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New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope

2018

Hope Stories

Interview 15

Kit Elliott & Meg Long Transcript Index & Excerpt

NMSU Aggie Cupboard

Interviewed by David Lee del Norte

8 January 2019

at Aggie Cupboard, 906 Griggs on the NMSU campus

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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 a small lunch service which later became El Caldito Soup Kitchen. As need for food and healthcare clinical service increased, the Las Cruces community supported the Saint Andrew's congregation 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 shape collaborative alliances with operations at 999 West Amador nearby to downtown Las Cruces. In 2011, following a particularly harsh "Deep Freeze" winter that caused health concerns and exposure deaths for the homeless, Mesilla Valley Community of Hope staff banded together with Hope Campus clients, appealed to the City of Las Cruces for sanctioned overnight camping status, and soon founded Camp Hope transitional living program.

In 2018, the Hope Stories project collected fifteen oral history interviews to learn about the legacy of organizational homeless services at Mesilla Valley Community of Hope. The term "Corridor of Care" refers to a healthcare industry perspective known as the Consolidated Services Model that helps people to access health and human service related programs quickly, reliably, and within centrally located "Hub" or "Node" areas of potentially consistent preventative care.

This public history graduate project asked participating narrators questions about how the Las Cruces community first began to advance, reinforce, and collaborate with 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 consolidated services “Campus” concepts.

The project ended without narrators to represent the community’s food pantry. Founded in 1979, Casa de Peregrinos relocated to the Hope Campus as an alliance member during the 1991 opening, and today continues to serve Doña Ana County with increased food delivery and expanded satellite locations. 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 this fifteenth interview with Kit Elliott and Meg Long occurred at Aggie Cupboard on the 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 organizations 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 assistance and resources offered by the City of Las Cruces, the New Mexico Department of Health, and the New Mexico Department of Human Services. For an updated and comprehensive list of regional community services, insightful for anyone experiencing homelessness, inquire City of Las Cruces or MVCH with search term “Las Cruces Community Resource Guide.”

Narrator Summary — Kit Elliott

Kit Elliott graduated from New Mexico State University class of 1962, earned English, Spanish, and Secondary Education degrees, and became an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) instructor through Albuquerque, New Mexico's Central New Mexico Community College. Born and raised in the military, Elliott remembers waiting in line for "Airlift" food distribution in 1948 Berlin, Germany. An alumna volunteer with Aggie Cupboard, Elliott speaks about NMSU campus food insecurity, and student homelessness dating back to the 1960s.

Whether working to increase awareness about fair trade, human rights, and women's labor with Weaving for Justice, or attending to borderland migrants and economic refugees seeking medical care, emotional support, and asylum in the United States, Elliott's statement that "The purpose of life is a life with purpose" makes light of a compassionate and tenacious volunteerism to help others succeed.

A member of New Mexico's Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), Red Cross' Disaster Medical Assistant Team (DMAT), and the national Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), Elliott's career commitment to New Mexico's public health continues to inspire volunteers who work to limit campus hunger and experiences of student homelessness. From Elliott's perspective, it's important to recognize healthful nutritional education, personal "Balance," and to incorporate a well-rounded "Understanding of food" as NMSU students.

Narrator Summary — Meg Long

Aggie Cupboard program specialist Meg Long first became involved with social service advocacy with women experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Long worked with AmeriCorps to improve housing conditions for South Dakota Native Americans, and lived in Kenya, East Africa with Peace Corps as a HIV/AIDS prevention educator. In Portland, Oregon, Long became a certified Living Yoga “Trauma-informed” and “Recovery-sensitive” instructor for those experiencing substance abuse and recovery from incarceration.

With Sociology and Social Work degrees from Western Michigan University, and Masters of Public Health from New Mexico State University, Long recognized the need for increased student access to nutritional food sources. Originally introduced to the campus community in 2012 as “NMSU Food Pantry,” the Aggie Cupboard helps to increase supplemental nutrition, housing resources, and community awareness about hunger in New Mexico. Long explains that Food Insecurity is “The state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quality of affordable, nutritious food.”

Aggie Cupboard provides free and confidential food assistance to the NMSU students, staff, and faculty. To help limit food insecurity, this important local access to food includes Doña Ana Community College, and the monthly Mobile Food Pantry (MFP). Aggie Cupboard nutritional assistance includes “Non-refrigerated nutritious food that typically includes staples such as protein, vegetables, soups, beans, rice, pasta and sauce,” while Mobile Food Pantry events work in collaboration with Casa de Peregrinos and Roadrunner Food Bank to deliver fresh fruits, vegetables, and other perishable goods, to the NMSU community.

