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Mesilla Valley Community of Hope

2018

Hope Stories

Interview 1

The Great Conversation with Randy Harris

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

2 March 2018

La Paz Room at Jardin de Los Niños

Sponsored by Doña Ana County Historical Society

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Recording Information

Hope Stories 001 — 1h 30m duration. Recorded at Jardin de Los Niños
La Paz Room on the Hope Campus.

Acknowledgement

With guidance from public historian Dr. Jon Hunner, and support from Dr. Elizabeth Horodowich and Dr. Peter Kopp, in early 2018 Doña Ana County Historical Society awarded the Hope Stories project generous transcription funding through the Mary and J. Paul Taylor NMSU Student Scholarship.

Archivist and oral historian at New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum, Donna Wojcik transcribed eight interviews of the project, provided invaluable knowledge about transcription craft, and kindly orchestrated narrator appreciation artwork from Ray Ortiz. Donna's interpretive insight and professional workflow support is unmatched.

Kara Andrea Lory's *The Cultural Geography of the Homeless in Las Cruces, New Mexico* remains must-read research. Available at NMSU Library Archives and Special Collections, Lory's 2003 thesis is an excellent historical source on the consolidated services model at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, an important first step to learning more about Doña Ana County poverty and Las Cruces homelessness.

I am especially thankful to each of the sixteen Hope Stories narrators whose invaluable time, insight, and personal engagement with the homeless community cannot be highlighted enough. Seen together collectively with project oral history transcription and audio recordings, it is my wish as researcher that New Mexico citizens recognize each narrator's contribution alongside the many unnamed individuals who work to end homelessness and hunger in Las Cruces.

Project History

The Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH) is a homeless services corridor in Las Cruces, New Mexico. In the 1970s, Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church began Soup Kitchen service which later became El Caldito. As need for food and healthcare clinical service increased throughout the 1980s, the Las Cruces community supported Saint Andrew's congregation members with the opening of Saint Luke's Health Clinic. With a long history of compassionate services for visitors, the City of Las Cruces recognized the importance of limiting distance and travel-time between public health and human service organizations located throughout different parts of the city.

Incorporated as a non-profit in 1991, additional support continued to form what became known as a collaborative alliance with operations at 999 Amador Avenue nearby to downtown Las Cruces. In 2011, following a particularly harsh Las Cruces "Deep Freeze" winter that caused health concerns for the housed, and deaths for the homeless due to exposure, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope staff banded together with clients to appeal to the City of Las Cruces for sanctioned overnight camping status to found the Camp Hope transitional living program.

In 2018, the Hope Stories project collected fifteen oral history interviews to learn about the development of the consolidated services model at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope. The term "Corridor of Care" refers to a perspective in the healthcare industry known as the consolidated services model that helps people access health and human service related programs in centrally located "hub" or "node" areas.

This public history graduate project asked participating narrators questions about how the Las Cruces community first began to advance, reinforce, and collaborate through the actions necessary to become the Hope Campus at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope. Rather than conduct interviews with those who experienced homelessness, the project features staff and volunteer narrators who shared community engagement stories about the consolidated services corridor concept.

Two additional perspectives from outside the Hope Campus, the fourth interview with Glenn Trowbridge took place at CARE Complex in Las Vegas, Nevada, an out-of-state counter-balance to the history of homeless consolidated services in the United States; and the fifteenth interview with Kit Elliot and Meg Long occurred at Aggie Cupboard on NMSU campus, a satellite food pantry inspired by Casa de Peregrinos.

Today's work to help the homeless in Las Cruces is the result of a compassionate, multi-organizational approach by non-profit service providers. In 2018, these five core non-profit homeless services include Mesilla Valley Community of Hope; Casa de Peregrinos food pantry; El Caldito soup kitchen; Jardin de Los Niños educational program; and Amador Health Center (formally Saint Luke's Health Clinic).

With Hope Campus the geographic center of non-profit homeless service providers in Las Cruces, it is important to note resources offered by City of Las Cruces, State of New Mexico Health and Human Services, and many other local organizations not located at 999 Amador Avenue. For a comprehensive listing of community service organizations, including for those experiencing homelessness, use online search term "Las Cruces Community Resource Guide," or ask for an updated copy.

Narrator Summary

Randy Harris was born on Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington, studied history, social science, and communication, and worked in agriculture, media, energy conservation, and entrepreneurial creativity.

In 2010, Harris engaged Las Cruces citizens to participate in a series of civil and informed community dialogues called The Great Conversation. To focus on the homeless situation happening on-the-ground prior to City of Las Cruces legally sanctioned overnight camping, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH) asked Harris to coordinate and facilitate The Great Conversation with those experiencing homelessness.

A way to negotiate the needs of the homeless community through respectful dialog, and to make available timely opportunities to access local services, MVCH clients, and residents living temporarily at Camp Hope, meet to discuss a range of topics such as transitional housing programs, on-site options for healthcare, and reliable sources of food. Each Tuesday morning at 10 o'clock, The Great Conversation begins with an orientation session for those new to Camp Hope, a MVCH staff attended exchange of information and discussion about the progress of individuals seeking permanent housing opportunities.

In this March 2nd, 2018 interview, Harris spoke about 2011 origins of Camp Hope on the Hope campus, the importance of community dialogue to support collaborative problem-solving, and approaches to limiting short-term symptoms and long-term causes of homelessness. Since 2010, The Great Conversation has hosted approximately 1,500 dialogues in the Las Cruces community.

Index of first hour

- 00:08 - Interview introduction
- 01:09 - Great Conversation at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope
- 03:48 - The dialog process
- 04:47 - Origins of services at Camp Hope
- 06:00 - Addressing issues through dialogue with homeless people
- 06:46 - City of Las Cruces ninety-day waiver to legally camp overnight
- 08:03 - Drop in first responder 911 Calls
- 08:50 - Transitional homeless setting at Camp Hope
- 10:22 - Compassionate “Spirit of the Camp”
- 11:41 - Support to legally sanction Camp Hope
- 12:55 - Self Governance and the Safety Team
- 13:49 - Camp Hope Amenities
- 15:09 - Unsanctioned camps
- 16:25 - Camp Hope resident agreements
- 18:04 - Facilitating Dialogue course text
- 19:11 - Origins of Great Conversation
- 20:16 - How best to work with the homeless
- 21:09 - Contributions of Mesilla Valley Community of Hope participants

Index of first hour (cont.)

- 22:43 - Immediate problem-solving resolutions
- 23:30 - Challenges of unadorned homeless alongside costumed society
- 26:27 - How homeless people are treated
- 27:16 - Well-informed and compassionate Las Cruces law enforcement
- 28:19 - Mobile Crises Team
- 29:34 - Mental health professional approach to avoid incarceration of the homeless
- 30:35 - Fear of homeless people
- 31:18 - Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) program
- 34:35 - Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- 36:17 - ACEs connected to homelessness
- 38:54 - Disoriented youth 18-25 years of age
- 40:26 - Unique and compassionate community
- 41:17 - Camp Hope support and local funding
- 43:04 - Community Contributors
- 45:22 - Willingness to reshape homeless services for other communities
- 46:21 - Results of the financial crash of 2007-2008
- 47:21 - Bankruptcy from medical bills leading to homelessness
- 47:58 - Nowhere to disappear anymore

Index of first hour (cont.)

