

Granite City Alumnae Jessica Mefford-Miller New CEO Of Valley Metro Public Transportation Authority In Phoenix

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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GRANITE CITY - Jessica Mefford-Miller, a 1998 graduate of Granite City High School, has always been an innovative and connected leader, working four years as Executive Director of the Metro Development Agency, the provider for public transportation in St. Louis.



Recently, Mefford-Miller was named the Chief Executive Officer of the Valley Metro Public Transportation Authority in Phoenix, Ariz., where she oversees the entire public transportation system in the city and suburbs of the Valley of the Sun.

It's a big job overseeing the entire public transport system, especially in a fast-developing metro area such as Phoenix and it's a job she's tackling head on.

"I am loving my new role and it is, I think, a really natural progression for my career for me," Mefford-Miller said in a recent video interview on the Granite City Community Unit District 9's YouTube channel. "I have been working in transportation the last 20 years, since I finished my undergraduate degree from Southern Illinois University,

where I went after graduating from GCHS in 1998. And I love working in transportation. I worked for the National Park Service early on in my career in Texas, I later moved to Ohio, where I pursued my Ph.D. at The Ohio State University (in Columbus), and I worked for the Department of Transportation there. But I really love working on complicated problems that involve the interaction between people and places, really. And the natural path my career took was working in public transit. Public transit is such a great connector; it's an opportunity for people across the world and it's so important for creating really thriving socially, environmentally and economic sustainable regions.

"And I joined the team in Metro in St. Louis in 2006 and I thought it would be just for a little while," Mefford-Miller continued. "I was craving something different in my career at that point. I spent a long time in academia and I wanted to work in practice. And very early on in that role, I found that I loved to work in a role that where I could really see the impact on the work that we did on people. We were helping people every single day and I became very passionate about that. And then, I had the opportunity to to really dig in deep and learn more and become involved with the operations team and large capital and construction projects there. And I found that was an excellent fit for me and I was pleased to lead Metro Transit in St. Louis as their Executive Director for about three-and-a-half years until I pursued the role at Valley Metro in Phoenix.

"And so, it feels great," Mefford-Miller also said, "and it feels great. I love being part of a vibrant and fast-growing city. Maricopa County, where I live here in Phoenix, is consistently the fastest-growing county in the United States and delivering excellent public transit service and building a rapidly expanding transit system is a career goal, so this really is my dream job. I'm happy to be here."

Mefford-Miller helped oversee the expansion of the MetroLink light rail system in St. Louis and is also helping to oversee the expansion of a light rail system in the Phoenix area as well, hoping to reach a 50-mile system by 2030. It's a long process and it involves getting the community and its leaders together to help the project --- and the area - progress.

"The development of most cities, especially the big, bold kind of development that's happening here in Phoenix, it really requires a community and leaders that come together and have a forward vision for how they want their city to grow and develop," Mefford-Miller said. "And so, I'm really here standing on the shoulders of the leaders that have come before me decades ago that laid the framework for things like funding and the plans for the expansion that we're building right now. So, with my arrival here, what we're doing is expanding the system. In fact, I'm here in downtown Phoenix and if you walk out the door of my office in both directions, the streets are a little bit torn up, because we're laying new light rail track everywhere. We are expanding right now,

south and central right into the city of Phoenix with our light rail system. We're also expanding right now at the same time a separate project, north and west. And tomorrow, on May 30th, we're opening our first streetcar line, which is in Tempe. So we're moving forward with multiple projects, all at the same time in different directions across the greater Phoenix region.

"To really build the transit system that is going to move Phoenix today and tomorrow, as I said, it's a very fast-growing region," Mefford-Miller continued. "It's a city where we have lower density suburban communities, we've got a very dense and very thriving urban core here. And we need transit to move people, because we just can't move enough people fast enough in single-occupancy automobiles. So it's a complicated program of striking a balance between delivering excellent, quality service to people every day while we are expanding this big system. So very exciting, no two days for me and my team are ever the same, a lot of big challenges, but they are just the kind of problems that I like to solve."

Mefford-Miller does have very fond memories of her hometown and remembers it as full of hard-working and caring people who help each other out, no matter what.

"You know, I think growing up in Granite, some of the things that I have learned are very much formed my disposition and how I approach my work," Mefford-Miller said. "I am a servant leader, I support my team, I do what I do, whether that's building multi-billion dollar rail system projects or making sure that our buses show up on time and get people to work on time every single day. It really is about people and I found Granite City to be a place where people work hard, they work together and they help one another, whether that was growing up in school or playing sports or in church, it's a place where people care about each other. And that has certainly informed my entire career and part of my leadership style. And my platform as a leader here at Valley Metro is that we exist to serve the cities and communities across Phoenix and those customers that we carry each and every day."

Mefford-Miller was a very active student while attending GCHS, playing on the girls volleyball and soccer teams, was also a member of the debate team, a member of the school's National Honor Society chapter and the school's Science Club. It's been a part of her nature for many years to be active.

"Yeah, yeah, I think I'm always looking to try new things and to learn and grow," Mefford-Miller said with a smile. "And I hope that each day that I breathe, I'm continuing to learn and grow and challenge myself, whether that is in my career or striving for a personal best, like a workout or a run or something. I am about continuous growth and development. And doing things that I enjoy. And so, I was a soccer player; it's been 25 years or so. And now, I am a soccer mom, I have three daughters, actually."

So I'm in a little bit different life stage and I'm really enjoying watching them grow up and encouraging them to get involved in the things that interest them the most.

"And I think that's important," Mefford-Miller continued, "because you never know when you're going to encounter something that might strike an interest or where you just build skill. Being on the debate team was incredibly helpful for learning to solve problems, to look at problems from different perspectives and for learning to speak in public, which is something that I do often."

Mefford-Miller spent a total of 16 years working for Metro in St. Louis, and she still has very fond memories of her jobs and her co-workers as well.

"Gosh, you know, the team, the people at Metro who worked there." Mefford-Miller said, "and also, the customers that we served and the partners that I met. It was difficult to leave them and a piece of my heart will always be there. But as a leader, one of the things that I did, and I think that this is the responsibility of all leaders at this level, was that I built a strong team behind me. And so, I knew there were people who were positioned, equipped, who had the skills and the knowledge to succeed me once I left. And I think that's super important, because we're all one person and we can accomplish certain things. But leaders can accomplish some more when they develop and empower the people around them. So I'm very proud of the team that's behind me back there in St. Louis leading Metro today."

Mefford-Miller, if given the opportunity to speak to the current student body at GCHS who are looking to be leaders or executives, would share some very sage advice about how to proceed, achieve and succeed in their endeavors.

"I would tell them to reach," Mefford-Miller said, "to try different things, to discover your interests. And it's OK if you try something, whether that's a class or a job or program in college and you decide it doesn't work for you, then pivot and make an adjustment. But ask for opportunity. In the workplace, look for that and when there's an opportunity there, seize it. I think that this approach has taken me far in my career.

"When I finished my undergrad, for instance, at SIUE, I was looking for looking for an internship there in St. Louis, I knew I was going to Texas for my masters, I couldn't find anything and there was a job that came open in the National Park Service in Texas and they said 'but we really need someone to start in a week,' and I said 'OK, I'll pack up, I'll be there in three days.' And that turned into a job that I cherished and it formed the rest of my career. So I have always reached out and asked for more opportunity and taken the time to grow and expand myself. So I would say we are constantly a work in

progress, whether you're a current GCHS student or you're in the middle of your career late in life. Look for opportunities to grow. Where you don't see those opportunities, make them."