Index of first hour

00:03 - Interview introduction

01:00 - Current Aggie Cupboard roles, personal education, and early career goals

05:50 - Volunteerism: “The purpose of life is a life with purpose—” Red Cross; Medical Reserve Corps; Disaster Medical Assistant Team [DMAT]; and Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)

07:38 - Volunteerism: “I traveled all over the United States—” Domestic violence sexual assault shelter; AmeriCorps; National Civilian Community Corps; Kenya, East Africa HIV/AIDS prevention, and water sanitation public health with Peace Corps

10:42 - “Income-generating activities,” self-empowerment for low-income women and families: Solar ovens, Sack gardens, and Fruit dehydrators

11:27 - Living Yoga and trauma-informed practice in Portland, Oregon; Outreach to drug and alcohol recovery with Yoga classes

13:39 - Importance of education and personal perspective when seeking nutritional health; Subsistence with basic foods, choosing priorities, and “Throw-Away” culture; Illness and challenges to foods availability

16:15 - Hurricane Katrina specific food requests; “Ready-made” versus “Make-it-yourself,” and the cultural differences of food choices

17:54 - “Food Insecurity” defined; Affordability combined to nutritious choices; Childhood to adulthood poverty pipeline, and escaping the cycle of poverty through education

18:58 - NMSU staff, faculty, and student resources at Aggie Cupboard; Temporary situation of food insecurity for most clients

Index of first hour (cont.)

19:54 - International and Out-of-State student food choices; High-protein lentils substituted for beans, High-fiber brown rice substituted white rice; Healthy foods and nutritional value educational resources

21:50 - Helping students make informed food choices; Client conversations about recipes, perishable foods, and fresh vegetables

24:08 - Aggie Cupboard access to free supplemental foods and resources; Once-per-month Mobile Food Pantry (MFP) Preciado Park

26:00 - How “Food banks” and “Food pantries” function together; Original Aggie Cupboard spearheaded by Laura Martinez throughout NMSU administration pushback

27:50 - Aggie Cupboard connects students to community and social service resources; Historical perspective of NMSU presidents and student success; Challenges to “Work/life” balance for students; “One-meal-a-day” as student cafeteria worker

32:06 - Food ration experience, and subsisting between available food distribution times

33:40- First experience with Detroit, Michigan food pantry; Kenya, East Africa famine season, USAID — “If there’s no food to buy, it doesn’t really matter if you have money or not;” Standing in line for 1948 East Berlin, Germany “Airlift” food drops

36:40 - Aggie Cupboard volunteer trainings, Work-study, and internships; Weekly food distribution shifts, consistent safety procedures: food shelving, storage, and packaging USDA guidelines

39:24 - Business manager databases, statistics, and inventory to track food distribution, monthly restock need, and yearly combined donations; USDA “My Plate,” and providing Low-sodium, No-sugar, and nutritious foods

Index of first hour (cont.)

40:52 - Volunteer training and food distribution from “Public Health” perspective; “Eat-by” - “Best-by” expiration dates; Quality of stored foods, and USDA maintenance guidelines with limited Cupboard shelf space: “Six inches from the ground, and two inches from the walls”

41:48 - Challenges to storing excess foods during donation drives
“When we get a lot of food at one time;” Shared neighboring NMSU organizational spaces without proper food shelving

42:47 - Accepting Cupboard food donations, “I never turn food away,” regardless condition of item; Outreach information about most needed versus unusable, “Half-used,” or non-perishable food items

44:21 - “Not having a budget is not the same as not having support;” President Garrey Carruthers’ matched donations; Provost Daniel Howard

46:39 - Registered or Chartered student organizations with volunteer community hours for food drives; Panhellenic, Student Association of Nutrition and Dietetics (SANDs), and Women In Engineering contributions; Mobile Food Pantry (MFP) volunteers

47:45 - Anne Hubbard with NMSU Communications Department, and faculty classes helping Aggie Cupboard; Student Research and Education Gardens, Professor Guzman’s Horticulture; Policy change in order to distribute perishable goods

50:15 - “Thanksgiving Bag,” and NMSU organizational contributors; Partnership with NMSU Parking for “Peanut-butter for Citations” food drive; DACC Culinary Arts, NMSU Foundation support; Local restaurants’ proceeds, “Giving Tuesday,” and “Make A Statement”

53:49 - Cupboard clients who return to donate or volunteer; Increased nutritional support awareness; Partnerships with El Caldito and Casa de Peregrinos; Importance of de-stigmatizing topic of hunger and food insecurity on campus