50:31 - A paycheck away from the street

52:00 - Strong family units of New Mexico Colonias

52:28 - Elderly Homeless

53:28 - Nomad Land by Jessica Bruder

56:00 - Identifying differences between symptoms and causes of homelessness

57:45 - Metaphor of sawed-off fingers

59:51 - Causes of homelessness connected to U.S. economic model

Index of second hour

- 01:00:53 - Dealing with the opioid crises
- 01:02:22 - Conflicted interests of non-profit poverty organizations
- 01:04:33 - Economy in New Mexico
- 01:06:18 - Values factor and collective priorities
- 01:07:07 - Money use of non-profit organizations
- 01:09:00 - Mental Health symptoms and causes to homelessness
- 01:10:24 - Public defenders and criminal justice
- 01:14:09 - Social attitudes towards the homeless
- 01:15:34 - Finding solutions
- 01:18:25 - Healthcare options and opportunities
- 01:22:17 - “Not available” and “not adequately funded” programs
- 01:23:39 - Need for more affordable housing
- 01:25:01 - Future of Mesilla Valley Community of Hope
- 01:26:30 - Innovative ideas and addressing causes as a culture
- 01:27:27 - Los Angeles, California “Housing First”
- 01:28:44 - Compassion, patience, and direction of resources
- 01:29:30 - Learning to talk to each other to address causes

Interview 1 of Hope Stories — March 2nd, 2018

David Lee del Norte: This is the first recording of the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope Stories, a New Mexico State University Public History Project. Today's narrator is Randy Harris. The interviewer is David Lee, myself. The file number is 18HOPE_0198.wav. The recording is held at the Jardin de los Niños La Paz Room, also known as the Zen Room, on the Hope campus. The date is the 2nd of March 2018. Randy, could you tell me your full name?

Randy Harris: Sure. Randy Harris.

del Norte: And your date of birth?

Harris: 7-27-52.

del Norte: And the location that you consider your hometown or where you feel that you are most moored to?

Harris: I'd say Las Cruces.

del Norte: And your current role here at the Community of Hope?

Harris: My role is to convene with the campers, and community members, and [MVCH] staff members, accordingly, once a week on Tuesday mornings at 10 a.m. We gather out into a circle out in the camp, usually, unless the weather's really bad. Then we go indoors, and we have a civil and respectful dialogue about what's going on in camp. Challenges, successes.

You know, anytime you have a human grouping you at least run the risk and most often actually see conflict. People inadvertently step on each other's feelers under the best of circumstances. So, we talk about structural issues. Material needs and challenges.

We also talk about personal and internal processes that folks in the camp are experiencing, and address conflicts. So-and-so leaves the kitchen messy, or we're running out of toilet paper in the bathrooms, or so-and-so gave me a hard time about something the other day, or I felt so. And you know, we just sort through things. In any grouping you have conflict in some measure it seems, and addressing it early rather than let it build and fester, and, turn into something else. We just deal with stuff.

Like in the Tao Te Ching it says, "See the few as many, and the small as large."

Deal with it when it's small because ninety-eight percent of the stuff that we deal with on that level in our lives starts out real small, and if it goes unaddressed then it builds, and it— Pressure grows, and pretty soon it's out of proportion to the actual concern. The original concern.

Harris: So, that's the kind of stuff that we do, and, of course, we herald the success stories of people getting housed, and getting jobs, and going back to school. And it seems to be, some people have said that it's that dialogue process that makes the difference in regard to the idea that, you know, while they're bulldozing camps everywhere, and criminalizing homelessness, even criminalizing giving food to homeless people. People have come from other countries, and across this county, to study how... To ask: "How are you guys doing this? How, how . . ."

del Norte: Can I ask, how did you first experience what is today commonly called a tent city? Here it's called Camp Hope.

Harris: Right.

del Norte: Was this your first experience—

Harris: Yes.

del Norte: —in a tent city?

Harris: Yes.

del Norte: Can you tell me a little bit about the beginning?

Harris: Sure. The City of Las Cruces owns the property that this campus is built on, and the city's done a terrific job in terms of bringing the services together, readily accessible in one setting. Lots of cities don't have that. And this property, you know, is the ordinances, and the codes, and the zoning— prohibit people, quote “camping or sleeping on the property.”

And an announcement— the city made an announcement that there's not gonna be any camping allowed on the property. It was September, getting ready to come into winter, and the previous winter we'd had a— We'd lost a couple of people to— A couple of homeless folks passed away— Exposure. You know. It was— The previous year had been kind of a tough, tough year. Hypothermia and, you know, stuff.

So, the Director of the Community of Hope at the time asked if I would be willing to participate in and convene some dialogues to address— to address the issues. And we did. We took the daring step of talking about homelessness with, guess: homeless people. Whoa! (Chuckles) What a surprise! (Chuckles)

And it was very good. We were holding these dialogues on a relatively consistent basis with homeless folks, and the staff of Community of Hope, and city officials, councilors, fire department, law enforcement, emergency first responders— Mobile crisis type organizations. County folks. Folks from the county, county commissioners got wind of what we were doing and began to join us, and through that process, the city gave us a ninety day waiver.

Harris: They said, “Okay. We’re not gonna enforce this no camping thing,” and people like to camp over here because all the services are here. They wanna be close to their services, and that’s understandable. So, the city gave us a ninety day waiver, and said,

“Alright. People can camp here. We’ll get through the winter.”

And there was no camp, per se, there was just a lot, a little piece of a field over here that was empty. And we began to start putting tents there, and providing services for people, and at the end of that ninety day waiver the statistics showed that conflicts, and particularly conflicts resulting in 911 [emergency] calls for law enforcement or hospitals or medical services, had dropped precipitously. Things were quieter and calmer. And we all sat around and looked at that in dialogue, and then the city gave us another ninety days.

They said, “Oh. Alright.” It’s understandable that that might have been perceived as some sort of an anomaly or a seasonal anomaly. Well, after the second ninety days we saw the same or better. Long story short, through the process over the years, and we’ve been doing it for seven years, the city has now rezoned that piece of property to allow for an ongoing transitional homeless setting where people can come in, be safe, get their business in order, get their benefits, get their paperwork, documentation, stuff that homeless people often lack. Get health care, and start the process of re-acclimating to living in a community in a— in the traditional sense that we think of it. And it’s been great. A lot of people say it’s this— That this dialogue process is the center of it.

Harris: That's what makes this different from other projects, and other efforts, in other places. And surely there are good people doing hard work on this issue with homeless folks. And this seems to be unique. New York Times, Washington Post, Reuters, just right off the top, have all come here and done articles and interviews.

So, we just keep plugging away, and it works. Hundreds of people have been through the camp, and if the "Spirit of the Camp," which is the spirit of personal responsibility as well as compassion for others, looking out for other folks, cooperation, working together, committing to something larger than the daily needs or wants for self. As long as those factors contribute to the spirit of the camp it just keeps— It just keeps working.

del Norte: You were here at the beginning of this camp?

Harris: Yes.

del Norte: Can you talk about some of the differences between what is now sanctioned Camp Hope and unsanctioned tent cities, which the country's dealing with presently. Can you maybe paint a picture for us, the process of becoming so sanctioned through the City of Las Cruces?

