

## **Ms. Robin Roberts-Krieger, FM, HLM**

IEDC Interview Conducted with Nancy Moorman

### **Can you give an overview of how you have seen the economic development profession evolve over the course of your career?**

At a tactical or granular level, [the profession] moves faster than ever. Companies are making decisions faster than ever. Our technology has changed dramatically. We would go to the library to research and put together notebooks that were six inches thick for a proposal. [It was a] two-year process of wining and dining the clients in your community. You did all kinds of big events to host potential companies. It was slow and deliberate, and I would almost describe it as a “big” process. Technology has been a game changer.

An example is a recent project where we announced 550 new jobs with an average salary of \$100,000 per year. We had seventy-two hours to put the proposal together, and the decision was made within sixty days, then announced publicly sixty days [after that]. That’s the difference. Companies and site-selectors can do so much research online today, and you don’t know you’re being considered until you’re on the short list. By the time a client contacts you—and these are generalities—they want information tomorrow.

I think the biggest change I have seen is the speed in which we work, mainly due to technology. It affects everything...the skills we need, the resources we provide, our training, and our knowledge base. It also affects how we learn to be economic developers and how we do our jobs. It’s a game-changer.

When I started, I would go to conferences and I was usually one of the only women there. It was very much a white-male-dominated profession when I started, and today, much more diverse. I was the first female Chair of IEDC. I know there were female chairs of CUED and AEDC, but very few. So from a gender, ethnicity, geography [standpoint], you look at the old boards and you look at the boards today, and it’s a much more diverse profession. Frankly, I don’t even think twice about it, but my peers respect women, men, [and] all races...it doesn’t really matter. If you are good at your job, you are going to get respect.

Finally, the career path you take to be an economic developer has evolved. It used to be [that the] people who understood real estate development and public finance really were the ones that made up the profession. Today, if you look at the resumes of economic developers, we come from all walks of life. We tend to be generalists, and we may come out of city government, or we may come from the private sector. It’s a very diverse group in this profession. What we all have in common is the ability to be creative problem solvers and to get things done; to put projects together and figure out solutions, and to work collaboratively while providing a great deal of facilitation.

### **Has the speed at which economic development evolved created added challenges? Do you need a bigger staff? A more flexible budget? How do you deal with these issues?**

We have to work faster, but we have tools that allow us to work smarter. From a staffing perspective, I don't see a dramatic swing one way or the other.

If you don't change your number of staff that much, the budgets don't change dramatically, so I'm ambivalent on that. But, from an incentives perspective, the budget must be bigger today. Frequently, those budgets are controlled by a governmental entity. I'm a nonprofit, and the city and state controls the incentives. I have the contract to handle their economic development.

**Can you describe your personal career path? How did you become involved in economic development?**

I'm fairly confident mine is most atypical <laughs>. I have a degree in education...elementary and physical education. I taught seventh and eighth grade and was the football coach my first year. I have a Masters in Educational Administration. Because education paid so poorly, I was working weekends and nights in a ski area as a bartender and cocktail waitress. I made more money than I did teaching full-time. I was offered so many good positions in those ski areas [that] I ended up leaving education and becoming a sales and marketing professional in destination resorts. Then I took a position as the International Marketing and Product Development Manager for the State of Oregon's Tourism Commission, which was within the economic development department. On the product development side, I helped get destination resorts sited.

The head of the economic development department told me, "I think you've got a career in economic development." He basically started putting me into some of their meetings and training. As much as I enjoyed tourism, I was more challenged and intrigued by economic development. I started moving in that direction and then was offered a position in 1996 to run a nonprofit regional economic development organization. Then I was recruited by the City of Portland—the Portland Development Commission—to run Portland, Oregon's economic development. From there, I was recruited by the governor's office to do economic development policy work for the northwest part of the state. This added transportation, land use, environmental issues and housing to my knowledge base. Then I was recruited to Oklahoma City.

**What skills did you acquire over time? Did certain skills become more important as your career evolved?**

The skill that was the most important when I started is the skill that is still the most important today: communication. You have to be able to communicate, build relationships, build trust, [and] communicate effectively with the client, with the partners and with the naysayers. Verbal communication, written communication, public speaking, and political skills [are all essential]. You really have to be able to finesse, read people, and understand your constituency. That hasn't changed. Everything I've done, interestingly enough, has helped me. Teaching seventh and eighth grade for example...if you can keep seventh and eighth graders engaged, you can do anything <laughs>. Working in city government, regional government, the nonprofit [sector], the private sector, and state government...that's an interesting background. I think I understand how companies think. I understand how government, [both] state and local, works. And, I try to

understand how citizens think. I like to think that everything I've done, while a very indirect path to economic development, has given me the additional skills needed. The most important thing is communication. It was, it is, it will be.

I think what has changed are the technology skills. You have to be able to research online. From a marketing, imaging, and positioning perspective, you have to understand how media has changed and how it changes how you get the word out. You have to understand how the next generation is thinking. Even though most of the people that I work with are from my generation, more thirty-somethings are moving into decision making positions in companies and government. Many of them think a little bit differently and they communicate differently. You have to really understand how technology and generational changes are affecting the way that we do things.

