



INTERVIEW WITH AMY SMITTER – April 29, 2013

Our State of Generosity, a project of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (JCP) at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), in partnership with the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF), Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA), Michigan Community Service Commission (MCSC), and GVSU Libraries' Special Collections & University Archives present:

An interview with Amy Smitter on April 29, 2013. Conducted by Kathryn Agard, primary author and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded in Lansing, Michigan. This interview is part of a series in the project, *Our State of Generosity* (OSoG). OSoG is a partnership of scholars, practitioners, and funders from four institutions – the Johnson Center; CMF; MNA; and MCSC – that collectively form the backbone of the state's philanthropic, voluntary, and nonprofit infrastructure. OSoG's mission is to capture, preserve, analyze, and share the developments, achievements, and experience that, over a period of 40 years, made Michigan a State of Generosity.

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Abridged: The following interview has been edited to assist readability. Extraneous verbal pauses and informal personal conversation not related to the topic of Michigan philanthropy have been deleted. Footnotes to the transcript have been added clarifying any factual errors in the memory of the person interviewed.

Text of the interview questions are as asked. Individuals interviewed have had the opportunity to add or edit their answers in order to provide their most accurate answers to the questions. For these reasons, the edited transcript may not exactly reflect the recorded interview.

Kathy Agard (KA): Amy, if you could tell me a little about – you know, we're doing this about the four infrastructure organizations, CMF – Council Michigan Foundations, Michigan Community Service Commission and Johnson Center. Just as orientation and to warm our brains up a little bit, can you tell us about your relationship to one or all of those four organizations?

Amy Smitter (AS): You said CMF...

(KA): MNA, the Commission.

(AS): MNA, Johnson Center.

(KA): And the Johnson Center.

(AS): Well, I first became aware of most of those organizations – not the Johnson Center I guess – when I started working as a director of a volunteer center in Albion, Mich., which is my hometown. I became familiar with the nonprofit association from the work that I was doing with volunteer centers of Michigan then later learned about Michigan Campus Compact. When I was able to get a job with Michigan Campus Compact, I [00:01:00] became part of MNA and worked closely with CMF and later the Johnson Center on a few projects and the Commission on a lot of projects. [Laughter] I don't know if that's what you're looking for.

[Side conversation]

(KA): Tell me a little bit about how you got started in Albion. What happened? Is that your first job? Did you morph into that somehow? Why did you get into that job? I don't think I [Crosstalk](#)...

(AS): That's a good question. In college, I studied political science – Russian Eastern European Studies. This isn't important to you, I'm sure, but I did some work volunteering when I was a college student and loved it. I have been raised by a volunteering family. I looked for a job in a nonprofit sector [00:02:00] when I got out of school but they were scarce at that time, 1992. So, I took a job in a retail organization. As soon as I could, I started looking for another job and was able to secure the job at the Albion Volunteer Service Organization. I think part of it was it was my hometown and people knew my family and the reputation of it. But also, part of it was the volunteering I'd done in college and understanding of that field and some advocacy work I'd done in college, things like that.

(KA): I know that a major trajectory of your career in Michigan has been with Campus Compact. Can you tell us the story both of the development of Campus Compact in Michigan and then also your role, kind of when you came in to the story and what you've been doing?

(AS): Sure. Campus Compact was an [00:03:00] idea that came about in 1985. Nationally, there were some concerns on the part of some college presidents that the image of college students was that they only cared about making money and having nice things and that they didn't care about the greater world around them. They saw evidence to the contrary that when students were encouraged to participate in service and civic activities that they relished the idea, that it actually enhanced their learning.

So, they wanted to start an organization that would encourage colleges and universities to include more of that as part of what they were doing for their college experience. Three presidents started it. They thought it would be a success if they got 100 campuses to be involved with it. Currently, Campus Compact is about almost 1,200 members nationwide, and about 40 percent of all the Carnegie classified schools in the nation.



Michigan Campus Compact came about sort of in a [00:04:00] similar way, which was that there were a couple of college presidents in the state (one from Albion College and the other from Michigan State) who were inspired by what have been done nationally and they felt that it could be better supported if there was a statewide organization to do it as well. Kellogg Foundation agreed, which was wonderful and (this predates my time there) we were able to start it and to encourage colleges and universities to engage with more campus and community partnerships.