Harris: Well, we've had terrific support first of all, thanks to the city. One of the distinctions between Camp Hope and just kind of impromptu or ad hoc encampments are that the campers, you know, we have a specified area that is approved.

Harris: Lots of camps are set up in various different places now, without any approval, and are subsequently subject at any time to being eradicated. Because this is sanctioned we're secure. We don't have to worry about that.

We have very specific guidelines with the city in terms of fire safety, and access, and health, and those kind of problems which we practice very closely and carefully. The camp itself, here, is a setting wherein you find a kind of a self-governance. People take on responsibility for various aspects of the camp. There's a safety team that is posted. We have a safety office that's posted near the entrance of the camp.

And the safety team members are all camp members first, and just keep an eye on things. You know: who's coming and going. Help process donations and contributions. Give tours to community members and others, show them around the camp.

Because we have done this consistently for as long as we have, what was once a field of mud has now all been graded and graveled. We've got tent pads, rising pads. We have a kitchen. We have bathrooms with showers. We have a safety office.

We've got— with solar, with solar power. We've got solar powered night lights. We've got shade structures. Structures for people to sit around, hang out and talk, and visit with one another. We've fenced it with chain link fence, and then installed that kind of wind blocking vinyl so there's a sense of privacy. Also a sense of boundaries.

Harris: And those factors in themselves are marked variations from what most camps are. Most camps are kind of random collections of folks who just kind of show up.

del Norte: The unsanctioned camps.

Harris: Yes. Correct. And in those settings all kinds of hierarchical structures unfold, and it isn't based on, it isn't always, at least, based on the kind of principles that we use here. We're here to look out for— first get our business in order, look out for others, be supportive, contribute. Lots of people who have passed through the camp come back to visit, and to volunteer, and to do stuff. You don't see that in other camps.

So, subsequently what you do see in other camps is often violence, criminal behavior of various sorts, drugs; and we have some primary rules out here. There's no violence, no threats of violence, no possession or use of drugs or alcohol, no weapons, and everyone who comes in the camp agrees to those terms.

del Norte: As I understand they have to sign a document—

Harris: Agreed.

del Norte: —where they—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –are told these, and see it written–

Harris: Yep.

del Norte: –so, in order to stay at the camp–

Harris: Yes.

del Norte: –they have to acknowledge the rules.

Harris: Yes. It's part of the entrance. You have to... Yeah, everybody reads that, and they talk through it, ask questions,

“Are you okay with this? Do you understand it? Can you be in compliance?”

“Yes, I can.” Signature. “Okay. Let's go.”

del Norte: From my experience at the Great Conversation it would seem that you reinforce those rules during the Tuesday ten o'clock meetings.

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: I have a Great Conversation sheet here that has some of the rules of your facilitating dialogue course. If it's okay, I'd like to read some of it.

Harris: Sure, of course.

del Norte: And the reason is because it's what you're trying to accomplish on a level that is equal with homeless people regardless of the outside world's potential stigmas.

Harris: Yes.

del Norte: You're trying to make them feel at home, and also understand the rules.

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: That's how I understand it.

Harris: Okay.

del Norte: It says here, the Great Conversation: “In the Great Conversation everyone has a voice, and every voice is heard in a safe and civil setting. We can speak freely and openly about things that are important to all of us. We may agree or disagree, even passionately, but always with respect and consideration for everyone in the circle. This is an opportunity to hear and respectfully examine the views of others, and to have our views heard and respectfully examined as well.”

“In the Great Conversation we come together as a community to address our differences, and to recognize how much we all have in common. Ours is an inter-dependent community. We all need and depend on each other. Like it or not, we really are all in this together.”

So, this is something I received outside of camp but — How did the Great Conversation begin in the context of Camp Hope?

Harris: Well. We had been doing conversations in the community.

del Norte: Ah. It happened outside—

Harris: Yes.

del Norte: —first. Okay.

Harris: So, the idea was to bring that process, the conversation process, particularly in alignment with the principles that you just shared, creates an opportunity for collaborative problem solving, among other things, and people come together, and explore, you know, mission, intent, challenges, and clarify direction, and work out solutions. And it's different doing it in a setting where it's not competitive. There's no-, you know, there's not competing agendas. Everybody's on the same page.

Our intent is to address... For example, in this situation our intent is to address how best to work with the homeless population. Okay, and part of that is integration. It's like, you know, not moving away from the idea that homeless people are this separate, unconnected demographic. That just isn't accurate. And so to be able to bring people together in such a way as to work on problem solving skills, this seems like a good mechanism, and so far it's been— So far, it's been very, very effective.

And, you know, it in itself wouldn't mean anything without “The Spirit.” The contributions of the staff of the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, and the contributions of the homeless folks themselves, the contributions of community members who come and, yes, participate in the conversations. Students, nursing students, public health, social workers, and others — to get a sense of what we're doing out here, and how that matters.

del Norte: I think it matters a lot from my experiences in Albuquerque. Coming to Las Cruces, and seeing the tight knit community of helping the homeless—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –it's something I'm unfamiliar with.

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: It's one of the reasons I chose to go this direction with the Hope Stories project.

Harris: Great.

del Norte: A little bit of a transition here, and it has transitional housing question. Can you talk about the benefits of transitional housing programs, like Tents to Rents, and particularly in the context of a success at Camp Hope? Someone that has been in the camp, and is on their way to housing.

Harris: Well David, there are a lot of stories, and frankly, you might get a more accurate recounting of that from Nicole Martinez or Sue Campbell or— My role pretty much exists within the limited, within the confines of bringing folks together and doing these immediate problem solving, resolution seeking, and some of it's kind of quasi-therapeutic. We talk about self-sabotage. We talk about managing our emotions, and de-escalating conflict rather than impulsively escalating it. Stuff like that. That's kind of the center, the focus, these aspects of the experience, not just the kind of psychological aspects, although that's part of it.

Harris: In the homeless community you find the same kinds of challenges that you find in the larger community. You find chemical or alcohol dependency. You find financial irresponsibility. You find folks with mental health challenges, behavioral challenges, again not unlike what you find at large in our culture, in our society. Most of the time homeless folks are, they're just unadorned. There's no hiding it. It shows.

Lots of folks with comparable issues are kind of costumed in the exceptional, the accepted costumes of our society. And still... Our... I mean if you look at... If you look at, for example, crime statistics overall, or domestic abuse, or child abuse, or any other, or any of those multitudes of challenges, you don't see some inappropriate portion of that coming from homeless people. It's just not so.

And there seems to be a fair amount of focus these days on the concept of adverse childhood experiences, and how adverse childhood experiences can shape kids, and shape people into their adulthood in terms of their behavior, and their traumas.

del Norte: I'll ask a question about childhood experiences in just a minute; however, it sounds like you're approaching some of the problems with the criminalization of homelessness. Can you talk about the outside factors that might bring people here, or even unfairly costume them as homeless because perhaps they are arrested for a situation— Can't provide bail, or anything that might be a criminalization of the beginning stage perhaps, or even trying to sleep somewhere overnight.

Harris: Well, are you're talking about what leads people to homelessness or how homeless people are treated in the public?

del Norte: How they're treated.