### **Did you approach each of your economic development jobs the same way?**

No, they were all different. If you are in the private sector, you actually own the company, own the business, and you're creating jobs. You have to understand how the private sector thinks, because that's where job creation occurs and where wealth creation occurs. Nonprofits tend to facilitate and lead all parties towards economic development goals. The public sector tends to have roles and responsibilities in physical infrastructure and site development...where you "put" companies. So the city has a relationship to the physical and political environment for the company and the attitudes within that city towards companies. Counties and regions tend to have a role in image, but depending on the state, they may or may not have a role in the direct physical infrastructure. So again, it depends on how local/regional/county government is funded and their roles and responsibilities. State government sets the tone for workers' compensation, tort reform, state incentives, [and] regulatory environments. When companies are looking at the bottom line, they are going to have a huge say on the overall costs of doing business. Government has a huge role in the attitude of the region towards business, and how integrated or fragmented that relationship is. It also depends on the authority the organization you are leading has, like the direct control of incentives, the ability to control lands, etc.

### **What challenges did you have to overcome during your career?**

I've worked in cities and states that say they're pro business and they're [really] not. And, at times, they are either unwilling or unable to understand why they are not. Business knew it, economic developers knew it, but the cities or states were either unwilling or unable to acknowledge it or to change it. As an economic developer, that's incredibly difficult.

I have also worked in cities and states that are genuinely pro-business and that sit down with the corporate CEOs on a fairly regular basis. That's the ultimate environment for an economic developer.

### **Was there anyone that inspired you during your career? A mentor?**

Absolutely. There are a couple of people. Jon Jaqua was the Deputy Director of Economic Development at the Oregon Economic Development Department. He was the one that reached

out and said, "I think you need to be doing economic development." He was smart, he was tough, and he was fearless. He did some things that made Oregon a better place for companies that not everybody would have had the guts to do. I learned a lot from him. Felicia Trader was the executive director of the Portland Development Commission and she taught me how to be a really good administrator. She taught me how to treat and interface with employees. It's a cliché, but she taught me how to "know when to hold 'em, and know when to fold 'em." She also taught me how to pick my battles. She was just a very smart, compassionate, [and] shrewd administrator. I learned a lot from her.

Finally, Roy Williams. He's the CEO of the chamber where I work today. He was a consultant when I met him, and he helped me as a consultant to be successful in my first economic development job in 1996. I hired him to help me educate local government about the role of economic development. He was an outstanding orator and thoughtful leader. He really was in some ways a mentor for me in how to pull coalitions together. He taught me how to explain your role in economic development in a thoughtful, pragmatic way that made sense to non-economic developers. I would probably say those three, in looking back, were the role models. Each one helped me in different ways.

### **When did you become involved in IEDC? Where you involved with CUED or AEDC at all?**

I had gone to one AEDC annual meeting and one CUED annual meeting when I was hired in 1999 to become the Director of Economic Development at the Portland Development Commission. An IEDC board member came to me and said, "I think I need to go on the board." Next thing I knew I was on the Board <laughs>. I think that was at the Atlanta conference around 1999. So I came on the CUED Board without really much knowledge of either organization other than that they were national professional organizations. That was in September, and the next Board meeting I went to was when AEDC came and asked if we would consider a merger. So I'm probably the first Chair of IEDC that didn't really come out of CUED or AEDC. I really was an IEDC person. I really didn't have a history with either organization. So, if you asked me where I came from, I came from IEDC.

### **Were you involved with the merger at all?**

As a CUED Board member, one of the things that I focused on was whether this was fiscally responsible for CUED. It made no sense to have two national professional associations, so the merger seemed logical. On the other, does this make fiscal sense? But as a board member I was not on any of the special committees because I hadn't been around long enough. I didn't have the history.

### **Can you give more detail about your role within IEDC?**

As a Board member I started attending the meetings on a regular basis. I started using the professional development training to help me grow my programs at various locations. When I was with the governor's office in Oregon, about six months after I got there we went into a recession. I ended up paying my own way for a couple of years to all of the IEDC meetings. But I believed that it was important for me to stay involved and stay on the Board. A couple of years

after I came on the Board, I was approached by some of the past chairs and executive committee members, and they basically said, “Robin, we think you would be a good person to move into the leadership.” Ed Nelson, Jim Griffin, and some others...and so I ended up eventually becoming a committee chair. Eventually they asked if I would consider moving into leadership. Once you move into leadership with IEDC, it becomes such a rewarding experience. [It is] time consuming but also very rewarding. So that’s kind of how I moved in to leadership. I wasn’t one of those people that went out and campaigned for it <laughs>. Folks just reached out to me. At first, I was a little bit cautious, but it worked out well. I Chaired the Communications Committee, and then moved into Secretary Treasurer, Chair Elect, Chair, [and] Past Chair. I just rolled off the Board a year ago.