That kept growing and it's a little over 40 campuses now and they continue to work and strive to better the opportunities for students to be involved. So, the original thought was if students were involved with community service (what we call volunteerism for the most part), that they would automatically develop a civic voice, a civic consciousness. What they found through the [00:05:00] process was there were even better ways to encourage students to do that, through things like service learning and community-based learning which include a whole variety of different ways that you can engage students in the community.

So, Campus Compact has grown up a little bit in that sense too, where there's more encouragement of a variety of activities with the community – larger partnerships, larger civic initiatives and things like that for students.

(KA): Couple of thoughts: when did you come in - so you went from the Albion Campus Compact and up to the state?

(AS): No. I never thought about working with college students or higher education, actually. I was a faculty daughter. My dad taught at Albion College for 13 years, most of the time while I was growing up. I never thought about higher education as [00:06:00] part of my civic purpose or my service purpose. I always was attracted to nonprofit type work – big ideas, that kind of thing.

But when I started working at the volunteer center in Albion, it was the same time the federal government was encouraging campuses to use some of their federal work study money to have students out working in nonprofit organizations. We created the first partnership with Albion College and the Albion community. I found that I really liked working with those college students.

I kind of investigated that a little bit, and Albion College gave me the chance to work with some of their clubs and organizations on campus including their service club on campus. I found that I really enjoyed that work and found out there was a career called Student Affairs and went on to get a Master's Degree in that. I worked in West [00:07:00] Virginia at a college for a couple of years but found I really missed Michigan. My husband and I both were raised here. We wanted to come home and we found a way through my first job at Michigan Campus Compact. My husband worked at Starr Commonwealth at that time.



(KA): I'm trying to remember the name of the Michigan State president who had a lot to do with Campus Compact. As I remember, he really had a great commitment to student service.

(AS): Yes, the founder of Campus Compact here in the state of Michigan is John DiBiaggio. He was the president of Michigan State University at that time. That was in 1989, that they founded the Campus Compact here. It was the third state Campus Compact to be founded in the nation; now there are 35 state Campus Compacts across the nation.

(KA): I know he went on to...

(AS): Tufts.

(KA): And Tufts has a wonderful program that's known university wide. I've been really [close with] that because Brian O'Connell was there for a while.

(AS): Yes, and he actually [00:08:00] ended up chairing the National Campus Compact Board for quite a few years actually.

(KA): He's one of my favorite people in [Crosstalk].

(AS): Yes, he's wonderful. [Laughter]

(KA): So, how strong in comparison, what would be Michigan's Campus Compact compared size wise or scale or health or to the other Campus Compacts around the country?

(AS): I think that there are a couple of reasons that Campus Compact here in Michigan is stronger. A lot of it has to do with the founding organizations that you were talking about, as well as the philanthropic commitment in the State of Michigan. Michigan Campus Compact is not the largest Campus Compact and it doesn't have the largest budget, but I think it has the deepest roots.

The reason I think that is true is because of our partnerships with other organization in the state, as well as our deep commitment in Michigan to make sure that campuses that want to join Campus Compact are truly committed to the mission and goals of the organization. They're not just joining it to be on [00:09:00] the list with other presidents that they consider peers.

So, Michigan Campus Compact has forged these innovative partnerships and been invited in to some of these innovative partnerships with some of these larger organizations in the state. That has certainly helped us to create a base of legitimacy, but also I think connectedness that people want to be part of in the state.



(KA): With all of the university president has on their plate, why in the world would they give energy to Campus Compact?

(AS): I think college and university presidents give energy to Campus Compact because they really believe in education and they believe in the power of education. They believe that higher education has a civic purpose to promote our democracy. By joining Campus Compact, they are able to be part of a larger [00:10:00] conversation about that.

In addition to that, Michigan Campus Compact is the only place in the state of Michigan where two-year, four-year, public, private, secular and faith-based institutions get together and talk. It's around this idea of service, volunteerism, how do we create a stronger state, how do we create stronger students who learn and want to stay here in the state of Michigan or do good things for the world.