Harris: It's tough. It's a tough situation. You're a business owner, and you've got a person or persons sitting out in front of your business either panhandling or asking people for money or whatever. Naturally your instinct is to say,

“Hey, wait a minute. This is private property. We don't want you doing that here. It's upsetting to our business.”

Okay. That's certainly understandable. So, what'll happen a lot of times is there's a call to law enforcement. Law enforcement shows up, and we are very fortunate in this town that we have a body of law enforcement folks who are well informed, well educated, and overall do a really tremendous job of being compassionate, being helpful. It's not like people just wade in here with billy clubs, and— That's not how it works in Las Cruces. So, we've got a real good team in law enforcement, and in mobile crisis response teams.

del Norte: I'm not gonna forget this childhood experiences question here—

Harris: Yeah, yeah.

del Norte: –but can you talk about some of the programs that might, that I don't know about or, that have worked or not worked over the life of Camp Hope so far? I mea-, a mobile crisis team, I, I'm–

Harris: Okay. Mobile crisis is actually funded and sponsored by a— I'm pretty sure they're a statewide organization that deals with mental health concerns. So, they have a phone number, and either an individual, that's related to some event, or law enforcement officers will occasionally call mobile crisis.

You roll up on a situation, and you realize that you're dealing with someone or some-ones who have serious or influential mental health issues that are affecting the whole situation. Mobile crisis— When mobile crisis is called they'll send folks out to the location to talk to people.

“Okay, John. What's happening here?”

And they come at it with a kind of— with a mental health professional approach. Much of this can be resolved in ways that don't require incarcerating homeless people. This business that we're gonna lock up everybody that produces a disturbance, or is homeless, or doesn't seem to have both oars in the water. We can't, you know— History shows that that doesn't get us where we want to go.

It's not affective, first. Secondly, it's expensive. And we don't benefit from locking people up for this kind of stuff.

Harris: Obviously if there's a serious offense or a crime that happens to have been committed by a person who happens to be un-housed, that's a different story. But much of the conflicts we see are, oh, generated, spawned, nurtured by fear of homeless people. People are afraid of homeless people. Homeless people have, in some settings, a reputation for being violent, or criminal, or— And there is some aspect of that in the homeless community.

Just like there's an aspect of that in the sports community or any other community. So, organizations that do work like mobile crisis really bring a lot, really bring a lot to the process. The local law enforcement folks, and organizations like mobile crisis, have helped sponsor on many occasions crisis intervention training for folks in the camp.

del Norte: C-I-T, I believe.

Harris: Yes.

del Norte: Okay.

Harris: Yeah. The C-I-T program has tools and perspectives and mechanisms for one of the— One of the key factors is de-escalation. Someone approaches you or you have to deal with a situation, and you get to choose every time: “Do I react to this in such a way that it fuels the fire, or can I bring it down?” “Can we scale this down?”

Harris: And, “Maybe it’s a temporary— Maybe it’s temporary until there can be a long term de-escalation.” But most un-pleasantries happen, it could be said, in a moment of passion. “Someone’s angry, or someone’s hurt, or someone’s afraid,” or, “Yeah. Yeah. I get it, and we want to choose.” We want to choose which way to respond. This is not just for homeless folks. This is probably good cultural advice at large.

del Norte: (Chuckles) I can see that perfectly, especially in terms of my experiences in Albuquerque.

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: I think that Albuquerque and Las Cruces are nearby one another, geographically, but worlds apart in many ways.

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: Do you need to take a break or anything? It’s—

Harris: I’m okay.

del Norte: You’re alright? It’s only been about a half an hour, but—

Harris: We’ll go a little more.

del Norte: Alright. Cool. How about, maybe, the mobile crisis team or the, the crisis intervention training program.

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: Can you kind of tie that into what you were talking about with homelessness sometime being caused by adverse childhood experiences or—

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: —kind of the industry it— Or I guess that would be the mental health, and homeless services are looking at childhood traumas that often happen to people who become homeless.

Harris: Sure. There are a list of, I forget, I think there's something like ten— I just have it here. There's something like ten examples of adverse childhood experiences, and this is not particularly a new notion; however, it's being approached from a different way. A different perspective. Kids growing up in an alcoholic household, or in a household where alcoholic behavior is prevalent, can produce all kinds of traumatic side effects for kids. Violence, physical violence, verbal violence, sexual violence, drug abuse, neglect.

Harris: These are some of the examples of adverse childhood experiences that actually shape us as children. And some of this stuff kind of rolls off. Some of it causes deep wounds that influence, and actually shape the way we relate to the world around us.

If you are betrayed, neglected, abandoned, abused by those whom you would hope most to trust like, for example, parents, then you're gonna have trouble connecting with people very often. You know, again, some people seem to be able to get past it. Other people carry it with them, and it's understandable. So, we see a lot of homelessness is attributed— Or let's say it this way: a lot of folks who qualify with a lot of adverse childhood experiences end up homeless because they end up involved in drugs, crime. People... We've heard all the stories about, or a lot of the stories about, kids that get involved in gangs because they don't have a place where they're accepted, and valued, and respected. Through the home life setting, or... and of course these things can affect kid's schooling, education.

If you're awake all night because your parents are fighting, or the cops are coming, and maybe you're not getting enough food. You're not getting enough rest. You are living in a state of anxiety. Walking on egg shells. Waiting for the next bad thing to happen.

These are not factors that contribute to effective education. And of course when people drop out of the education system, or fail, quote, "fail in it," that can set up some social dynamics, and factors and forces, that can further— kind of impact how people relate in society.

Harris: So, these are some of the kinds of examples. And there's been quite a bit of study, in the last ten years anyway, on adverse childhood experiences. They call them "ACEs," and that process... Those projects are still underway. Identifying it.

del Norte: Speaking of education, have you worked with anyone in the Project Link program in Las Cruces Public Schools by chance?

Harris: No.

del Norte: That's— This will be one of my focuses in Hope Stories.

Harris: Great, great.

del Norte: So, have you experienced, I guess it would be, children over eighteen but still very much kids in the camp?

Harris: Out here?

del Norte: Yeah.

Harris: Yeah, we, uh, we: No minors in the camp.

del Norte: Oh, eighteen—

Harris: So, you've gotta be eighteen and older to come into the camp, and yeah, we've seen a bunch of youngsters between eighteen and say twenty-five who are pretty disoriented. They're coming out of kind of rough experiences, rough backgrounds. Some have been incarcerated. Some have been incarcerated a lot, and some have done— Some have done very well. They look around. They realize this is a safe place where people are not gonna hurt you. And you are able to kind of redirect, refocus, get back on track. So, yeah, we've seen that. Yeah.

del Norte: Randy, how about a little bit more about work in general at the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope, as in, you're staff here—

[Harris shakes head “No.”]

del Norte: –You're not staff here. So, you're a community member who volunteers here. Can you talk about the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope and Doña Ana County services that matter most to what you do at Camp Hope?

Harris: It all matters. We are a very unique community in some respects. This is a very compassionate community overall. People do care. We see that [compassion] in this community. Perhaps at a higher proportion than some other communities. I don't know how you quantify that, but many people... Whether folks are just visiting or new to the area, you'll hear people commenting frequently about how friendly people are here. That people are nice, and this camp, for example, I'm not sure if this is going in the right direction for you, but this camp is not federally funded. Okay. We don't get grants for this.