**What exactly was your role in these positions? What were the main priorities? Were there any particular challenges that you faced?**

It is also important for the Chair to have a few areas that they want to focus on and take the organization forward during their tenure. We had some fiscal challenges when I was Secretary-Treasurer. Not only did we come through successfully, we came through stronger. I take a lot of pride in that. We made some fundamental changes at the staff level as well as how we oversaw our finances. I worked extremely closely with the President/CEO, our Chairman Joe Marinucci, and Tom Harned, who stepped up and helped us with an advisory committee. Bill Best can obviously give you some of his perspective, but as Secretary-Treasurer, we had a big financial challenge. In some ways, it was a “hangover” from the merger.

Once we got through that financial challenge, the we were stronger and fiscally very sound. Our budget was much more transparent, and staff at IEDC for the first time really owned the budgets. It was a completely different process used for budgeting each year by both the Board and the staff. Instead of being caught up with finance [issues] as the Chair, I was able to focus on my initiatives, [which were]: to leave the organization fiscally sound, to institutionalize and professionalize some of the policies and procedures that we used as a Board, and to streamline the Board meetings. Some of our Board meetings used to go on for hours. That doesn’t happen anymore. Ronnie Bryant brought us through a new governance model. So, during my time, it was more about refining that governance model—areas that were a little bit gray—and trying to get those cleaned up and clarified. I am proud of the work we accomplished.

**How did being involved with IEDC affect your own career development?**

I think it strengthened my understanding of Board governance and the role of volunteer leaders. It certainly broadened my relationships within the world of economic development. It’s interesting, because you stand in front of a group of 1,000+ people, and after the meeting, everybody knows who you are. It allows you to utilize those relationships when you want to reach out and collaborate. I have built relationships with my counterparts in places like Cleveland and Nashville that, without IEDC and without IEDC’s leadership roles, I probably wouldn’t have been able to; I wouldn’t have gotten to know those people the way that I do today.

**Where do you see IEDC moving into the future?**

I think economic development will continue to change and evolve. The fundamentals won't change, but I think how we do our work, how we're funded... things are going to continue to change. And I think the importance for IEDC will be to make sure that our education and programming is relevant and evolves as our profession evolves. I think IEDC needs to continue to be a "thought leader" for us.

**Are there any other stories or anecdotes from your career that you'd like to share?**

The things that come to mind are in addition to having fun. We learned from the challenges. The financial challenge was at the same time Joe Marinucci was Chair. I have the utmost respect for Joe and how he handled the Chairmanship while I was Secretary-Treasurer. We had to work through those financial challenges together with the staff. I will be forever indebted to him for his intelligence and leadership. When you have difficult problems like that, you can have a very divisive and fragmented Board. Joe led the Board through that process and in fact brought us closer together. It was not about pointing fingers, it was about fixing the problem. He allowed us the latitude to fix some problems that were systemic. I have so much respect for how Joe handled a very difficult year. In the end, we not only came through stronger, but we had a great year fiscally. The budgetary problems that we had were probably minor in hindsight. We had process problems and procedural problems.

Another memory was watching Ed Nelson, Bill Best, and Ronnie Bryant really talking about ethnic diversity and understanding some of the things that we needed to do as a Board to address those diversity issues. I really respect Bill for working on a Code of Conduct and a standard by which we as Board members needed to lead by example. I also had a great conversation with the women in the profession about how to empower upcoming female leaders.

Rick Weddle and Jim Griffin were the consummate professionals in working through the issues. As a Board member, I did not see probably half of the behind-the-scenes challenges of getting that merger done. I don't believe it would have happened without Jim Griffin from AEDC and Kurt Chilcott from CUED. They dealt with every problem thrown their way in real time.

One of the women who mentored me was Ellen O'Connor from Chicago. I mean, I didn't really know anybody on the CUED Board, let alone the newly merged Board, and so some of the women that reached out to me and encouraged me to move into the leadership were Lynn Haskins, Joy Pooler, Diane Lupke and Michele Keller. Bill Best and I came on the Board at the same time, and we always laughed that there were some undercurrents going on and we didn't really get it because we only knew IEDC.

I guess I would say IEDC has helped me to grow as a professional. It has broadened my perspective. I look at federal policy differently. I look at state policy differently. For me, those are the take-aways.

From the aspect of the Board, it was trying to make the professional association better and more relevant. I'll give you a humorous [anecdote]. There are so many humorous ones. As I was incoming Chair, Jeff Finkle sent me something that was going to be in some program and needed my signature. I looked at it, I spell-checked it, and I track-changed it. I kind of edited it and made

it my own. I sent it back to him and he was really concerned that I had been unhappy with the document. I started laughing and said, “Jeff, I used to teach seventh and eighth grade. You’re lucky I didn’t put a C+ on it <laughs>.” And we got a good laugh out of that. I [explained] that it was more about me trying to make it my style. It was just so funny because my predecessors probably hadn’t done that. He may not tell you that it’s funny, but I thought it was funny <laughs>.

Jeff Finkle has become a friend and a resource. He probably has the best knowledge of the history and background of the profession. He’s an amazing asset to this organization. I also have so much respect for the staff, from interns on up, because they work so hard.

Transcribed by Alla Rubinstein on December 21, 2010

Edited by Tye Libby on March 10, 2011