

The Columbus “Crew”sader

An unsung hero, Megan Kilgore, uses her superpowers to help save the Columbus Crew.

BY DAVID LEWIS | ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH MOORE

Superheroes wait in the shadows. They wait for the perfect time to spring into action—to fight a nasty villain in the name of justice. Oh, how I love a good superhero story. And you may be familiar with the story where the Columbus Crew Soccer Club gets saved in the eleventh hour from being relocated to the far-flung land of Austin, Texas.

You also may have heard about the heroic acts of the many people who helped save the Crew (more about them later). But there's one woman who played a huge part in helping the Crew remain alive in the Cbus. Her name is Megan Kilgore, the City of Columbus Auditor—and she kicks ass.

THE VILLAIN AND THE CRIME

On October 17, 2017, Grant Wahl, the soccer writer for *Sports Illustrated*, tweeted: “Columbus Crew owner Anthony Precourt is set to move team to Austin, Texas, in 2019 if downtown stadium can't happen in Columbus. Story soon.” Reminder: Anthony Precourt is a soccer carpetbagger, an owner of a private investment management firm based in San Francisco, California who bought the Crew in 2013.

The Twittersphere went nuts. Crew supporters, former players and Columbus natives were in shock, and livid. A charter member of Major League Soccer and occupant of the first ever soccer-specific stadium built in the United States moving to Austin, Texas? Why?

The fine print on the contract between MLS and Precourt stipulated that the owner could move the team if market conditions dictated. At the time, Don Garber, the commissioner of MLS, agreed and added that one other city could be named as a replacement. In this case, Austin. Nobody outside the MLS offices in New York and Precourt really knew about this nuance. Until Wahl's D-day tweet.

THE SUPERHERO

“My mom thinks I am a glorified bank teller,” Kilgore tells me. “The [City of Columbus] Auditor has a very large umbrella of powers responsible for accounting and operations, among other things. Every dollar that comes through City Hall goes through our office. We are also responsible for debt management, issuing bonds, payroll for the entire city; the auditor says how much the city can spend.”

But Kilgore also loves soccer, especially when it comes to the U.S. Women's National team, whom she watched play in the 2012 Olympics. And she fell in love with the Crew in 2000 as an undergrad at Ohio State.



“Grant’s announcement was about three weeks before my election,” Kilgore recalls. “I was working my tail off doing as many campaign outreach events as possible [...] my involvement with the Crew up to this point was as a fan.”

She won the election in large part due to her mentor and predecessor Hugh Dorrian, who served 12 terms and 48 years as the Auditor. “Working with him was like taking graduate school classes over and over and over again; he was brilliant,” said Kilgore.

She took her mentor’s advice: “Go out, conquer, get exposure, get on the national scene.” And that’s what she did. She landed on the cover of *Time*. As the first female Auditor of Columbus—and first lesbian to hold the office—she joined other exceptionally powerful and inspiring women on the cover. The headline read: “The Avengers: First they marched. Now a record number of women are running for office.” Doors were swinging open. Kilgore now had superpowers to fight the villain.

THE BATTLE

Soon after Wahl’s tweet, Precourt slithered his way from under a rock to announce how disappointed he was with attendance, sponsorship and the overall revenue stream of the team, and said that if he didn’t get a downtown stadium he would be gone. The grassroots Save the Crew movement, led by Morgan Hughes, was taking off and shook the sports world, eventually being cited as the main reason for the Crew staying in Columbus. “I have not seen in my lifetime here in Columbus something so spectacular. To have that much civic engagement just blew me away,” Kilgore says.

As the Save The Crew movement was building steam, Alex Fischer, the CEO of the Columbus Partnership, a civic organization of Columbus’s top business leaders to improve the economic and cultural base of central Ohio, was also getting steamed. A massive Crew fan, he is considered the primary engine behind saving the Crew. “I honestly don’t know how Alex Fischer

slept; he did so much to help [the Crew staying in Columbus] happen,” said Kilgore.

Strapped with the demands of the MLS, finding new local ownership, exploring legal loopholes, figuring out what to do about this downtown stadium, Fischer needed help.

At a lunch in March, 2018, Kilgore met with Fischer. “We actually had a very typical agenda that day that did not include the Crew, and then [Fischer] said he was working on something else,” Kilgore recalled. “They had already done their due diligence and they knew all that they needed to know about the legal stuff, the ownership stuff, but they were asking me questions about some of the capital side of this. At that luncheon we started chatting about stadium finance 101 and how these projects come together.”

Kilgore rolled up her sleeves. She was well-versed in stadium financing from her private sector consulting days. She crunched numbers, did matrices and leaned on her staff to create a fiscally responsible strategy to help the stadium plan, one that would help Fischer and others bring in local ownership interest and help put a stadium downtown and create a redevelopment plan for Mapfre Stadium.

By July 7, 2018, with the Crew still on shaky ground, Kilgore was fully entrenched in the cause. She sent a heartfelt letter to Mark Abbott, the President and Deputy Commissioner of the MLS. She also finally met Dee and Jim Haslam, owners of the Cleveland Browns.

“I first met with Dee Haslam [at a Columbus Partnership meeting] and she was absolutely ready to listen, and I remember her asking me ‘What you think?’ and I thought that was one of the best questions she could’ve possibly asked since she’s not from Columbus.”

Ownership interest continued into the fall with Dr. Pete Edwards (former Crew team physician) and his family joining the Haslam family as potential owners. “When we started working with Kilgore I knew that the project had a good chance of being successful,” Dee Haslam said. “Her determination, passion and smarts gave us confidence to commit to going full steam ahead.”

THE VICTORY

On January 9, 2019 at a press conference, the announcement came that the Crew was officially saved. Alex Fischer was there on stage. Dee Haslam along with Dr. Pete Edwards, the new co-owners of the Crew, were there. So was Mayor Andrew Ginther and MLS commissioner Don Garber. The brand-new coach Caleb Porter and new GM Tim Bezbatchenko were beaming at the podium. Save the Crew was fully represented.

And there was Megan Kilgore looking full of civic pride. Her cape was at the cleaners, getting ready for its next use. ■

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