Harris: This camp is solely supported by [Las Cruces] community members. Churches, organizations, individuals. Everywhere from across the spectrum from combat veterans to college students in various programs to, again, churches, and other organizations who recognize the value of this. Who care about the situation and contribute to making it all— I described earlier, it's all graded and graveled, and we have tent pads, and shelters, and three-sided shelters. We've got three-sided shelters that the tents set in, and we've got— Oh, yeah, and fencing, and bathrooms, and kitchen, and all that stuff. It's all been donated by the community.

del Norte: One of my questions that was a couple down the line from what you mentioned about federal funding. How do city, state, and federal funding programs play a role in your work? “They don't” is your answer to that. There are not federal fundings coming in for Camp Hope. Can you talk about, perhaps, some of the relationships with community organizations?

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: Specifically those churches that you mentioned, and anything else that makes a difference.

Harris: Sure. I mean, a lot of people contribute. Boy Scouts contribute. Lions Club. Veterans groups. A multitude of churches, and synagogues, and mosques. And [to] contribute can be anything from offering classes and courses —which we do quite a bit of for folks here— to clean-up time, or coming out and cooking meals.

Harris: Folks will roll out here, and just set-up and cook for homeless folks. Sometimes people will bring prepared food. People donate basics. Toiletries, blankets, sleeping bags, tents, tarps, rope... Things that are kind of fundamental. Mosquito repellent. You know, basics. Soap. And it's all community support, and it's lots of organizations. One of the local [New Mexico] State University classes in construction—

del Norte: The architecture of— Are you speaking of the group that designed the [tent] shells?

Harris: Yeah, and then build them. Yeah. This is an exceptional community it seems. Yeah.

del Norte: Being on the inside of this process over the years, Can you suggest what other communities that don't experience this level of compassion— Can you suggest some of the processes that they might take under their wing in order to be successful with their homeless populations? I know there's—

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: —many tent city camps that are in process that are, some of them are sanctioned. Mostly they're unsanctioned.

Harris: Yes.

del Norte: What makes Las Cruces different? And how can that help other communities?

Harris: It could be said that a broad or general will. Will matters. Are we willing to do that? Is it in our agenda? Are we serious about it? Are we serious about reshaping this situation? And this is perhaps one point of view, one perspective on this, and others will have others: if you can sit down and talk about stuff. When you start flaying sweeping generalizations about groups of people.

When you start thinking in terms of slogans and bumper stickers, and it's like "homeless people are '_____.'"

Well. Wait a minute. There's an enormous spectrum of homeless people. And more so, we saw a huge uptick in homeless come after the banking— after the financial crash in 2007 and 2008, and housing before that, and housing following that. Everyday working folks suddenly found themselves— They lost their jobs. They lost their... They couldn't make their mortgages, and suddenly you're talking about people who have always participated in kind of a mainstream way suddenly on the street. Living in a car, or— Or if their car got repossessed, not even with a car.

And sometimes, certainly more often than we'd like to see, families with kids. And I mean there are many, I mean... You know the number one... Reportedly, the number one cause of personal bankruptcy in the United States is medical.

Harris: Somebody has a medical condition or circumstance that arises that they just can't— They just can't do it. These are people who are working, and carrying insurance policies, and it just, you know— Medical impacts drive people to the streets, so you've got— You've got a mix.

You've got a whole spectrum of people. On one end of the spectrum you might say that throughout human history up until pretty recently, if you— Maybe you just didn't fit in. You just didn't really like society or you didn't feel comfortable there, or you didn't wanna do it. You could work, and save up some money, and buy yourself some gear, and a pack horse, and you could disappear. You could go be a hermit. You could be a loner. You could do all that. There's nowhere to disappear to anymore. Except maybe, some people might say, disappear in— into plain sight.

del Norte: Is that a phrase for the homeless?

Harris: I don't know. I don't know. It just came out of my head. I don't know what it means.

del Norte: Sure.

Harris: I don't know if it means anything beyond there are some people who are homeless who are just not in alignment with our societal standards. They would just rather do things differently, and that's understandable. Many of us, perhaps, would do things differently if we felt that we could.

Harris: We might capitulate or comply with this set of societal agreements, and we might reject a different set. Right? So, on one end of the spectrum perhaps you have got people who elect to be outside of the system, the culture.

That doesn't necessarily mean they're bad people by any measure. Perhaps some are, and perhaps some are not. So, you really gotta watch this, this kind of lumping everybody into a bucket. And you've got people who are drug addicts, lose everything. You've got people who are hard workers, and have families, who lose everything. You look at the actual population of homeless people, actual homeless people, and there is multi-, there is a geometrically significant multiplier of, or—I'm not sure of the language I'm looking for — of people who are near homelessness.

del Norte: Ah, on the peripheral—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: —almost . . .

Harris: Right there.

del Norte: . . . right, yeah.

Harris: You know, a paycheck away. A paycheck away from the street. And if that paycheck gets interrupted— A lot of people rely on friends and family, and not everybody has that. And even for those who do that can wear pretty thin pretty quick. And particularly if— Then again, if folks are afflicted with mental health concerns or substance abuse, self-medication. There are many, many people, I mean, there are people with Phd's pushing a grocery cart down the street. And—

del Norte: You bring up those on the peripheral, and those close to homelessness.

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: What is your knowledge of poverty, and hunger, and near-homelessness in rural areas of New Mexico?

Harris: That's probably a statistic you'd best get from someone else.

del Norte: Have you worked with clients from New Mexico Colonias?

Harris: Not a whole lot. Sometimes in the Colonias, what we see is stronger family units.

del Norte: They're able to band together in order to avoid homelessness.

Harris: Yeah. Sometimes.

del Norte: Despite the— Despite their living situation.

Harris: Yeah. Yeah. It's not always the case, and sometimes it is. Again, it's all nuanced, and there's no hard and fast standard or rule for any aspect of the demographic. It's— and some people just fall through the cracks. We're seeing older folks, a lot of older folks who are homeless.

del Norte: Is that something you— You're seeing that as a new situation for the elderly that are homeless?

Harris: Not particularly here. We do have a significant portion of our campers who are fifty or sixty, or sometimes older, but nationally there's an increase of older folks falling through the cracks. They lost their 401Ks. They lost their equity in their homes. They're at fifty, or sixty, or seventy years old suddenly find themselves stranded financially.

There's an interesting book called *Nomad Land* [by Jessica Bruder], and it's written by a gal who went and explored, and spent about three years working with folks, older folks, who just— They can't compete with what's happening here anymore.

Harris: They've taken significant financial hits, and now find themselves living in cars, and traveling to Amazon fulfillment centers, and the beet harvest. Trying to make enough money to eat. And these are these are folks that would be considered main steam folks until the economics, or the health care, or some of these key indicators knock them down.

And we tend to look at people who have trouble, or people who are having a rough time. We tend to look at them judgmentally. It's like, "Yeah. Well. You're a failure."

del Norte: The peripheral folks—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: —that are close—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: —to homelessness.

