

## The Inner Workings of a Local Mastermind

It is quite the usual Saturday morning in the City of Phoenix. The dimmed city landscape is complemented by the silent roads that are barren of both the chaos and rapidity of modern life that typically comprise their vitalities. The streets are lined with garbage; the sidewalks adorned with tents and tarps alike. Aromas of cigarette smoke and bodily waste fill the air. I slow down to avoid colliding with a wandering homeless man every few blocks. It is civil twilight. As the sun rises on my journey towards the seemingly desolate city, I begin to observe the waking of various camps spread across the pavement. It is the middle of winter; myself and a group of colleagues find ourselves caravanning to the city for a supply distribution session at Service Saturday—a bimonthly event organized by Arizona State University's Project Humanities that serves to distribute clothing items, food, and other necessities to the homeless population of Downtown Phoenix.

By 6:30 in the morning, the lines to pick up these items begin to wrap around the block. The homeless men and women come in flocks and arrange themselves uniformly based on their assigned sexes at birth—a method of organization that is later dissolved as the customers cross the threshold into the distribution center where they are free to pick items that compliment their respective gender identities without policing or judgement. As volunteers arrive in crowds, the spearheads of this event work hastily, yet carefully to unload the van stocked with donations. Bodies clothed in t-shirts that read "Project Humanities" scurry about the distribution site, meticulously organizing items on foldable tables and transportable racks. At around 6:40, we convene in a large circle to discuss the procedures and agenda for the day. Leading this event is none other than Dr. Neal Lester. Dr. Lester is a professor of English at Arizona State University

and the Founding Director of Project Humanities ("About Dr. Lester"). He has authored and contributed to a rather eclectic range of literature that tackles prevalent societal issues of the past and present alike. Such works detail subject matter ranging from black masculinity to African American homoeroticism. In his spare time, Dr. Lester moonlights as a community superhero of sorts, advocating for the rights of a variety of persons ranging from African American individuals to the LGBTQ+ communities of Arizona. His first words to the group strike authoritatively, inspiring motivation and excitement into the crowd.

The hours pass between breaths as we work and become familiarized with individual after individual, connecting with them on a level like no other. One woman tells me of how circumstance brought her to Phoenix and how she savors the hot Arizona sun that contrasts the frigid winds of the north—an unfriendly American region she last called home. Another recounts the story of the ring she wears proudly on her finger—a ring gifted to her by her late husband. The session concludes once the last person in both lines has been served. We clean up ardently, ensuring we leave the site “better than we found it” as directed by Dr. Lester. At our group’s final coven, the sentiments of service and accomplishment are palpable throughout the air. I leave the event astounded by my most recent experience. Little did I know I would go on to characterize this day as life altering. As the weeks pass, I begin to wonder at the inner workings of the mastermind behind this socially contributive event.

I sat down with Dr. Lester weeks later at a local Starbucks to pick his brain on his journey towards becoming a community trailblazer, his work as a professor of English, his inspiration behind Project Humanities, and his views on the socio-political landscape of the 21st century.

“A job” he tells me when I ask what brought him to Arizona. His move was a product of racial turmoil rooted in the deep South during the 1990s. On the subject of his realization of his professorship in English, he tells me of how an opportunity at Vanderbilt University drove him to complete his masters in Tennessee. At Vanderbilt, he describes how his presence as one of only three African American graduate students at a predominantly white school led to the magnification of “notions of difference” against him as a minority. He was often placed in lecture halls composed of predominantly white students, where he tells me he would be singled out and assigned *selective* tasks on the basis of his race such as reciting lines from “Dixie”—a racially charged piece by Daniel Decatur Emmett that channels the discriminatory attitudes held by white American southerners against African Americans during the Civil War. He tells me that his tumultuous experiences on his path towards attaining his degree did not keep him down, however, but rather served as kindling for his life’s work.

His tenure as the Dean of Humanities and chair of the Department of English at Arizona State University coupled with the economic downturn of the 2000s inspired him to create a program that enhanced social emphasis on the vitality of public humanities in the surrounding world. His envisionment of humanities was one centered around “critical conversations” that emphasized the principles of “talking, listening, and connecting.” He recounts his inspirations behind its formation and the early origins of the program. The early “clothing corner” organized by himself and others later grew into the vital communal resource now known as Service Saturday—a program that aims to “bring humanity to a population of folks whose humanity is often denied.”

When asked about his thoughts surrounding the recent rhetoric put forth by officials under the current executive administration surrounding the American homeless crisis, he tells me that, although it is in fact dangerous, it is indicative of deeper rooted issues within the United States such as housing insecurity and the general discouragement of independent efforts to aid the homeless population. Dr. Lester claims this rhetoric stems from “those who really have no empathy, understanding, or compassion for a circumstance that they are unaware of or can’t identify with.”

We transition into discussing his opinions on the recent efforts put forth by city officials such as Mayor Kate Gallegoto to aid the homeless crisis within the city of Phoenix: “It can’t just be about tossing resources. Although resources are critical, it has to be a whole different attitude towards the inhumanity highlighted when we talk about individuals experiencing homelessness a certain way.” Although he believes these efforts will help to an extent, he acknowledges the critical nature of current affairs and how the dissolving of social stigmas surrounding the American homeless population makes resolution of the situation much more complex.

At the end of my conversation with Dr. Lester, I discovered that at the heart of the inner workings of a local mastermind is in fact critical thinking. Critical thinking is what allows us to understand the human race as a fragile people that is at times submissive to the vast complexities ingrained into the very fabric of existence. It is what allows us to realize that every individual bears an untold story revealed only through personal bonds forged from empathy and compassion. As preached and practiced by Dr. Lester, “Empathy is not about walking in someone else’s shoes, but it’s about understanding someone else’s circumstance and caring about their circumstance.”

Works Cited

“About Dr. Neal Lester.” Arizona State University, <https://projecthumanities.asu.edu/content/about-dr-neal-lester>.

Lester, Neal. Personal Interview. 10 Mar. 2020.