57:32 - Student self-care and personal health & wellness techniques

Index of second hour

59:54 - Getting to know clients, promoting acceptance, and watching children grow up; Repeat visitors, communicating food insecurity situations, and respecting confidentiality

01:02:27 - Student homelessness, NMSU Social Services, and making connections to provide timely resources; Increased clients during cold weather, access to NMSU Activity Center (AC) showers

01:05:54 - Additional on-campus homeless student resources with the Trio program and Student Accessibility Services; “Quarter-sheet” paper information available on Cupboard lobby wall; Combining Cupboard services with NMSU Social Services

01:08:50 - “We need a lot more help for our homeless students on campus.” Difficulty of helping students navigate limited resources

01:09:41 - Developing an emergency related grants “Index” account for homeless students; Common difficulty of accessing allocated financial aid to help rental down-deposit and move-in fees

01:11:46 - Student access to Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP); Outreach intern to help with Human Services Department application at NMSU Corbett Center

01:13:36 - Future programs’ development at Aggie Cupboard; Newly established “Career Closet” to help students dress professionally

01:15:45 - NMSU campus history of student homelessness with “Doubling-up” conditions and varied student support from NMSU deans

01:19:31 - Married Housing, campus jobs, and student costs

01:21:12 - Off-campus student housing conditions; NMSU fraternities, athletes, and emotional appreciation from those who visit the Cupboard

01:23:14 - Questions to de-stigmatize: “How do you know people aren’t taking advantage;” “How do you know they really need it?”

Index of Second Hour (cont.)

01:24:24 - Student concern for the hunger of others, “Empowerment” from ability to choose available Cupboard foods, and client volunteers

01:26:25 - Increased Cupboard space, potential for a budget, and ability to grow fresh foods with paid Agricultural student collaborations; the need for a dedicated golf-cart to help pickup and distribute foods

01:28:45 - Imagined additional future spaces, the original Cupboard food distribution procedures, and potential for Social Services “Triage”

01:31:48 - Future of Aggie Cupboard, a “Center of social support,” and continued need for paid staff

01:33:42 - Difficulty of scheduling all-volunteer student workers; Alumni awareness, and increasing community knowledge of Cupboard statistics

01:35:56 - Aggie Cupboard website, and closing conversation

Interview 15 Excerpt — Meg Long:

Food insecurity is the lack of consistent access to affordable and nutritious food. So, it can be— It's basically, quote: "The state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quality of affordable nutritious food." So, it's really important that it's not only affordable food, but it's nutritious food. So, you could be food insecure and hungry. You can also be food insecure without hunger—

Elliott: (Whispers) Yes.

Long: And that's very important to keep in mind. Very— Like, what Kit was saying, in terms of the type of food people are eating. Just because they're eating food, if it's not nutritious, or they can, once a month, get nutritious food, but the rest of the time they can't afford it, then they're "Food insecure."

And especially in New Mexico where so many children are below the poverty line, chances are that as they're adults they're still under the poverty line. So, we have this cycle of poverty, and one of the few ways to get out of that cycle is education. Which is one of the wonderful things about the Aggie Cupboard, and, honestly, one of the great things about working here, is that the majority of clients— And not all the clients— because we do have NMSU staff come in. We do have NMSU faculty come in.

Meg Long:

Though, with the students, this is really a temporary situation because soon they will get a degree, and the goal is that then they'll get a job, and have a career, where they are not food insecure. And so, working here, that is really promising to really have the feeling, as people come in, that this is a temporary situation that they're in. This is not a state that they "Will not be able to move out of." For most of the clients. What we do is we provide free supplemental food to students, faculty, and staff at NMSU and DACC (Doña Ana Community College). So, basically, anyone with an Aggie [Student, Staff, or Faculty] ID. Anyone with an eight hundred [Barcode] number, a current NMSU affiliate in some way.

And so, we're open twice a week here at the Aggie Cupboard itself. So, that's Tuesdays and Thursdays. We also have once a month what's called Mobile Food Pantry, which is in collaboration with Casa de Peregrinos and Roadrunner Food Bank. And so, on the fourth Tuesday of every month, instead of being here at this physical house, we're down the street at Preciado park. And they bring us about four thousand pounds of food, and we—

You can look on our website, if you want, under "Aggie Cupboard Impact," and you can see every month how many pounds, how many clients came to visit, all that kind of stuff. And so, basically, from when the truck gets there to when it's distributed, we have do it within about two hours. Which we do.

