Afzal: Please talk about how the AZ Spartans chapter of Michigan State University Alumni Association got involved with Project Humanities. What drew your organization to get involved with our homeless outreach?

Randy: The decision to partner with Project Humanities was done by another person who was on the board at the time, [Bunny Hodas]. She’s the one that was given the responsibility [to initiate this partnership].

Every year, Michigan State University has determined a date in the springtime for what they call their Day of Service. And the Day of Service could be anything from cleaning up a river to helping Habitat for Humanity– building a house, you know; something on that particular date, … picking up trash alongside the roadway.

They’ve been doing this for years and years, and [AZ Spartans] had never really been actively part of it until 2018 when the organization decided to take an active role in it. And the person that did this was Bunny Hodas. Michigan
State was getting a lot of bad press and publicity--and rightfully so--because of their affiliation with the gymnastics guy Larry Nasser and because of his sexual exploits with some of the female athletes.

And so, she was looking for something that was more rewarding that would hopefully put us in a more favorable light. And a friend of hers had been involved with Dr. Lester and the Project Humanities before and suggested it. So, Bunny looked into it and said, “This is what we want to do.” And at that point, I got involved, and from there, it’s taken off since the first year.

That first year, we did it in April of 2018, and we drew 35 volunteers from the AZ Spartans Alumni Association. Our Alumni Association actually has something along the lines of 4,000 alumni just in Arizona. It could be somebody with a bachelor’s degree. It could be somebody that got their bachelor’s degree from ASU but went to Villanova or wherever.

Or, it could be someone who went to Michigan State and got their master’s or their doctorate, for example. So, 4,000 names in our database. And I mean, that could be all the way up to Page, AZ, or Bullhead City-- whatever. So, we publicized it, promoted it, and we had 35 volunteers show up that first year [for that first distribution Saturday in downtown Phoenix with 150-200 adults experiencing homelessness]. In 2019, we chose to do it again with Project Humanities.

Now, we’ve got a comfort zone of 35 people that could also go out and tell the others how great of a program that Day of Service with Project Humanities was and how rewarding it was. And we skyrocketed up to 50 volunteers the next year, and Dr. Lester can vouch for this. That was the most volunteers in any single day Project Humanities had had for this homeless outreach. Our 50, along with, I think, there was 24 other volunteers was the largest turnout Project Humanities has had for the homeless outreach program.

So, then last year, obviously the pandemic closed things off. Dr. Lester, in his great decision-making, said we’re not going to expose ourselves to the virus or expose our clients to the virus by continuing as we were doing every other Saturday distribution of shoes, clothes, and toiletries. We didn’t want to bring COVID to our clients, and if they have COVID, we didn’t want to expose us as volunteers.

We stopped having it last March, but in April, Michigan State had yet another Day of Service because you could do it not remotely, but socially distanced. You could go out and pick up trash along the river or out in a field or whatever, and not be near each other.

Well, we had made a commitment among ourselves and to the Project Humanities program that we were going to do something with them. So, we did a collection. We asked Dr. Lester what was needed in the COVID-modified homeless outreach going forward.

And I said, “Okay, so what do you need?” And Dr. Lester gave me a list of six or eight items. And we went out to our AZ database of Michigan State alumni and told them what we needed, told them we were going to be at this restaurant in Scottsdale, Wasted Grain, and on a Saturday.

And they brought enough that filled up two SUVs and at that point, and Dr. Lester filled up his car. So, this year [2021], we did a two-fold event. We did a blood drive with vital ENT who’s the primary blood collection organization here in Phoenix.
We did a blood mobile, signed up 25 people, and we also publicized the Project Humanities donations collection during the same hours.

**Afzal:** That's really interesting to see the progression of how things went and especially with the pandemic. It's good how we were able to do some form of service.

**Randy:** It's unfortunate that the pandemic came along for God only knows how many reasons, but you know we were gaining momentum. We were gaining more and more volunteers and more people becoming aware of our homeless clients’ needs.

That human element and connection is like a big part of the draw to volunteering. So, yeah, it really is incredible. I mean the very first time that I did it, I really didn't know what to expect.

But you know, it took about 3 minutes for me to realize I'm dealing with other human beings. You know, my expectations were misplaced. You know, I was dealing with other human beings that had other issues going on. There was a fellow there that was a veteran. He'd been deployed, I think, three times—Afghanistan and someplace else—came back, and had to have a knee replaced. And they said, “Well, you know, because you've already had one done, you have to go on a waiting list. And the waiting list was something like 3 years long. And somebody told him, “You know, too bad, I guess, that you're not homeless because we can get you in in 3 months if that was the case.

I mean, you know, first off, jeez, thanks veteran for serving your country. But you know, if you want expedited service, you're going to have to be homeless. So, guy got rid of his apartment, got rid of all this worldly belongings, and moved onto the street so that he could have his knee replaced.

**Afzal:** What specifically about Project Humanities and its homeless outreach really struck a chord with the Michigan State Alumni Association? I know there are other service projects that could have grabbed your interest and attention.

