



INTERVIEW WITH SAM SINGH – 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 Sam Singh 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.

Sam Singh (SS): I actually had my first job while I was still in college. I was a YES Ambassador, which was the Youth Engagement Service Ambassador. It was a program through the Points of Light Foundation. So you did almost a one-year fellowship with them focused on youth service, service learning, and trying to build that curriculum in your state. That position itself was housed at the Michigan Community Service Commission. I was there for a little while under Diana Algra before she made her transition to Washington D.C. to be helpful with the AmeriCorps program expansion. I was there along with Kyle Caldwell, who was also there as a GMI Intern I think they were called, and we were actually – Part of my year at the Community Service Commission included helping start up the first Governor's Service Awards. I, also along with Kyle and others, implemented the first year of AmeriCorps; so, we developed all the regulations for the [00:01:00]

state, did a lot of work obviously in Washington D.C. as the program was being developed. That was my first kind of involvement with national service along with the infrastructure here in Michigan was at the Community Service Commission.

After that, a year after that, that program ended obviously after a year, and then I was picked up by the Volunteer Centers of Michigan. They hired me to be their Executive Director and at that time the Volunteer Centers of Michigan was housed at the Michigan Nonprofit Forum and Dave Egner was its new Executive Director at that time and he hired me to, along with the Volunteer Centers, to run the Volunteer Centers of Michigan. I did that for three years and then expanded that role to President & CEO after Dave had left the organization.

(KA): I think we first met – am I remembering this? You were a mentor at the First Youth Advisory Committee Camp up at Summer Hill? Spring Hill?

(SS): No, it wasn't. I think my first involvement with kind of the leadership type of camps was at Camp Miniwanca; that would've been in '93 so it might have been maybe the second or third year. That was during that year I was in the Youth Engagement Service Ambassador program. That's how I got connected to [00:03:00] the Council Michigan Foundations and most specifically the MCFYP Program. I was kind of doing work as trying to create the youth voice for some of the youth action councils across the state. I worked with a number of local youth action councils but then also was brought in to do some training along with the Michigan Campus Compact and a few other organizations.

(KA): How would you typify that time? It seems to me at the time, you know where there's lots of youth involvement, what was it like contextually in the greater culture here in Michigan?

(SS): It was actually a very exciting period of time both for, I think, the movement, but also for a group of us who were just graduating from college at that time. I'd started my involvement at the Service Learning Center at Michigan State University's campus, so I was getting very actively involved. To be that involved with these statewide associations that were doing cutting edge things for the country at the time, and then given the responsibility that we were given – whether it was a woman by the name of Ginny [00:04:00] Grey who was at the Michigan Campus Contact, Jill Mason who was with the Council of Michigan Foundation, Terry Langston. There was a group of four or five of us that were really young professionals and as they were doing these national changes to creating the AmeriCorps program, for example, National Youth Service Day, we were actually the ones that were charged to implement them. So, to be given that level of responsibility right out of college I think was really exciting for us as professionals, but it really had that youth feel to it because we were really trying to get younger people involved in the decision-making.

(KA): This is a good time maybe to segue into this. One of the things that I wanted to explore was the nature of leadership in the sector, and maybe the way to approach this is what have you



observed in the people that you have worked in Michigan that may make it unique or if it isn't unique, what do you admire about what you've seen in the leaders of the state?

(SS): I think that the nonprofit leaders that I had the opportunity to work with, one, [00:05:00] were very collaborative in nature. I think part of that was because a lot of our institutions were influenced by great stalwarts of the state – the George Romneys of the world, the Russ Mawbys of the world, the Dottie Johnsons. Because they were involved in a lot of the development of these organizations, we all worked together as the staff. That kind of collaborative nature was, I think, not necessarily unique to Michigan, but it was the thing that actually allowed us to do things at a much more rapid space and time than I think other places around the country.

(KA): What did they do that you've tried to incorporate into your own work?

(SS): I think throughout is that kind of collaborative nature, is trying to bring all the conveners around the table, have dialogue and discussion, and also you can have disagreements during those periods of time, but having that kind of community voice, that buy-in from all the partners was very important as we created the AmeriCorps program for Michigan. I remember just the [00:06:00] groups that we bring in from across the state to help us think through what should be our strategies, what should the rules and regulations be. There's obviously national rules, but we could create our own here in Michigan and having that kind of feedback from people on the ground who are actually doing the work was very helpful and meaningful.

