisions that we're making are informed. And then that really pushed me into the university where I'd oversee a number of relationships within the School of Education, largely business administration. So, I had done, you know, alumni relations work, essentially public relations marketing, some of that stuff. I, as a woman of color here, have felt really limited I think, in my professional opportunities as it relates to connecting with other folks like me. And so, I was a founding member of Latino Professionals Association and that really helped kind of catapult me into a number of opportunities and thinking critically about volunteerism and how that was really near and dear to my heart. And so fast forward I ended up being within the School of Education part of a startup-- a long name-- we do that well at the university as well as actually, in city government. It's called the Wisconsin Education Research Network and really, the goal of that was to connect education policy, practice and research more holistically to ensure education access and achievement across our state and all students were able to thrive obviously in the context of our K12 education system. And I was assistant director there for a number of years before my last role, where I stepped into the chancellor's office as director of community relations. And so, in that role I worked with city and county government as well as again, community at large and that was very multifaceted and very heartwarming. I think the university is an incredible resource. In my nine or so years on campus, I’ve not only learned a great deal, but I learned something every day, right? It's sixty-six thousand people; students, staff, faculty, as well as visitors that are doing really valuable work. That said, to me, it's the tree and the forest issue, right, where that tree in the forest falls, nobody's around to hear it. Similarly, if you're doing great work and nobody knows about it, or it's not applicable to real life or other people in our community, is it really a value? And so, the last role was incredibly, was just an incredible privilege, to serve and connect having practice inform research to inform policy. And in my last role having worked with city and county government there were context in which we'd find opportunities for policy to inform the work that the city was doing so there was greater alignment and therefore more seamless service across jurisdictions to our area residents or if it was a matter of informing research through practice. So that was research that was actually a value add versus something that was a mere curiosity of some kind. So, the role itself, while really robust also afforded me an opportunity to better connect city and county government with the university. And obviously that's something I've brought with me that I care very, very deeply about. I do think that we're better together. As it's applied to this role, it's been really nice because I think our region is a region in a way that it hadn't been used before. And having worked on some of the issues I worked on in my last year, like transportation, bringing that with me has been really valuable because I also brought relationships with outlying mayors and I'm bringing, as the state lobbyist, a vision that is heavily complementary to the mayor's interests of working collaboratively across the state to better tell that story of how we truly are better together. Madison is a better place because of the robust, awesome nature of the many things that our state produces and how and we're therefore a complement to them as well with our economic growth and vitality. And so, long answer, my multifaceted background which is really spanning marketing, public relations, communications and business administration, I think have been heavily complemented by wide ranging relationships that have positioned me for, I would say, even easy wins, or I should say a lesser steep learning curve as I've transitioned into the mayor's office.

[00:10:58.410] - Jason Ilstrup

 So, to me, you are just such an amazing connector of people and you can hear that with the story you just told of working at UW, working for the School of Education, working for the county. She's fanning herself going "Yes, I am great..."

[00:11:10.890] - Leslie Orrantia

You're making me blush, I don't blush.

[00:11:10.950] - Jason Ilstrup

But your ability to connect people is in the top 1 percent, right? I mean, you really know how to connect people, but I think that is so important right now as the city continues to grow. It has some challenges we haven't seen because of that growth. How do we continue to connect even more whether its governments, between public and private, nonprofit and private? How do we connect even deep into great strong relationships so that we're all working on these problems together to get them solved?

[00:11:42.130] - Leslie Orrantia

Well, first I want to thank you for that compliment and say that I think you are also quite the connector and I think some of it following in your likeness as a hospitality area. I feel it's just not only who we are but it's something that is really low hanging fruit that a lot of people don't necessarily see as such. And the importance of connecting, again to me, I think change is made by a handful of ways and some of that is changing minds and changing hearts and that means listening and validating who people are, what they need, what their concerns are, and then bringing people together because we have more that's actually similar than otherwise. And I think the reality is if and where those relationships don't exist people fill in the gaps right. They fill in these blanks and assume X Y or Z about that constituency or otherwise that ends up informing based on an anecdote. And that's not how systems are changed for the better. It's also not how policy should be created, right? So, I just feel very strongly about that and that's obviously something that's integral to who I am. So, there's an actual question in here, you know. How do we do more?

[00:12:45.780] - Jason Ilstrup

Exactly. How do we take it to that next level as our city continues to grow?

