

NMSU Archives
Oral History Collection

New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope

2018

Hope Stories

Interview 1

Randy Harris Transcript Index & Excerpt

Causes and Symptoms of Homelessness

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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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; while 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 Excerpt — Randy Harris:

And thank you for asking that question, David. It's fundamental to the issue. In many of our realms of 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.

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.

Randy Harris:

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.”

“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.”

Randy Harris:

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.”

Recommended Citation

Harris, Randy, interviewed by David Lee del Norte. March 2nd, 2018.
Hope Stories oral history project, New Mexico State University
Library Archives and Special Collections.

Recording Information

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

Transcripts and Recordings

Listen, read, and request Hope Stories complete transcripts, sound
recordings, and 2018 project research box at New Mexico State
University Library and Special Collections.