Harris: Well, and folks who actually experience homelessness. It's like, "Well, you're a failure. You can't hang." Hmmm. Let's maybe, maybe consider not being so quick to judge.

del Norte: I agree with not being quick to judge a hundred percent, a hundred and ten percent. It's incredibly important. We're almost at an hour of today's interview.

Harris: Okay.

del Norte: I have maybe four or five more questions.

Harris: Okay.

del Norte: And because maybe we'll have another interview at the capstone, at the end of the summer—

Harris: (Simultaneously) Okay. Okay.

del Norte: —I think we can cut it short.

Harris: Can we take a little break now?

del Norte: Let's take a break and then.

Harris: (Simultaneously) Are you okay with that?

del Norte: Let's do that.

Harris: For a few minutes. Yeah. Thank you.

[Recording stopped and resumed]

del Norte: So, we're back from a break with Randy Harris. Randy, can you talk about the differences between the symptoms and the causes of homelessness, and really focus on what those symptoms are, specifically, compared to what the causes are—

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: —specifically?

Harris: And thank you for asking that question, David. It's fundamental to the issue. In many of our realms of, you know, organizations, and groups, and systems that deal with our social ills, we find ourselves focused on the symptoms, and that's important. We need to address the symptoms. If people are homeless, or kids are homeless, or kids are out of school, or— Those are profound symptoms that need to be addressed promptly. There also seems to be a tendency, and it may just be neurologically induced by the human brain, for us to focus on crisis, and that's a good thing. Crises call for focus.

Harris: And at the same time it's starting to seem wise to begin a parallel process of addressing causes. For if we don't address the causes, the symptoms just continue. They just go on, and on, and on. We pass it from generation to generation. Not only do we pass the cultural disease, and its symptoms, we also pass the responsibility for addressing that.

And unless we want to doom another three or four generations or more to dealing with the same stuff we're dealing with now, then we need to get to the causes.

An easy metaphor: Say you were in an urgent care or an emergency room, and for the last four weeks about once a week someone comes in with their hand all bundled up, and they've sawed their pinky off.

The first time you see that you go, "Oh my gosh!" "Blah, blah, blah," and you address it. You know, you stop the bleeding. You try to reattach the digit. You address that symptom right here, right now. Well, and if this continues to happen, sooner or later you're gonna ask, "Ahhh, Where?" "Where did this happen?"

"Well, at work."

"Where do you work?"

"I work at such-and-such fabrication shop."

Harris: “Okay,” and then you realize that four or five of these people that you’ve seen in the last four or five weeks also work in that shop. It’s like, go over to the shop. Talk to the shop steward, or whoever’s in charge, and ask, “Can I take a look at your table saw?”

“Well,” you know, “You see there? That table saw is missing a safety guard.”

“Well,” you know, “It gets in the way. It slows us down.”

“Blah, blah, blah.” And then, these are common explanations for why this— It’s an example of common rational for allowing things to continue.

“It’s too expensive to change it. Too expensive. We don’t have the time. We don’t have the staff. We don’t have the personnel.” Whatever the scale of the issue is. And you say, “Get the safety guard on there, please.” “I’m tired— I’m tired of sewing peoples’ fingers back on.”

[End first hour of interview]

Interview 1 second hour — March 2nd, 2018

Randy Harris: And that's a real rudimentary cause and symptom example. If we... If we're looking at homelessness, the causes of homelessness, lots of it— Lots of the symptoms of homelessness seem to trace to a cause that could be, and is by some people, identified as the outcomes of our economic model. If we don't have access to health care, sufficient access to health care, both in terms of treatment and prevention. If we don't have access to education. If we don't have time to invest in spending with our families, and doing things together, and learning, and sharing, and growing, for example — most of these can be traced to economics, and these are examples of the things that often lead to homelessness.

We look at the opioid crisis. Okay. We have an opioid crisis. Let's deal with it. Let's get some rehab going. Let's evaluate the flow of opioids across the counter, and to the public. What happens when those opioid— when that opioid flow slows down? People go to heroin, or other substances of comparable influence. Okay.

Let's ask the question: Why is there so much pain? Why are so many people addicted to pain killers? Why is that? Let's get upstream with this. Let's figure this out.

Harris: It's like fishing kids out of the river with nets. It's like, "Lord, have mercy. Yeah, you— We've gotta stop what we're doing right now. We've gotta get these kids out of the river." "Okay." "Got it." Sooner or later somebody's gotta go upriver and say, "How the heck are these kids getting into the river?" And so, cause and symptoms seem to be key issues in addressing homelessness, as well as other issues, and far and away the focus is on symptoms. Now, interestingly enough, you hear people talk about, in non-profits,

"Well, my goal is to work myself out of a job." "If I'm working on an issue in the community on poverty, well, what are we gonna..."

How many organizations in this country have been pouring millions or perhaps billions of dollars into organizations that are going to address poverty? Well. There's kind of— There can be an inherent conflict there. The money is in treating the symptoms. The money is not in solving the causes. Because then it just goes away.

And that's not to suggest that people who work in non-profits are greedy, self-serving perpetrators of the issues that they address. It is a suggestion that we as a society, as a culture, begin to evaluate. Ask the questions that lead to answers to,

"When are we actually going to address these causes, and fix it?"

It's like you've got a leak in your kitchen ceiling, and you put a bucket on the floor. Well, that's okay. Good.

Harris: You're dealing with that symptom right now. If you don't ever fix it you're just gonna have to keep getting bigger and bigger buckets. You're gonna have to have a vast supply of buckets. It doesn't end until you get up on the roof, and fix the leak. So, there's that—
There's that factor that—

David Lee del Norte: The economic model.

Harris: That's part of it.

del Norte: So, as examples that's the only example that I've heard is, is the economic model. Can you—

Harris: (Simultaneously) Sure.

del Norte: —put that in terms of New Mexico as often called the fiftieth poorest state?

Harris: Oh, gosh. Well, yeah. You know, when people don't get education that impacts the economy. When people aren't having good paying jobs, and rational lives, you know, rational in the sense that perhaps you're not having to do two or three jobs to just scrape by. You have time to learn, to educate yourself. You have time for leisure. Time to spend time with your family. These are all social, cultural, human elements that make for quality of life. And when those begin to fall away, it's like sleep. We say, "Oh. America's sleep deprived."

Harris: A lot of studies will tell you that, “We’re a sleep deprived nation.” So, what do we do? How do we fix that? “We’re tired all the time.” “We’re not thinking clearly.”

“We’re not making good decisions.” What do we do? “Oh, let’s drink more coffee, or let’s find some sort of pharmaceutical brain stimulator.”

No, no, no, no. “Stop!” “Sleep!” “Sleep.”

“Yeah, but I—”

No, no, no. “Just sleep. Go to bed early.”

“Well, I can’t go to bed early.”

“Well, yeah, figure out a way.” It’s like, “Well, I’ve gotta stay up late and watch TV or something.” And okay. I hear that.

del Norte: So, that sounds like what one of the things— a light notion of this cultural disease that you’re speaking about.

Harris: Um hmm. [Yes]

del Norte: I’m interested in—

Harris: (Simultaneously) Values.

del Norte: Go ahead.

Harris: There's a values factor.

del Norte: A values factor?