[00:12:49.210] - Leslie Orrantia

That's a really, really fabulous question that I wrestle with a lot because we have a great deal of civic engagement here, right? And that's something that is I think in some ways a blessing and a curse. The campus was actually an interesting parallel in this regard, with shared governance structure, right? Everybody has a voice. Therefore, it takes forever to get something done because you seek representation. Similarly, city government-- I don't think that's harmful--I think it's always for the best obviously to have more voices rather than fewer. I think the question is are these voices representative? And I think, more importantly, is us being in it for the other guy, right, or the other girl or the other person. I think very realistically one of the challenges we have as a hyper-educated, hyper-engaged Madison is we have an academic perspective of some of the challenges that are impacting other communities that we seek to represent or even call upon when it comes to policymaking or even changes in practice. And I think that's really hard, that's really problematic because the second you say something is interesting...I'll actually give you a very specific point, an anecdote, of a colleague. This mentor, if you will, that had shared with me at this point in time that there's a switch that comes when there's too much time and not enough interesting, to too much interesting and not enough time. And I pushed back on that thinking because it's not about interesting it's not about me as the individual although I might be a beneficiary of whatever experience or whatever exposure but instead it should be about importance. So too much importance not enough time. And so, we need to think critically about how and where we're using our time. And the challenge as it relates to other people is if we're talking about other communities if we anecdotally understand some of the challenges that other people or their other perspectives have no matter the issue, we're still filling in these blanks probably inaccurately or in anecdotal capacities right. If we have one or two or three relationships, it's not representative. So, as it relates to what people can do to build relationships, we have a very segregated community.

[00:14:43.960]

 And there are very few spaces like schools or libraries that are lesser segregated. They're just more organically diverse. But we have a changing community. And if we really value that diversity as a strength, we need to all be our full selves and bring that full self into all of these spaces and really celebrate the difference that exists in lieu of just being blind to it. Right? And suggesting, again anecdotally or from a data perspective, that this and this and this might be the needs of various constituents. And that's one of the things I find really critical is that that's obviously why I'm a connector. I have this, I think you're very much like this as well, we have this code switch capacity we could talk to anybody. We see value in talking to everybody. That's not necessarily everyone's skill set but it's something I want to share not only with the world in a professional capacity as well as personal. But it's something I think is and should be integral to who we all are as a community that cares about one another and celebrates where we're going, doing it together.

[00:15:38.940] - Jason Ilstrup

 So, getting to that relationship building and the connecting that we both like to do. And I think we both agree that we need more of that in the city. Where do we need that and what issues are really the challenging challenges right now, but also what are the opportunities?

[00:15:53.390] - Leslie Orrantia

Great question. I think my hope is that everyone knows the answer. You know the mayor really campaigned on priorities that were also seen as primary issues for me. But arguably because she knocked on a lot of doors a lot of people told her the same thing. Really, we're talking about transportation primarily bus rapid transit. We need to figure this out before our economy is choked. There are a lot of people that are challenged basically with the existing infrastructure we have which is insufficient despite as good as we try to be. And even as much recognition as we've got nationally, specifically for our metro transit system it's not sufficient. And it's not meeting the needs of all local residents. In addition to that of course affordable housing I mean we just have exploding costs. We have a lack of both variety of stock but also obviously affordability at various levels. And that is something we need to figure out; some of this is just meaning we're growing into a region. So, we need to think creatively and intentionally about how as a region we solve these challenges together. There is, of course, limitations within the context of state law and the permissions allocated to municipalities. But I will say that that's been a priority as we've built relationships early on within the county and even beyond. The other, of course, is climate change, right. It's happening. We've seen flooding in our community, we've seen a lot of unanticipated challenges related to climate. And obviously it's only going to continue to grow, right? We have what is called a one in five-hundred-year storm, meaning it should happen one in five hundred years, happening once or twice a year now. This is only going to continue it impacts thousands of residents none of whom have flood insurance, right? And obviously there's trauma, right? I had a colleague of mine who was directly impacted by the floods last year. This was obviously before I was in my role. I was on a board with them and they had come to the table and teared up in their sharing of a week and a half prior their experience. And one of the things I kept thinking about is not only the economic impacts but the health impacts, specifically mental health. In addition to the actual physical health, if you have mold in your basement if you don't have fiscal resources to be able to accommodate this need, if you can't afford to move, right? Or, you might be able to afford to move out to Stoughton or elsewhere, but you can't afford a car or insurance, right? All of these things are compounding and challenging for people. But I was thinking specifically about the trauma. So, even as we had talked about in your last question, this idea how we connect with people. I mean this person, one of the things that really resonated with me in that experience when they shared this with their board was: 1). It felt like either the emotional significance of this experience and how it needed to come forward in that space, OR their trust and rapport with other members of this board. But the reality that just like this person thousands of other people were impacted and literally suffering, right? It's a trauma, right? It is absolutely a trauma. And yet we don't necessarily acknowledge it as such as a larger community. We aren't saying like, “Hey are you impacted, how are you doing. How is your family?" And I think some of that speaks to one of the challenges actually I have in this role which is we're moving a billion miles an hour and there's not always that opportunity for real genuine connection. I mean I'm very intentional about never having my phone in front of me when I'm in a meeting, never having a laptop open, I'm always on a notepad. I try to be very present because I know that my time is hard to get and shouldn't be harder than anyone else's. But those connections are harder and harder to come by. So that full presence I think is important. So, back to the priorities thing. You know obviously as I mentioned transportation, affordable housing, as well as increased housing and stock various stock as well as climate change, we have racial equity. Right. It is and should be a priority in our community whether or not the majority of our community recognizes this. This is something that nationally is telling our story for us especially as it relates to our growing economy or our interest especially private sector interest in engaging recruiting and hopefully retaining a more diverse population. We're trying to pull in the best and brightest and arguably a lot of those folks are coming from at least more diverse places, so are interested and exposed to a different culture than what we have here. And the second thing if they're folks of color or if they're folks in representing some other underrepresented population locally, you have this huge issue related to recruitment and retention. Some of that is because of the narrative itself. But some of that is even if we're bringing them in an executive salary and we have these huge racial inequities in our community, this community isn't really embodying the full values that we have, that we claim to have, I should say. And so those are really significant priorities, of course, that the mayor ran on. Those are things that we're working on significantly. I would argue that we've had a couple quick wins but of course this is long game work and some cities just haven't figured it out right. So, my hope is that we can figure this out together. And of course, these are things that are as a Madisonian, I mean I've been at home here for more than a decade. I absolutely want to work on these issues and it's something that I know we collectively have no choice but to work on in order to really advance our city and our region for the better and ensure that everybody has the opportunity to thrive.