(KA): Do you think there is a uniqueness to the philanthropic structure in Michigan? You've worked nationwide as well like most people have had state roots but then worked nationwide. Is the whole thing...

(AS): Michigan is very different than other states. Having worked at the national level now, I find that often when I'm talking to people, they just don't understand how [00:11:00] interconnected they could be with others, because I don't think it's promoted in other states the same way it is here in the state of Michigan. I think that has a lot to do with the philanthropic community in the state. They have asked people to come together and to think strategically about what would be best for the state, how do we best deliver services and how do we best spend our money in the state. I think those conversations have really, in a lot of ways, inspired people to think bigger, to think beyond what they normally would do with their nonprofit.

So, the way that that has boiled down for my career, the things that I've tried to do is that we've been able to partner on award ceremonies, conferences, discussions, being able to make things come together in a different way in our state and have the philanthropic community be responsive to that as well as [00:12:00] inspire some of it.

(KA): Where do you think that comes from?

(AS): I think that that difference in the philanthropic structure in the state of Michigan comes from the strong leadership we've had in the state, some really visionary people who run some of our big foundations but also run some of our big statewide associations as well.

(KA): When you think about them, what have you admired that you're trying to put into your own practice in your career? Have you seen behaviors that they have done or have they modeled things that you admired, that you would like to be a part of who you want to?



(AS): The leadership here in the state (from the philanthropic community and the association work in the community, the higher education community), the things that I admire that I try to model in my work is: seeking to understand first; calling on colleagues; not just jumping to assumptions or conclusions whether good or bad about what might be possible; [00:13:00] to decide to stick with a conversation a little longer to see what might be rooted out and what might be able to blossom and come from that kind of thinking.

I also think that the philanthropic leaders here in the state have done a really good job in mentoring nonprofit leaders and association leaders in the state so that they can continue to work collaboratively and to think collectively.

(KA): You came into this, as I would say, one of the relatively young professionals. Can you tell me a little bit about what that was like to enter the professional community of philanthropy and how your own career has been?

(AS): It makes me laugh thinking back on it and then I also think about the things I [00:14:00] could still learn. [Laughter] As a young professional coming in to this work in the state of Michigan, I was extremely lucky to find a position where I was able to watch and see what others were doing and how they were reacting, where I was being introduced to statewide people and that kind of thing. I realized that not all young nonprofit leaders get that opportunity so I feel very fortunate about that.

I also was sort of in a state of awe at what was able to be brought together. In particular, when I was fairly new into Campus Compact and working within MNA, we were able to start working on the ConnectMichigan Alliance which is something – I think as a young professional, I never would have been able to imagine as a possibility or how it would even come together. That experience alone (and many, many other ones) [00:15:00] have taught me that almost anything is possible and I still truly believe that. I think it helped me to remain idealistic the longer I stayed in the profession. It helped me to feel more fulfilled as a professional in that profession, if that makes sense.

(KA): It makes good sense. You and I both had a dream that I still don't give up on and hoping to be successful with, which is that we could knit together the pieces so that there would a life-long continuum from Learning to Give in kindergarten all the way through the senior volunteer court. Can you talk a little bit about both what that vision is, and then also what the hurdles have been – because it's not in place yet but I think you made lots of progress on it. Can you tell me a little bit about that, the idea of across a lifetime.

(AS): Yes, when I think about the opportunity for every citizen in the state of Michigan (and frankly the world) [00:16:00] to be part of service and volunteerism and to have that civic voice and to feel



empowered by the things that they can bring and do for the community, I feel really optimistic about that. We had always hoped that we could start children in a very, very young age learning how to serve and bring them all the way through adulthood to be able to serve in their communities and to grow in that process and be part of it.

I think that there are so many systems and structures in place that make it difficult to do that. I do think that progress has really been made either through Learning to Give, Campus Compact, the league, Volunteer Centers of Michigan. We have the puzzle pieces in the state of Michigan to be able to stitch that kind of [00:17:00] continuum together. I think that the barriers that we're facing are sort of the institutionalization of education, having to unwind sort of those processes and reach so many people that need to be a part of it.