Harris: Well yeah. It's like—

del Norte: —Throughout different cultures, but we all share—

Harris: (Simultaneously) —and across. Across this culture. It's like, what are our collective priorities? You've heard it said, perhaps, that a budget is a moral document. A budget reflects what we value. If we're investing eighty percent of our budget in one or two things, it's those one or two things that are really central to our values.

del Norte: That reminds me of your bringing up the non-profit issues that arise. So, how do non-profits budget their monies that are received?

Harris: (Simultaneously) Sure. Sure, and it seems reasonable to say that certainly most non-profits are working on a shoestring. There's not a lot, a whole lot of money.

Harris: And there are some that are just rolling in money. How do you focus the use of that money? Now very, again, very frequently: smart, hardworking, well intentioned, committed people are peopling the non-profits, and they're addressing the issue at a symptom level.

And thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much for doing that. And when do we get to the causes, so that this is not the standard operating process for the next hundred years?

del Norte: Um hmm. Making it sooner than later.

Harris: Yeah, when do we change these things?

del Norte: (Simultaneously) So, when is, when is the pinky not gonna have access to health care?

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: And—

Harris: Yeah, for example.

del Norte: —you know, the collective pinky, so to speak.

Harris: Yeah. And so how can we, how do we address that? And it's an attitudinal thing. Humans are, like I say, we're kind of prone to crisis. We're bright, shiny, noisy things. "Oh, my gosh. We gotta deal with that." Yeah, you do. You gotta deal with that. How do you keep it from recurring all the time? You gotta go to the cause level. What's causal?

del Norte: Is there any other examples besides economic model, especially in terms of Las Cruces and the Community of Hope here? What are some of the other causes and symptoms that we deal with, if any? I mean—

Harris: Okay.

del Norte: Economic models— pretty broad especially in terms of—

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: —American homelessness. I guess I really wanna stay in Las Cruces for this question.

Harris: (Simultaneously) Okay. Mental health considerations are significant causes and symptoms. Sometimes a cause becomes a symptom or a symptom becomes a cause, or they're so closely interwoven that it's difficult to peel them apart. If we— Now, this relates to economics, too, and I guess it relates to the moral budget.

Harris: We are woefully short of systems that effectively address mental health concerns. Subsequently, a lot of people slip through the cracks, and a lot of bad behavior gets acted out, that could conceivably have been addressed and prevented. If only fifty percent, it would make an enormous difference. Our budget in this state that doesn't fully, adequately address mental health concerns. We— It just doesn't.

It's also true for education, and it's true for a whole bunch of other things. It's true for— We've had lots of trouble with public defenders in the criminal justice system being able to aff-, being able to hire a sufficient number of public defenders to do their jobs without caseloads that render them dealmakers.

del Norte: Would you associate that with the issue [of] criminalization? That homeless folks might get into a situation, [and] no one is available to defend them—

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: —even though—

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: So, that's a local issue in Las Cruces?

Harris: Well, it's yeah, yeah, yeah. It's a... Once you get— Once a homeless person gets engaged in the criminal justice system, almost without exception everyone suffers. Law enforcement officers who have to go out in the field and arrest someone for the third or fourth time for some kind of misdemeanor, and then take them, book them in. They've gotta be housed. They've gotta be fed. They've gotta be clothed. They've gotta be given some minimal amount of health care.

They've gotta go before judges. They don't have money. They can't hire attorneys. They can't even make, sometimes, make very minimal bail, and if they do, what in the world is gonna motivate them to go back when their court date comes up? And, as a judge you're looking out here, and you're seeing "John" or "Joleen homeless person," and you're thinking now, "What am I gonna levy a fine against on these people? They don't have any money. I can't..."

You don't get blood from a stone. It's like, "What are you doing?"

del Norte: So, I'm reminded of a conversation just last weekend. I guess this is called the Bail Bonds problem?

Harris: Yeah. It's—

del Norte: So, homeless folks are being fined, and it incrementally—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –rises–

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –and they have no money–

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –so it’s— It’s a cycle.

Harris: Yeah, and it’s a reflection of our culture. It’s like, wait a minute, this is kind of crazy. We place expectations that cannot be fulfilled, and then we are angry at those who don’t fulfill them, knowing full well that these people don’t have the capacity to fulfill those expectations. So, what do we do? We start looking for solutions, and I think that the solutions are most likely to be found through dialogue. People sitting down and talking to each other.

del Norte: I picked up a book called *Out of Place: [Homelessness in America]* I think it's by [Richard] Sweeney. And there was a homeless woman who said that her car has more rights than she does.

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: It can be parked.

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: It can stay there as long as I put money in the parking meter.

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: I think she was in California which must be extremely difficult when you can park the car–

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –and it can live there–

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –so to speak, yet you’re not allowed to live in the car.

Harris: Right.

del Norte: So, this criminalization–

Harris: Uh, yeah.

del Norte: –keeps working on space and–

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –access to goods, clothes. All the things that you mentioned.

Harris: And it becomes a social attitude issue. There are lots of people that say, “To hell with those homeless people.” “They can't hang.” “Survival of the fittest.” “Let them perish.”

There is that attitude. Obviously everybody doesn't have that attitude, but at one point on the spectrum that's where you find that, and on the other end of the spectrum, you find people that want to do everything for everybody all the time. Each of those positions seems rife with challenges. Somewhere, collectively, collaboratively, between those two positions, there should be some, it seems that there would be some solutions. It's tough. It's tough.

We're dealing with humanity. It's not easy. It's not simple. And it takes hard work. It's much easier to shout slogans, and buzz phrases, and sound bites, than to do, you know, and get lots of press, and aggrandizement, and organizational aggrandizement which leads to funding and, “Okay. I get all that.”

Harris: And if we're ever going to make change then we gotta do something different. We gotta do the hard, unpleasant, uncomfortable work, sometimes, of sitting down with people who we may not agree with, and figuring things out.

Finding solutions. And it's not flashy and splashy. It doesn't give you that hot outrage brain chemical dump of adrenaline and endorphins, and it's not flashy. It's not sexy. It's like no one knows your name. And as a species, and particularly as a western culture, it seems there's a lot of attachment to celebrity, and virtue signaling, that allows for approval and praise, and acknowledgement. "Oh. Okay."

del Norte: Would you say that these factors in our cultural disease are why homelessness are stigmatized in the way they are?

Harris: Certainly in— Certainly to some measure. Yeah.

del Norte: In our greater cultural—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: —focus.

Harris: Yeah. And I mean there are little simple things. It's like, sometimes people don't want to see homelessness or homeless folks because on some level there's a fear of realizing that one might be closer to that position themselves than they like to think. I mean there are all kinds of psychological and neurological aspects of how we address our social issues. Yeah.

del Norte: Well. Speaking of how we address social issues, but as well as pointing toward solutions—

Harris: Okay.

del Norte: Can you talk a little bit about access to health care for homelessness including those that help the homelessness? Like kind of a little parallel there. How important it is? Your analogy or your anecdote of the sawed off pinky that kept reoccurring—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: Rather than a Band-Aid for home-, or excuse me, for health care—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: How can that be a solution? And maybe I'm making an assumption that you would agree that health care is a great direction to start.

Harris: It's important. It's important to all of us.

del Norte: Can you just talk about the importance of health care?