(KA): Okay. Is there anything else you can think of that they specifically did? I was looking for – what I wanted to do was, for the benefit of people from other countries...

(SS): Sure.

(KA): Are there behaviors that they did or was there – if somebody gave you now a complicated task to do, are there steps that you go through that you have sort of become a way of your doing things?

(SS): We took some national models, you know. I always remember the work that the National Campus Compact did and groups like COOL, which was the Campus Opportunity Outreach League, what they really wanted you to always take a look at is whatever programs you were doing, did they actually have meaningful service attached to them? [00:07:00] How were you getting the community input? We would use the lens often times that, one, is how do you bring in the community input, how do you do kind of the orientation so everyone's on the same page? Then how do you make sure that that action that you're working towards, the goal that you're working towards, has some meaningful outcomes? You develop those outcomes in that kind of collaborative fashion. But then we'd also take a look at how we would reflect on that. We'd create this kind of environment where we would reflect on the work that we did and on the systems that



we created and then at the last piece of it was evaluation. It was kind of these five steps that were often used on how to create service programs and projects across the country. We began to use that and implement that in our development of systems for the state. I always remember those being taught to me as I started my career. I still use those even in the legislative world, how do you bring in your partners, how do you bring in stakeholders that might be on opposite sides of issues and bring them to the table? [00:08:00]

(KA): Perfect, thanks. That's good. Of the pieces, were you involved in ConnectMichigan Alliance recently?

(SS): I was, yes.

(KA): Why don't you tell us that story because you have a unique perspective on it?

(SS): Sure. Well, one of the things as we began to see the transition that was going to happen with Governor Engler leaving office and Michelle Engler who was the Chair of the Michigan Community Service Commission, we began to see was there an opportunity to take the programs and projects that were created under the State of Michigan and make sure that we operationalize those and then continue them, even though the governor was going to change because of term limits. We often see in politics, once a new governor comes in, programs are changed very dramatically and so forth, and so Kyle called Will and I.

We were at a Points of Light Foundation conference and we began a conversation and said, "Okay, if we could do something like this, could you create an organization that [00:09:00] helped the Volunteer Centers of Michigan, helped the Michigan Campus Compact and the universities that were doing service learning? And then make sure that the programs that were at the Michigan Community Service Commission like the Service Awards and other continue into perpetuity?" So we started that conversation. At that point I was the President of the Michigan Nonprofit Association – and the Volunteer Centers of Michigan and the Campus Compact were programs of [MNA]. We really started this conversation of, "Can we create an organization and an endowment that could help sustain that?"

At first it was looked at could you potentially put it within the Michigan Nonprofit Association. I think, as we talked with the Governor and the First Lady, I think they were more interested in perhaps creating a newer organization. Obviously the Nonprofit Association was doing a lot of advocacy work and so forth. They didn't want to tie some of the volunteerism-based things and service learning-based things with that mission at that [00:10:00] point in time, and so the ConnectMichigan Alliance was then decided to be its own organization. Because they were going to be overseeing the work of the Volunteer Centers, the Campus Compact, MNA was willing to give up those programs. We then decided to create a very unique structure for the board.



We took the four key institutions around service and direct volunteering and service learning and decided to create their board where we would be appointing those members. We would make sure that there was a voice in a way to connect those pieces. We also had two endowments at the Michigan Nonprofit Association, the George Romney Fund for Volunteerism, as well as the Russell Mawby Fund for Youth Volunteerism. We also then committed those two funds to the ConnectMichigan Alliance, and that's really when we decided to go out and create an opportunity to raise \$20 million.

It's kind of strange to think about it now [00:11:00] because Michigan has gone through some very difficult times, but the Governor was very generous in saying that they would create a supplemental that would allow for \$10 million. The Governor was very serious about making sure that there was a commitment to not only utilizing the state money but that that money would be used and be able to be grown. So it was required that there would be a one-to-one match for those dollars, and so that \$10 million would obviously grow to \$20 million. So that was kind of the process and then as we began to form the committee that would oversee that, Mrs. Engler was very gracious with her time.