Frankly, a really difficult time reaching every single family, because we know that children who volunteer learn to volunteer through their home life will continue to volunteer as adults. So, it's critically important if they don't get that as part of their family structure, that we reach them. The best possible way is through school systems, but those systems are hard to change. Not impossible, but hard. We'll continue to work on that obviously. Everybody will continue to work on that.

(KA): I think there has been tremendous progress.

(AS): Yes, I think so, too.

(KA): [00:18:00] One of the things that we're positing as a theory is that that Michigan has benefited from a sort of "in the water" theory of servant leadership that people understand and take it seriously. Would you agree with that and have you observed it if you agree? Do you think it's a part of our culture?

(AS): I do think servant leadership is a part of our culture here in the state of Michigan for professionals. It sounds like a really dangerous way to say this. Let me think about it for a second and I'll start over.

I think servant leadership is a part of our culture here in the state of Michigan. I think it's a really important part of our culture that's been nurtured by many, many people. I think once you learn to be a servant leader, it continues to grow and it grows in the people that you support and [00:19:00] mentor and bring in to the system, bring into jobs within the field and that kind of thing. I really see that has been modeled by people like Dottie Johnson and Russ Mawby and Sam Singh and many, many others that I've been able to work with over the years.

It seems to me that there's a lot less competition in the state of Michigan between nonprofits. I think that has something to do with the servant leadership model that's been promoted here.



(KA): You know I have talked to Sam a little bit this morning about the merger. Were you at Campus Compact during the merger, I mean inside MNA?

(AS): Yes.

(KA): Would you talk a little bit about what that was like to be in charge of a major system going through what I think is really a phenomenal piece of work yet?

(AS): Which merger? [Laughter] What's the question? [Crosstalk]

(KA): You said you were in and out and then [Crosstalk].

(AS): [00:20:00] One was more positive than the other for me so – which you won't put on the tape, I'm sure. [Laughter] Yes, I was lucky enough to be at Michigan Campus Compact when we formed and started the ConnectMichigan Alliance, which merged together the Michigan Community Service Commission, Michigan Campus Compact, Volunteer Centers of Michigan and then the Michigan Nonprofit Association.

The idea really was how do we bring all of these statewide associations that care about service volunteerism, community service, service learning together into the fold so that we can create that continuum of service for individuals (particularly young individuals in the state of Michigan as they go through their life here as citizens).

The idea really was that we had so much more in common than we had separate. How could we share resources and benefit from an endowment that would help us [00:21:00] to create more systems that would make it easier for our citizens to be a part of a service continuum? I'm blanking now, unfortunately I should have looked it up before I left. We had a really, really great sort of tag line on what that was all going to be. I can't remember what it was. [Laughter]

(KA): You'll find it. [Laughter]

(AS): Oh, I know. So, ConnectMichigan Alliance really was this vision of how we can create service where we live, work and learn. We really wanted to promote all of those ideals as part of Michigan's culture.

(KA): Great. It's okay. I forget my name also at times.

(AS): I'm trying to start my senses with "This is what it is."



(KA): [Crosstalk] good experience with this. What has been difficult in Michigan philanthropy or you know, it's not all easier, [00:22:00] it wouldn't be called work. What have you seen that has been difficult, and how are difficulties overcome?

(AS) That's a really good question. I think there has been some difficulty in the state of Michigan with philanthropy from new people coming in from out of state to run some of the bigger foundations. I think that that has been good because new ideas come in to the state, but it's also been hard because they haven't been stewarded through the process of how the state has worked in the past.

Some of that shake up is probably good for other nonprofits who felt disenfranchised from that process, but it's also difficult when we created so much infrastructure that was doing so many good things to see of that change. But that's the nature of it.

One other thing that I think is really positive and good that the Council of Michigan Foundations and others were able to promote was the idea of a foundation [00:23:00] director within the governor's office to make a closer alignment with the government. I think that has yet to be seen what the benefit of that totally will be and how that will change the landscape of Michigan, but I feel very optimistic that that was a good move and the right choice. Many, many good projects have been able to come to the state through that process. I think that and our connections to other states have allowed us to bring good ideas from other states into our state, but having infrastructure to implement them faster.