Meg Long:

So, I get a lot of volunteers, and we unload the truck. We pass out the food. We break down the tables. And then we kind of leave no trace at the park. And so, we have that once a month. And then, here at the Cupboard it's mostly non-perishable foods.

Food banks have a large stock of food. And then, food pantries distribute boxes or bags. So, it's really just the size that's the main difference. The banks, it's like a "Bank" of food. And so, either people come and get a large supply, or, just like the Mobile Food Pantry, they then bring it to the other locations like the "Pantries" which then give more individual size portions.

Interview 15 Excerpt — Kit Elliott:

It's not just food. It's resources.

Long: Oh. That's true. Yes.

Elliott: It is "Resources," and "What's available." Rehab.
Legal. Victim. [Support]

Long: Well, that's the Social Services aspect.

Elliott: Exactly. It is. But, when they come to the Cupboard, it's a comfort zone. It's not intimidating. If they have a personal question to ask Meg while they're here in the waiting room: They'll ask her, she's here, she'll answer. It's like a home. It's just like a home. And it's very comfortable. And our students have said that over and over.

So, when I look at some of these cans of vegetables [at the Cupboard today], that would have been "Heaven." We could have had green beans, and corn. We could of had— (Laughs) Everything was in the coffee pot. And so, if we could kind of scramble up some leftover stuff from the cafeteria— But, otherwise, too, on weekends: It was peanut butter and crackers, and hot chocolate.

Kit Elliott:

And then, [Living in NMSU dormitories] kind of reminded me of when I was growing up because, again, we lived on food rations in Germany and Guatemala and Panama, and all these things. So, we had to kind of figure out how to make things last a month. And sometimes we were just really scrounging. We would go to— Well, they didn't even have McDonald's.

We would go to a restaurant, and we would scrounge things, and take it back to the dorm, and figure out: "What am I going to do with this?" So, but nevertheless, there was a lot of food insecurity. But, even at the sorority house the kitchen was locked up until at dinner time. And if you did not belong to the sorority house, which a lot of us did not, we could not ask for food. Yeah. And the same with the fraternities. Yes. Only the ones that lived at the house.

We stood in line, too, in Berlin. We had the Berlin Airlift, and basically in 1948— And we were assigned a day that our plane was coming in because planes were coming in twenty-four-seven [24 hours a day, 7 days a week], and we had our day that we would meet at the airport, 4:30 in the morning, with anything we could carry food in, and that was our food for the whole month in Berlin.

Kit Elliott:

The students basically have been the same all along. There were homeless students then, and all the way through. So, the caliber of students, as far as living conditions, have been the same all along. And we did have homeless students. And it was embarrassing.

del Norte: Where would they go? To sleep?

Elliott: Behind buildings. Behind buildings.

del Norte: On the campus?

Elliott: Yes. Exactly. Behind buildings. We know certain buildings were notorious, that they would be able to sleep in, because they didn't have a lot of cars [People parked in the area] or whatever. And they— or any of that. But, behind the buildings. In between buildings. And yet, the rest of the students: We were short on money. We were short on food. We were short on whatever, but we just made do. We did make do. And we supported each other. And I think that that's what we're seeing even now.

All the governmental programs are very complex. I find, too, with all of the acronyms, and so forth, and sometimes it's just more than people can handle. Simplicity was what was going on then.

Kit Elliott:

We didn't have all these programs. So, we just found a way of making do, or making "Through" the problems. A lot of us adopted each other also, so to speak, and we didn't have apartments off campus. We were on campus.

I think the cost caused some of the students to be homeless. But, it was not unusual that when we found someone who just did not have some place to go we would take him into our dorm room, [to sleep] on the floor, whatever. And so, that was not uncommon. Even the sorority houses. Some of them who knew that their sorority sisters just were short funded for a month— Take them into the house, and so forth. We took care of each other a lot.

del Norte: So, I'm sure you may have heard this before. I just learned about it in my research. It's called "Doubling Up." When you have to invite family members, or anybody—

Elliott: Yes. Correct. Correct.

del Norte: In order to take care of them. Keep them out of the cold. Give them access to a kitchen, and some food. So, that occurred on the NMSU campus?

Kit Elliott:

In the 1960s. Yes. It did. Yes. It did. It was amazing.

del Norte: So, did you see a change after that? Was it ongoing?

Elliott: I think it's ongoing. It's always been— I think in every generation there've been people who don't have the wherewithal to take care of themselves, and for some reason they still want to go to college. And they're gonna make it somehow— to get through the college. We didn't have the Community College. We had New Mexico State.

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Transcripts and Recordings

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