

Corey Zetts

Executive Director, Menomonee Valley Partners
Member since July 2018

In 2005, a UW-Madison graduate student made a decision that is creating Milwaukee's future by re-building a symbol of its faded past.

A few years earlier, Corey Zetts had dropped out of a philosophy doctoral program just as she was starting her dissertation and pulled toward applied theory rather than academia. She moved to Madison in 2003 to go back to grad school, this time for Urban Planning. As a grad student, on the advice of Prof. Jerry Kaufman, she took a day trip to visit organizations in Milwaukee, including the relatively new Menomonee Valley Partners, which immediately resonated with her. A Cleveland native, Corey thought the area felt like home with its river running through an industrial valley. MVP's bold vision to transform vacant land and abandoned factories would require deep partnerships, courageous leadership and commitment. It would become her passion.



A year later, she moved to Milwaukee to work for MVP. Milwaukee was “a kind of Goldilocks city,” Corey joked. Not Atlanta, where she studied at Emory: Too big. Not Madison: Too small. Milwaukee was just right: small enough to manage and large enough to do things that matter.

She joined MVP as program director in 2005, advancing to associate director in 2007 and executive director in 2014. Corey knew transforming the 1,200-acre Valley with contaminated soil and abandoned factories required partners who were willing to share time, talent and treasure. And everyone had to work in tandem.

“I am not an expert in anything,” Corey argued (but) a convenor and connector who builds partnerships, engages stakeholders, develops shared vision, leverages funding and aligns partners to achieve shared goals.

“I am amazed by Milwaukeeans' capacity to give time and talent,” she said, “and I am grateful that we have so many skilled professionals who give countless hours to make their city better. People just dive in.”



Everyone involved over the years owns the Valley's achievements, Corey says: 5,200 family supporting jobs; 70 new or expanded companies; 1-million square feet of green buildings; 300 acres of contaminated land cleaned; 60 acres of new trails and park space; 45 acres of native plants; and a once largely abandoned place that welcomes nearly 10 million visitors annually. If there's one achievement, however, that illustrates Corey's comprehensive approach, it's the transformation of a former railyard into Three Bridges Park, extension of the Hank Aaron State Trail, and opening of the Menomonee Valley branch of the Urban Ecology Center. This comprehensive project's goal was to connect people to jobs, nature and each other.

An amazing array of stakeholders in the public, private and non-profit sectors achieved together what none could have done alone. That effort was led by a partnership among MVP, Urban Ecology Center, City of Milwaukee, Department of Natural Resources and Department of Transportation, Corey said.

“As you might imagine, we did not always see eye to eye as we began the work,” Corey explained. “The leadership worked on working together, developing a ‘project charter’ to reflect the scope and the intentions of the work, as well as defining the roles and responsibilities for each partner at various decision points.

“The charter focused on our shared belief that our team’s diverse perspectives inspired creativity and better solutions that worked for everyone and accomplishing more together than we could individually. What started out as a contentious team dynamic that required a mediator evolved into the strongest working relationship I’ve ever had and gave me perspective I’ve used in everything thing I’ve done since then.”

That project charter hangs on her desk as a reminder.

Corey is a commissioner of the Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD); a member of the Governor’s Council on Workforce Development; a board member of Mobilize (formerly Regional Transit Leadership Council) and Professional Dimensions; and serves on civic committees, including the Wisconsin Policy Forum’s economic development committee and workgroups for the Milwaukee Estuary Area of Concern.

She and MVP have been recognized: Milwaukee Business Journal, Woman of Influence 2022; Harvard Business School Young American Leaders Program, 2024; Chase Bank Economic Development Award for Neighborhood Development Innovation, 2018; Social Impact Award for Three Bridges Park, National Redevelopment and Renewal Awards, 2015; Private-Public Cooperation Award, Public Policy Forum, 2014; Nonprofit collaboration of the year, MVP and Urban Ecology Center, Biz Times 2024; Milwaukee Riverkeeper’s River Hero Award, MVP, 2013.

Kudos aside, Corey is clear-eyed about unfinished work.

There is land to be developed to bring additional businesses and jobs to the Valley, she says. There needs to be public access to the Menomonee River through the Valley. The jobs, nature, and opportunities in the Valley should be more easily accessible to neighboring residents. The Valley has work to do for the surrounding neighborhoods to “ensure that the investment in the Valley also benefits those living nearby.”

“We still have the challenge of having the Valley lift up the surrounding area – the neighborhoods and their economic well-being,” she said.

“Milwaukee has done this and can do it again,” she promises, referencing the Valley’s coordinated partnerships of business, government agencies, non-profits, neighborhood residents, schools, etc. She shares the Valley’s lessons with others in the city, state and beyond.

A Rotarian since 2017, she’s co-chairing Rotary’s next Big Project, the Beerline Trail. Corey believes RCM can make a difference in this part of the community.

“In the same way that the Valley has benefitted from the Hank Aaron State Trail, the Beerline Trail can have a broad impact on the area’s economic, ecological and community health,” she believes.

Corey is a bicyclist, hiker, kayaker and camper who will visit her 50th state in October. She and her husband Benji Timm live in Milwaukee with their 13-year-old daughter, Ivy, who attends Highland Community School, a MPS Montessori School. Corey is bullish on Milwaukee, saying the city is an example of good governance and strong leadership in many areas, from watershed management to reducing homelessness and, of course that huge Phoenix rising from the ashes: The Menomonee River Valley.