(KA): To kind of continue on the theme of what to worry about. You've committed your life to this particular field, what do you worry about for the future? What do you see on the horizon that you think might be of concern to the health of the field?

(AS): I think the [00:24:00] major thing that I worry about in terms of the health of the field – particularly for the work that I've devoted my life to, which is around service and civic engagement activities within higher education (but I think it relates to other association works and projects) – is that when we had the economic crisis, it immediately threw the foundation community into a different set of priorities, good priorities, immediate needs priorities. I am concerned that when we don't take the long view and continue to support some of the longer view type of programming that we will end up making those short-term crises worse. [Laughter]

(KA): They'll come back in.

(AS): Yes.

(KA): Then, what are you really hopeful about, are you excited about that you see happening in the field?



(AS): A couple of things [00:25:00] that I'm really excited about in the field are collective action. I think it's yet to be seen where that's going to go, but I see a lot of people in the state of Michigan and around the nation using that model and trying to think about it. I feel like here in Michigan, we started collective action before anybody knew what it was. [Laughter] It's nice to have sort of a pathway or a road map that's out there for that, so I'm really excited about that.

I'm also excited – although I'm not an evaluation person per se, I don't know where my heart is in this work – but I am excited to see that the evaluation for a lot of things is getting better and stronger. I think that that will really strengthen the whole field as we become closer to understanding and really pinpointing what we've been able to accomplish.

(KA): What kinds of things – then, I'm [00:26:00] going to switch over to your personal story – but what kinds of things are you doing with your family to continue this tradition?

(AS): Sure. I'd probably ask Paige.

(KA): [Laughter] What are your recommendations to families who care about giving and serving, what they might do.

(AS): Sure. The things that I think are important for our family to focus on, as a mother of two young daughters (but also parents that have a lot of kids in and out of our house on a regular basis), is we try to focus on servant leadership at home as well. So, we have the kids out volunteering and serving and finding appropriate volunteer projects for them, which I think works really well. They enjoy things that they feel connected to, just like adults enjoy things that they feel connected to.

But I think we also really focus at [00:27:00] home on the idea that we serve each other in the household because we're a family and not because we get an allowance, not because we have household task assigned to certain days or certain things. We just ask people to help, and to serve each other. I think that's been really important for us to make that distinction.

(KA): Good. Is there anything that I didn't ask that you want to make sure that we have on this record, the formal record of what's happened in Michigan and you've observed and what you think others might want to know? In particular, if somebody from another country were listening to your words, what are the essential lessons that you think you could pull out of all these experience?

(AS): I should have sat down and thought about this a little bit more. I think for me, the essential lessons that I've learned so far in my [00:28:00] career – I anticipate learning a lot more – are that things are possible, and it's important to dream about what the world could be like and not what it's like now. It needs to be rooted in where you start and how do you build from there.



So looking at the problem that faces you and saying *I don't know what the solution is but we're going to try a few things and we're going to try to make it work*. For me, that's been a good formula to figuring out some of the community issues that I've been able to work on in my life.

(KA): Anything else you want to make sure you say that I didn't ask?

(AS): I'll think about it for a second.

(KA): Okay, we can come back again to it. I want to do then this little switch. I'd like you to tell us about a little more about your family and how – sort of with the roots of your commitment to the field. You gave us some but this will be a good time to talk a little bit about – like you said your parents were very involved and civically oriented.

(AS): [00:29:00] Yes. I grew up most of my life in Albion, Michigan. Albion was a wonderful community to grow up in because it's a small town, we felt safe there. It's also diverse and it has a college as well as an industrial base. It went through many, many rough times (particularly when I was growing up) but I learned so much from that experience. My parents served because they were asked to (or their church was involved with something or I was involved with the church for some reason), but they were also politically active. They took me to rallies or had me dress up and pass out balloons for candidates that they supported, that kind of thing.

It just became part of our social life to be part of the community in that way. Everything from rolling egg rolls for our annual [00:30:00] community festival to dressing up as a clown and doing performances for small children – it was all part of what I did growing up. I don't think I was that extraordinary of a student but when I saw something that was wrong, I felt compelled to go and say something about it or to make something happen.