[00:21:04.430] - Jason Ilstrup

So, I do think it's important that we make sure that that diversity inclusion work is part of everything we do. And I think what happens is sometimes people can see it as a separate issue but it's not. To me it's only going to work if you understand that transportation has a huge diversity equity inclusion site affordable housing as well climate change all of the things you're bringing up. I think that your administration and who you're working for really do understand that. How do we make sure we get that message out to the rest of the city that this needs to be part of the conversation in everything we do?

[00:21:36.460] - Leslie Orrantia

Well said Jason I think one of the blessings and curses that is doing equity, diversity and inclusion work is, especially in the Midwest, where this is you know I should even say that nationally this is a trend rate. We see these positions popping up but absolutely more so in the Midwest especially in more recent years. And while it's really important, the reality is, we're thinking of it from a structural versus a cultural perspective. Structurally we want accountability. Therefore, it is X person's job to manage that and identify and check those boxes right identify the priorities and check the boxes accordingly. That said that is important but if you effectively have that and they don't have the political capital well say to effectively imagine across an organization you don't have other folks buying it. And because those folks think in maybe economic development or transportation or whatever the area, they think that that work is done over there by that person by that unit. And so, you inherently have this goal of trying to move equity and inclusion forward by creating an accountability measure by pulling a person in place and creating those tangibles. But as a product of that while you're moving closer right, you're essentially moving closer to the target. You still have this issue of being pushed further back from the target because you've more people thinking that the work is otherwise done. I would absolutely agree. That is why my role is shaped the way it is when we need essentially regional state and federal lobbying effectively to be aligned right and in alignment with our priorities. We also need workforce transportation specifically as a top priority of our mayor and arguably one of our city. We need to be working on that now and it needs to be tied to the government relations piece so it can be most effective. That said economic development and transportation have huge implications on equity and access no matter whether you're a person of color, low income no matter the context that equity and inclusion piece is absolutely foundational to who we all are and what we all do. And yet it's not. So that is one thing I think that relates in a major way to losing the academic focus of the nature of the way we understand issues in our city. It is important to have data. I'm not at all trying to suggest otherwise. I believe deeply in data, but I think there's more to it than that. We can't have one or two or three people in our lives that share anecdotes that share these perspectives either it's a, “Yes and”, we need to have relationships. I mean to be full people write with integrity operating with the values that our city seeks to uphold.

[00:24:01.690] - Jason Ilstrup

Leslie we are so lucky to have you as deputy mayor, to have a visionary thinker like you. You are someone that is pushing the envelope a younger leader this community needs as we grow to become a larger city. So, thank you very much for everything you do.