**Randy:** I think it was that connection with the Project Humanities group and with individuals who are homeless. I really enjoy seeing other folks, the other volunteers coming out from Project Humanities. You really do meet some fascinating people through that. And then you're distributing the clothes and the supplies to that completely different subset of Phoenix.

So, we're interacting with two other groups. And we're doing something for the community. If we were out picking up trash along Highway 101 or Highway 17 or Highway 51, we're helping the community, but I don't think it's as rewarding. Yeah. I know it's not as rewarding as going out and doing something for other members of our community.

That human connection really makes it rewarding. I think it makes all the difference in the world. As you drive down the street and you see somebody pushing a shopping cart with clothes, for 99% of the population, that is their only connection with that person with a shopping cart. They don't know what put them there. They don’t know what mindset that person has.

Again, we on a Saturday morning distribution, we typically have a line of men and women in two different lines because we separate the clothing. And this one day, this guy comes through the line. And as I do with every person that comes up, I introduced myself and got their name. “So, what are you looking for today? Anything specific?”
Usually, it's you know, just a little bit of everything. This one time, this fellow says, “I don't need anything.” Kind of stopped me in my tracks and I looked at him. He goes, “I want to thank you guys because I was here two weeks ago, picked up clothing that I wore to a job interview, and I got the job.” Wow! “So, I'm going to be renting an apartment. I'm going to be working full-time, and I wouldn't have been able to do that had it not been for this.” So, he went through the whole line and thanked all the volunteers that he encountered.

I mean, there's not a Saturday that I don't walk away from there with a smile and at least one pleasant memory. So, yeah, that's what makes it worthwhile. That's what makes us come back.

Afzal: How do you see the initiative moving forward with the pandemic and with the new circumstances? What is the new Service Saturday look like in your view?

Randy: I really don't have a clue because there's so many other different factors involved now. You know, first off, we have to wrestle with COVID. What is the aftermath going to be like? And two, there are some rather strange things taking place within the City of Phoenix. And yeah, they're kind of come up with different rules and regulations for the homeless community. I'm not really sure. I saw one thing that was being promoted that would make homelessness a misdemeanor.

So anyway, so many factors and unknowns out there. I really don't have a clue. All I have is this vision or this memory of what it used to be. I wish to get back to that. That that would be my ideal.

I don't think it's going to be anything like what we did in the past, but I don't have a clue. I defer to Dr. Lester on that, but you know, God, I really wish we could return to pre-pandemic days. And it was gaining all the momentum, too. So that was really unfortunate that like right when at the top, it had to close, however temporarily.

I don't know if you've gotten these statistics from Dr. Lester, but we were servicing anywhere between 150 and 200, I think, homeless population on any given Saturday morning. I'm sure that the numbers are still out there, and in all likelihood, maybe it may have increased because of the pandemic.

Afzal: So, the need's going to be there. How Dr. Lester and the program can address them is going to be the real project. Right? With the pandemic, we've also been trying to do more drives just to generate some more resources and to more help from others to just pitch in, to donate certain items, just whatever they could.

Randy: Well, the beauty of technology is that you can continue this work in a modified way. Dr. Lester tells me what's needed or more importantly, he directs me to the Amazon Wish List page, and I turn around and get all that information to those 4,000 people in the AZ Spartans database and say, “You don't have to come to Phoenix to distribute. You don't have to come to Phoenix to drop off your shirts and pants and socks and underwear. All you have to do is go to Amazon, go to this link, and pick out something that you can afford. And, you know, it's going to be utilized by the homeless because Dr. Lester wouldn't have put it up there if it wasn't.”

And so, somebody from Bullhead City, AZ can now participate. Somebody from Lake Havasu can now participate. They don't have to make that drive. That's the beauty of where things are at this point. It's a good that despite the circumstances, we can still generate a community whether that be virtual or actually in person. I think that's still good to keep the interest of the community in helping out.

I don't even know how long they've had that Amazon Wish List page, but we weren't doing that when we were doing the face-to-face
interactions on Saturday mornings. You know, we just told people, “Here’s the things that the homeless need. Drop them off on Fridays at the warehouse to sort and ready for distribution on Saturdays. Collect your stuff and drop it off.” Well, that’s great for the folks in and around Phoenix, but it doesn’t help the people up in Flagstaff or Payson. And they’re really not going to drive down 2-3 hours to drop that stuff off. But now with the Amazon Wish List page, they can support the program from the comfort of their own home. Technology is definitely enabling more support for sure.

So, it's good that is always an option for people to pitch in. I hope it's the option for those people that are too far to drive in, if and when we get back to the Saturday face-to-face things. I'd still like to see the people, the volunteers, whether they can donate clothing or some protection or sunglasses or whatever for them to be down there.

You really don't appreciate the whole homeless outreach program until you see the whole process and, and see who's the recipient.

Afzal: Thank you so much for virtually sitting down with me.

Randy: I apologize for the shortness of time this afternoon. As I said, I'd prefer to be here talking with you as opposed to sitting in a dentist chair.

Afzal: Yeah, no worries. Thank you.

Randy: Well, hopefully we'll see you some Saturday morning.