College for me was – I was not connected through the traditional volunteering service routes that I now promote in my work life. I would hear about something on the radio or I would say "I'm concerned about this issue," and I would try to find some way to serve that issue. I think that what my parents taught me was that you can take action [00:31:00]. So, like I volunteered as a literacy volunteer. I helped international students to feel more comfortable and help them with their English as part of my college experience. I volunteered for a lot of smaller projects and things like that throughout that whole experience.

Then, when I started my work career – like I said, I wanted to work for a nonprofit. I felt that the for-profit route just wasn't for me and it wasn't where I wanted to put my energies. So, it took me a little while but I was able to finally get a job working part-time. I took a big risk, left a full-time job for a part-time job working for the volunteer center in Albion, Michigan. Through that experience, I was able to meet Harry Bonner, who runs Minority Program Service in Albion, and did some work



with him and do some work at the high school and do some work at the college, and become a part of a community of service for my [00:32:00] hometown which led me to find out that I really liked working with college students. I like the idea of them developing. I like the idea of higher education and what it meant to people as individuals and what it meant to society as a whole.

I was able to get a Master's Degree in Student Affairs at Ball State University, so I left the state briefly. I took a job in West Virginia for a couple of years, doing some of that work and then was able to come back and work at Michigan Campus Compact. I started as a program director. Eventually, I had the opportunity to become the director of Campus Compact. I thought it would be a couple of years maybe, I wasn't quite sure but I ended up loving it so much, I stayed 10 years.

Then I was looking for something a little bit larger to spread my wings a little bit. One of the things that I really enjoyed was the idea of fund raising because for me, fund raising is an [00:33:00] opportunity to dream all the time, everyday about what's possible. So, I was lucky enough to get a position working with the National Campus Compact in Boston but telecommuting out of where my heart is – Michigan - and stay here and continue to do that work in a positive way.

When I really reflect back on it, my deepest and fondest memories are working collaboratively in the state of Michigan. I love that overused word synergy, but there was a synergy to the process. There was a synergy to the work that we were all trying to do together.

(KA): Do times feel different to you now?

(AS): Do times feel different?

(KA): Yes, I mean just the greater culture or that kind of sense seem different than it was during the periods of what we're talking about.

(AS): I do think that things seem different. It is hard sometimes for me to tell because I'm not directly [00:34:00] involved with it, but I do feel like some of that has dissipated as people have moved on. It's sad in a way but I do think the lingering effects are there and that as – like most young professionals, it takes you a little while to realize who you need to be connected – or most new professionals, even if you're not young, it takes you a little while to realize what the connections are in the state. I feel like they'll be rebuilt with new ideas by new people. I'm hoping that that base is still very much intact.

(KA): One last thought, as long as I have you, I'll ask you about. Since you've been fund raising, have you seen any differences in the fund raising landscape? Certainly, the economy makes a difference but have you felt any difference in where donors' heads are about giving [in] service or are they the same as they have been during your fund raising career?



(AS): I think the major [00:35:00] difference that I've seen in fundraising is the shift from bigger ideals of what we would like our society would be like to immediate needs. I think that that will shift back as the economy shifts back as well. I think there also has been a disinvestment at the sort of intermediate level for funders as well. They want to get closer to the direct need which is incredibly valuable. But I've been promised by many, many people in the philanthropic field that that is a natural swing and that it swings back and forth.

(KA): As an intermediary organization. [Laughter]

(AS): Yes, exactly. [Laughter] So, we'll see. I don't know how useful that is to you but I think it is...

(KA): I was just curious actually about how it was doing.

(AS): Yes, I think it really has changed. I had a conversation recently with a funder about a project that I think has tremendous possibility and the funder agreed to but they just said, [00:36:00] "You're not affecting enough people with the project yet."

(KA): Not immediately affecting.

(AS): You're not immediately affecting enough people. So, it is very tough I think.

(KA): Yes, good. Anything else? I think we've covered the ground here.

(AS): Anything you remember me saying that you want me to get on tape?

(KA): No, there was a couple or three that I was looking for that you did so well – that you recreated. So, that was really good. Thank you.

(AS): Thank you.

-End of Recording-