We went out and one of the first people we sat down with was Bill Richardson at the Kellogg Foundation and he was the CEO. I remember the meeting because it was the day after Michigan State won the national championship. Both Mrs. Engler and I were at the game, obviously watching and cheering on the MSU Spartans. Then the next morning we had this meeting and so we all drove up from Indianapolis [00:12:00] separately. We both ended up at there and pitched Dr. Richardson to joining our team, the Cabinet, to help us raise the money and he was obviously excited about the opportunity and did so. Then Julie Cummings was the other Co-chair if I recall correctly, and the three of them really moved this forward. But in the end you know, it was really Dottie and Russ who said "for this to really work, we had to bring in somebody who knew the system so well" and that's when we sat down with John Lore. John came on to be the first Executive Director but also to help raise the money and, in the only way that John Lore can do it, we were able to quickly get to our goal and raise the money.

(KA): Putting education and fund-raising together is [Unintelligible]...

(SS): Yes. No, absolutely. For both Kyle Caldwell and I who kind of designed the programmatic side and the organizational structure, to have the involvement of those key players in really shaping how to do [00:13:00] this, was a great learning experience for both of us as well.

(KA): So there's two young guys who say, "Oh yes, let's go out and raise \$20 million of endowment money" when there's no organization in place. I mean... [Laughter]

(SS): That's right. It had to require the right people coming together, but it was also this sense that we were giving things up from an organizational standpoint for the betterment of service for



the State of Michigan. You know in a lot of organizations, you wouldn't be saying, "Okay, we're going to give up two endowments that we have," and wouldn't normally say, "Okay, these two organizations that merged with us, we're going to spin them back out." I think the MNA Board was very progressive in that sense and very visionary to say, "Okay, we could be willing to give up staff and resources of our own because it's going to help the State of Michigan move an infrastructure forward." The same thing with the Michigan Community Service Commission giving up some of their programs to go into that ConnectMichigan Alliance. So having that [00:14:00] partnership from government to philanthropy to the nonprofit sector, I think was the kind of the mission that everyone kind of agreed to, and so it was a unique endowment to be created but it was created because everybody was willing to give up something for the betterment of the cause.

(KA): How old were you when you became the MNA CEO?

(SS): I was very young. I was, I think, selected I was 26 at the time. I remember very vividly how that whole process kind of unfolded and Rick Cull was the Chairman of the Michigan Nonprofit Association Board at the time. David Siemen, who was with the Hospital Association, was the Chair of the Search Committee and they did a national search and found, I think, some candidates to interview. In the end, I think they said, "There's this young guy at the association who doesn't have a lot of experience, but if we gave him the right mentoring and [00:15:00] so forth he would be just as maybe good as these national candidates." You know it probably took a lot of courage to say, "Okay, we're going to take this institution and give it to a 26 year-old." It was a great opportunity for me, personally, and because of the quality of Board of Directors that we had we were able to do amazing things. We quickly grew that organization. When I left it, it was 1,100 members. I think when I started, we were around 300 members. We grew staff; we obviously had a number of those mergers that happened. We were able to create the ConnectMichigan Alliance. I'm always grateful to that Board of Directors taking a chance with a fairly young person to be able to lead that organization and did that for 10 years.

(KA): I'd like you to chat a bit about the process of the merger of ConnectMichigan Alliance back into MNA, and also your relationship with Kyle. [00:16:00] Here we have two young – you've known each other for a lot of years. You're both very competent, wonderful people who have a lot of both ambition and energy and yet you were able to work out whatever might have been natural tensions in merging two organizations.

(SS): Sure.

(KA): Can you chat a little bit how that happened?

(SS): So you know as part of – you know, one of the things that the Michigan Nonprofit Association, I think, did very well, we did a lot of leadership training and a lot of technical assistance for nonprofit organizations. Part of the curriculum that I would teach was about



natural transition of executives and, you know, you always do the case studies where, the CEO that stays sometimes too long to the detriment of the organization, then sometimes the CEO who doesn't stay long enough, right? At that point, I was getting close to finishing 10 years as the CEO of the Michigan Nonprofit Association and I wanted to make a transition with my Board. So I told them very early on, I said, "I'm going to give you about nine months (I think maybe it was 10 months), this is the date that I'm going to be leaving the organization [00:17:00] and be willing to help in whatever way that transition is. If it's going out and hiring a new executive, I'll be pleased to help shepherd that project and so forth."