[00:24:16.480] - Leslie Orrantia

Thank you to Jason. I appreciate you in this role as well as obviously as a leader in our community but also at DMI. You folks are doing some really important work especially around the connection building especially across sectors which as we know is needed now more than ever.

[00:24:29.640] - Jason Ilstrup

Well I think that is very nice of you, but not so nice that I'm not going to ask you five Fast and Furious questions.

[00:24:36.200] - Leslie Orrantia

Darn it!

[00:24:36.350] - Jason Ilstrup

Yes. You know right before we went on air, I said you know what let's not do the Fast and Furious style. This is just too serious a topic. Well we're gonna throw that out the window. Are you ready for the Fast and Furious?

[00:24:47.010] - Leslie Orrantia

I told you about neither fast nor furious

[00:24:48.860] - Jason Ilstrup

Well, we're going to see what happens because I don't have any questions written down, so they're going to come off the top of my head. What is your favorite restaurant in Madison?

[00:24:56.190] - Leslie Orrantia

O-o-o probably Fresco. Service is a huge issue, I think, in Madison. Fresco has consistent service. And then when they don’t, they will acknowledge it.

[00:25:05.920] - Jason Ilstrup

You're right. That answer was neither fast or furious, but it was a good answer. What's your favorite Madison library?

[00:25:13.870] - Leslie Orrantia

That's a tough one because they're all different. And I really I.....

[00:25:18.340] - Jason Ilstrup

 This is the great political answer.

[00:25:19.560] - Leslie Orrantia

But they are! I mean when I grew up... so my mom volunteered with literacy tutoring when I was in high school. So, I started doing it really early. So, I did it for about 10 years. My mom still does. It's been like, I don't even know how old I am, but she's been doing it for like 15 years. And so, part of it was like it was my introduction to so many pieces of this world and to my own curiosity. But the other thing is as I mentioned earlier, we see, (neither fast nor furious), but we are so we are so segregated in this community. And it's one of very few places that really feels and is representative of an overall population. So, I love learning. I love knowledge. I love sharing. I love connecting and it represents all of that and all of them kind of have their own feel. So, I would say maybe two, no maybe three

[00:26:03.940] - Jason Ilstrup

Well your answer was neither fast not furious, but it was insightful What's the best book you've read this year?

[00:26:03.960] - Leslie Orrantia

 Oh wow. Best book I've read this year. OH, there's a long answer, “The Country Dentist and the Cadaver King”.

[00:26:23.550] - Jason Ilstrup

Is that one book or two?

[00:26:24.420] - Leslie Orrantia

It is one book. It sounds like a very dysfunctional punk band or something but ...It is a very insightful book. It is heavy. It essentially is the story of how forensic science is not real and how largely it is perpetuated inequity and created dysfunction within the legal world. And it is exceptionally well written. It is very heavy.

[00:26:48.100] - Jason Ilstrup

What's the name again?

[00:26:50.100] - Leslie Orrantia

 The Country Dentist and the Cadaver King.

[00:26:52.830] - Jason Ilstrup

It's going on my list right now. What podcast you're listening to right now?

[00:26:57.400] - Leslie Orrantia

Do you know... I think.... I'm trying to remember. I think it was the Ezra Klein show.

[00:27:03.320] - Jason Ilstrup

Yeah.

[00:27:06.270] - Leslie Orrantia

Yeah. Who doesn't know her?

[00:27:08.230] - Jason Ilstrup

All right. Last but certainly not least, if you could have the perfect job. What would it be?

[00:27:13.900]

Oh, that's a cute question. Mostly because my answer is cute. I feel really, I feel really heartened and inspired by this role and roles like it being in a generalist capacity where I have an opportunity to learn and grow but also to grow my service and my capacity to be in service to our community. I care about our community and to connect people and players and sectors across our community is to me where change needs to be made or I should say strengthened. And that's one of my strengths. So, I feel really privileged to be in this position and I would say similarly in my last role the opportunity to connect people being able to be in full presence with people like you who are also doing the work and share my appreciation.

[00:27:55.480] - Jason Ilstrup

Well, as my mom once said, " Good things happen to good people." So, I'm glad you got two awesome jobs. My mom Carol. She's the best, isn't she? Well Leslie Orrantia, Deputy Mayor of Madison I cannot thank you enough for taking time on the downtown downlow Madison. Thank you. I don't know. I think I added a few more low downs there. I still cannot remember the title of our podcast. At any rate, Leslie thanks for being here.

[00:28:20.350] - Leslie Orrantia

Thanks so much Jason. It was a pleasure.

[00:28:23.650] - Jason Ilstrup

Thanks for listening. Be sure to tune in next month to learn something new about downtown.