



community impact

By Rachel Schurz

Lester holds his award at ASU's MLK Jr. celebration breakfast with Colleen Jennings-Roggensack, ASU Vice President for Cultural Affairs and Chair of ASU's MLK Jr. Committee. Photo credit: Tim Trumble

# dr. neal lester

## Local Professor Wins Award and Inspires the Community

With a career in academia spanning over 30 years, Arizona State University professor and Ahwatukee resident Dr. Neal Lester is no stranger to recognition. Even so, he describes to ASU News being both excited and humbled when honored with the **inaugural 2022 ASU MLK Jr. Faculty Servant-Leadership Award**.

“It’s gratifying to know that others are watching, valuing and being impacted directly or indirectly by the work that I am facilitating through the state and national platform that is **Project Humanities**, as well as by my community and professional presence in the field — the trenches as it were — in this ongoing work toward social justice,” says Lester.

Project Humanities is ASU’s award-winning initiative founded and directed by Lester, which seeks to bring together the university and local communities through “talking, listening, and connecting.” The initiative marked its 10th anniversary in 2021, a milestone made even more meaningful when he was recognized that same year with an MLK Diversity Award in Education from the City of Tempe, as



A Service Saturday in action. | Photo credit: Project Humanities

well as the ASU Committee for Campus Inclusion Catalyst Award for “inspiring and igniting transformation and inclusion.”



Dr. Lester earned his BA in English and was Valedictorian of his graduating class at the State University of West Georgia. He took his MA and PhD in English at Vanderbilt University and is the first African American to receive the doctorate degree in English at Vanderbilt. He is the first tenured African American faculty member in the Department of English at the University of Alabama.

Lester has been at ASU since 1997, specializing in African American literature and cultural studies. He tells ASU News he always wanted to be a teacher and to empower diverse audiences of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members to view critically and experience the world in a way that challenges their own perceptions and biases. But when asked about his most transformative work, Lester points to **Project Humanities’ Service Saturdays**.

This homeless outreach program has engaged hundreds of individuals across the Valley to donate, collect and distribute clothing, shoes, and toiletries to adults experiencing homelessness in downtown Phoenix. Frequently, Ahwatukee residents participate, including a Desert Vista student and member of the boys team charity who told his family he wanted to celebrate his 16th birthday at a Service Saturday. “Andrew brought his parents, his brother, and his brother’s friend, and yes, we all sang *Happy Birthday* to Andrew. That Andrew asked his family for this gift was a gift to me,” recalls Lester.

*Learn more about Project Humanities: [projecthumanities.asu.edu](http://projecthumanities.asu.edu)*

**INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES WITH ASU PROJECT HUMANITIES:**  
ASU Project Humanities seeks talented and responsible high school students to participate in various aspects of activities, events, and research. Any of these opportunities can be modified for any student level (high school, undergraduate, and graduate). Other opportunities are available as appropriate to students’ talents and skills.