At the same time, there were conversations happening about the ConnectMichigan Alliance. It was great as it was formed. We created a new organization at the time, but we were finding ourselves, the Nonprofit Association and ConnectMichigan Alliance, doing a lot of the same things even though we tried to create separate missions. It's just that work we both did ended up being very similar, a lot of Board overlap, and so forth. So the Board said, "Oh, if you're making this transition, perhaps we should take a look at merging the organizations." So Kyle Caldwell and I, over a period of time, really negotiated what was a great opportunity to bring resources together and kind of extend the mission of both institutions by coming together. [00:18:00] So it made natural sense as Kyle became the new executive, I served for a few months in an interim role to kind of help the transition, and then I left the organization to work on other projects and, you know, Kyle then was able to take the organization and grow it in new ways.

(KA): Tell us for the record what you did with some of your time after MNA.

(SS): One of the things that I wanted to do was get a better global experience. You know, I did a lot of work now nationally on service, a lot of work in Michigan, did some local government work in elected office, I was a mayor of a community, but I needed a real global experience, and so I then spent a little over a year doing some work with some international nonprofit organizations, traveling to all seven continents, and just kind of learning what was happening out there. Then when I came back, I came back with a new passion to really try to position Michigan and our country in a global context and began working back with philanthropy and the New Economy Initiative to really work on a lot of those goals when I came back. [00:19:00]

(KA): So, Sam, you've been home maybe a couple of years now.

(SS): Yes, I came back in – I was gone all of 2008 and came back in the summer of 2009.

(KA): So you've had time to reflect on it. What would you say did you take out of that experience relative to philanthropy from a global perspective?

(SS): I think, it's so unique, the American story around nonprofits and philanthropy and kind of this commitment for social service that we have in our country. To kind of watch that in other



places, there are so many countries that I was going to. They are emerging democracies. They are trying to figure out what's the right balance between government and their nonprofit sector there. A lot of the places I went to there's not a strong element of volunteering or financial giving, and so their nonprofits are struggling with how do you help create that within a country that, obviously, there's a lot of international nonprofits [00:20:00] and international foundations that are helping with that.

It gave me a greater appreciation to really know the history of American philanthropy and how sophisticated that it is, but it's great to then also be there at the cutting edge, as a country's deciding how do they set up their governmental structures, how do they set up the nonprofit organizations. Then you'd also see the tension. We have a strong push and pull with our nonprofits and government. We advocate for policies and so forth, and then I'll be involved in some countries where the government now is pushing back on the nonprofits. They're jailing their nonprofit leaders because they maybe be opposed to a policy that's being done and so forth, and again, that gave another appreciation to what we have here because there is a sense that there is the right role for nonprofits to be advocates, to push their government in a direction, but at the same time, that government respects that role and to kind of [00:21:00] watch and see that in other countries was, I think, a great learning experience for me personally.

(KA): I remember once when some folks from Eastern Europe came over for a visit when the MOTT Foundation brought them and having them ask if you were writing your text book from scratch, what would you do? I thought I have no idea. [Laughter] What a really complicated question. You're doing great. Thank you. This is perfect. Let's talk a little bit about – and this is a place where I want to spend a little time, you have now the unusual experience of having sat on both sides of the public policy table.

(SS): Sure.

(KA): Could you talk a little bit about...let's start with as an advocate about whether, and you were starting down this road, whether it's legitimate for the nonprofits to do it, how to do it well? Then we'll flip over and talk about what it's like to be lobbied by [Laughter] the sectors.

(SS): Sure.

(KA): Let's start from your first experience which was MNA became the preeminent lobbyist on the part of the sectors.

(SS): Absolutely. One of the things as I started [00:22:00] with the Michigan Nonprofit Association, we always had a strong public policy committee and we did strong public policy work but we knew for us to be stronger that we needed to have our members actively involved in public policy. Then as we began to talk to our local members and their boards, there was oftentimes a



reluctance to get involved in lobbying on an issue or a change in the tax code or for a program that they would want funded and so forth. We struggled with that because oftentimes there was misinformation by board members or they would have an attorney or a lawyer that's not maybe an expert in nonprofit law but they'd say, "Oh, you probably shouldn't get involved in this type of activity." You know the IRS Code is very clear. Nonprofit organizations can advocate and lobby. What they can't do is electioneer. They can't choose Republicans or Democrats or support candidates, but they can do everything else as it deals with policies at the Capitol, and so we've created a program called the Michigan Public Policy Initiative, MPPI. [00:23:00] It was a joint effort between the Council of Michigan Foundations and the Michigan Nonprofit Association to educate nonprofits across the state about what their role was in public policy and advocacy.