Harris: Many homeless folks suffer from unnecessarily long term conditions that could —could or could have been— addressed when they were minor. Simple things like, let's look at diet. What we eat. If you're a homeless person, and you've got two dollars, the likelihood of... You know, and you don't have a place to cook, and you don't have a place to store food, and you certainly are not gonna be holding on to fresh organic produce.

You gotta eat what you can eat. Yeah. You gotta eat what you can eat, and if McDonalds — and not to smear McDonalds, but it's just an example — if they're offering two hamburgers for a dollar, you're very likely to eat those hamburgers. And, again, not to suggest that McDonalds or hamburgers are the central issue in our country's health care challenges. The point is: options. Options and opportunities. If you don't have access to health care the likelihood of health issues becoming chronic and/or fatal goes up exponentially. I mean, [in] a lot of countries it doesn't matter if you're poor, or you're rich, or you're old, or— You get health care.

del Norte: Hmm. Cultural differences here.

Harris: Values.

del Norte: Val-, yeah.

Harris: You know. What's most important? Is it more important that... A lot of people point to the United State military budget. And get a look at some of the other countries that don't have— They basically don't even have militaries, and what do they do with their money? Well, they put it in stuff like health care and education. Zero [costs] through university. No charge for education. Prenatal. Natal parental leave. Everybody, everyone has access to health care, and it's there— there's all kind of language challenges. Is it a right? Do people have the right?

del Norte: Human right?

Harris: Yeah. A human right to health care. Some people say, "Yes," some people say "No." Usually the people who say "No" have some kind of health care [insurance coverage] (chuckles).

del Norte: "No" to these other group of folks.

Harris: Yeah. "Not those guys." Yeah. It's kind of the NIMBY, "Not In My Back Yard," kind of deal. The same mentality.

del Norte: So, bringing it back to the economic model that—

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: —we choose— The haves [and]

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: The have-nots.

Harris: Sure.

del Norte: Randy, I have two more questions—

Harris: Um hmm.

del Norte: —for today. I tried to pack a punch with the last two here, so—

Harris: Okay.

del Norte: —we don't have to go on and on about them.

Harris: Okay.

del Norte: But you'll know about them and maybe in the future, if we have time for a second interview, you might be able to respond at that time.

Harris: Terrific.

del Norte: Can you name three of the most valuable contributions or levels of support not present today at the Community of Hope, and maybe even Las Cruces, that would help the homeless, here in Doña Ana County especially, overnight, immediately. I mean are there quick solutions that would put us closer to a more equitable model?

Harris: Okay. I would distinguish between “not available,” and “not adequately funded.” In other words, here at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope we do offer folks access to behavioral health care attention, and stuff like that.

del Norte: Saint Luke's [Health Clinic].

Harris: Saint Luke's. It's under-funded. We do offer medical. It's underfunded. Job skills and job training. We connect people to systems that provide and afford that in some measure. But again: it's under-funded. It's inadequate to meet these challenges.

Harris: So, it seems reasonable to say that on this campus, the Mesilla Valley Community of Hope campus, you have access to all kinds of really important stuff. And we need more of it. You know. So, attention. You know. Medical. Medical physical and mental health. Housing for God's sake. Affordable housing. We... The team over that at Community of Hope does a tremendous job moving people into housing.

del Norte: The Tents to Rents for—

Harris: For example.

del Norte: —another conversation.

Harris: Yeah. Yeah. And we have a shortage of housing.

del Norte: Public housing in Las Cruces?

Harris: Yeah, and affordable housing. Yeah.

del Norte: Uh, that's—

Harris: But that's, that's nationwide, too.

del Norte: Access to affordable—

Harris: Yeah, yeah.

del Norte: –healthy housing–

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: –but clean–

Harris: Yeah. Yeah. That’s a huge national issue.

del Norte: Well—

Harris: Does that answer that question?

del Norte: Absolutely.

Harris: Okay.

del Norte: That’s definitely at least three. Before I ask if you have anything to add, final thoughts for today or anything: How do you envision the future of Mesilla Valley Community of Hope in say, five years, ten years.

del Norte: Say that we do deal with lots of Band-Aids over the next five or ten years, but ultimately how do you envision the future as you see it? As you would like to see it? And also, something attainable from the time that you've been here, and all these years of seeing it change.

Harris: Candidly. I anticipate that we're going to be dealing with the same issues for a long time. I think we will wear people out who are working on these things. And those people will be replaced with the next wave of hardworking, committed, bright, intelligent folks. Unless we experience a significant cultural reevaluation: "What are we doing folks? Where are we putting our focuses, our emphasis, our resources?"

[There are] tremendous workers here, and some folks are able to commit a lifetime to doing this kind of work. For a lot of people it's very taxing. It takes a serious toll on your psyche, on your soul. And I would hope... I could say, "I hope" that things improve, and at the same time I... It might be reasonable to suggest:

"Brace yourselves because it's gonna get worse."

"Be prepared either way."

Let's just keep doing the best we can. Let's keep bringing-in and implementing innovative ideas. Let's keep doing the things that work. Let's try to address causes as a culture, as a community, and keep dealing with the symptoms. It just doesn't... You look back through human history, and you think, "Okay. This is not particularly new."

Harris: There have always been challenges, and it ebbs and flows to greater or lesser degrees, but this is not new. How do we deal with it? Can we come up with some innovative new ways of thinking, even? Change our thinking about how we address these things. It's like Los Angeles with their sixty thousand homeless people. They finally bought into a study that says it costs society half to just put people in housing. Just put them in there. Yeah.

“Well, they drink [alcohol].” “Yeah, that's fine. Just put them in the housing. Get them off the streets. Get them in the housing.”

Then, when people are housed, then you start dealing with, “Okay. Let's look at some remedial processes.”

Let's maybe get a person into a group, or whatever it takes, for them to address their alcoholism. We save fifty percent of our resources by just housing them, people. “Just do it.”

And then there are those who jump up, and say, “Wow. We can't do that.” “Yeah, sure. I'd love someone to give me my own home.”

Well, it's like, you know, “You don't need that. Everyone's in a different place. This person has a particular reality that's— that may be different from yours, Sir.”

Harris: So, who knows? Who knows? Ideally we would see a significant increase in compassion, patience, direction of resources. Hopefully.

del Norte: I'm learning. (Chuckles) I can't say that "I know."

Harris: Yeah.

del Norte: But I'm learning, and thank you so much for being here today.

Harris: Thank you, David. This is a great project you're doing, and—hope that folks will pay attention, and benefit from it.

del Norte: I hope so, too.

Harris: Thank you.

del Norte: Before we close—

Harris: Um hmm.

del Norte: —is there anything at all that you'd like to share which is just a little bit of an open offering—

Harris: I appreciate it. Thank you. I think we've touched on the stuff that matters the most from a personal perspective. If we can learn to talk to each other, to set aside our assumptions and biases to the degree that we can, and address the causes of these social ills while we're addressing the symptoms. It's not an "either/or." It's not a "binary."

del Norte: Parallelism.

Harris: Yeah, sure.

del Norte: Maybe a little bit of weaving?

Harris: Yeah. A little bit of woven parallelism. I like that.

del Norte: Thank you, Randy.

Harris: Thank you, David.

[End of recorded interview]