At the same time, Michigan was starting with term limits and we wanted to make sure these new term-limited legislators understood the nonprofit sector. So we created a number of programs. We called them Issues in Brief. We would do them at the Capitol and to help not only train the new staff that was coming in to work for these legislators but to inform legislators these are the policies that are impacting human services or the environment education. We created those programs to kind of move the sector forward. I saw during that 10-year period that we were able to create more and more influence with the legislature because our members became more and more active. Our agendas, our nonprofit agendas we would make sure that we would sit down with legislators to inform them on those [00:24:00] different goals and objectives that we had. Obviously it increased from there. Kyle Caldwell and his team with Erin Skene-Pratt actually created a nonprofit caucus of legislators who have committed to working with the nonprofit sector. Now that I'm in my new role as a new legislator representing the 69th District, one of the first things was one of the leaders of the nonprofit caucus, Wayne Schmidt, Republican from Traverse City, reached out and said, "Well, you know these issues so I'm hoping you'll join in the nonprofit caucus." So it wasn't only just the Michigan Nonprofit Association encouraging me to do this, it was legislators who knew my background as well. That's been kind of an emerging program within the Nonprofit Association that's really added a lot of strength and understanding for the legislature.

(KA): Did it make a difference? Can you point to an issue or two where the voice of MNA really moved public policy?

(SS): [00:25:00] Yes, I think, there was an interesting period of time right after 9/11. There was questions on what we should be doing, taking a look at philanthropy, taking a look at money coming in to nonprofit organizations and often since people were trying to create maybe new rules and regulations and so forth. I remember one time and this was one of the pieces that we got from the Attorney General's Office when Jennifer Granholm was Attorney General, and that information we felt went too far. It actually restricted the rights of nonprofits organizations, legitimate organizations. It wasn't going to help anybody that was dealing with national issues or issues around terrorism and so forth. We felt the IRS had actually created a good code around



how to deal with foundations and those dollars. So we actually had the bill in front of us before it was introduced, and we were able to actually push back very strongly, and a group of nonprofit organizations [00:26:00] pushed back and eventually they retracted the bill. Again, oftentimes it's not about only the bills you pass but it's the bills that you stop from being created. There is one example of that.

We also did a number of things in regards to changing some of the tax credits, making sure that we provided a lot of new opportunities for people to give and have incentives. Unfortunately, you fast forward to a period in time, two years ago, the current governor, Governor Snyder, as part of his budget and changes, actually removed some of those. So now the sector's in a very interesting point. Does it go back and ask for those tax credits back? You know you can go out and create them and provide a lot of incentive which we did for growth of community foundations and for homeless shelters and, at the same time, new people come in office because of term limits and now the nonprofit sector is now gearing up, I think, for another fight to say, "Let's put those back in", now that we've seen the [00:27:00] damage that's been done over the last two years.

(KA): I've always been curious particularly for MNA. It's somewhat of an issue but not quite as much. How did you manage inside the organization when you had an arts organization that whole group of people want something that the hospitals didn't or you had the environmental people who didn't want to have or might have wanted some special privilege that the community development people didn't. Because you had such diverse membership, how did you manage to hammer out a common public policy in general?

(SS): Well, that's the one thing that the board was very clear on from the beginning as I did public policy; that we had to use a framework before we would agree that we would support anything. One was that whatever bill or legislation or policy that we wanted to develop had to be broad-based so it had to go beyond just one sector. It had to help multiple sectors of the nonprofit community. Two, it also required [00:28:00] that our board had a super majority decision. What we didn't want to do was split the board because we could be splitting the nonprofit sector so that the board had to really agree by a 2/3 decision that this was the way to move a policy forward. We created a framework that we would as staff use before we brought something to the board, but then the board had its own safety valve to some degree, that they had to have more than 2/3 of the board support for public policy position. Now, at times, that might have restricted some of our movements and that could be frustrating from a staff perspective when you're ready to go on something, but it often allowed us to be that voice so we could represent the entire sector. Then we worked with what we call subsector groups, the groups that were representing human services and the environment. We would provide them with tools and resources, but then we would let the arts community, if they wanted to fight for the arts budget in the state budget, that was their goal and objective, [00:29:00] we could go in and talk about the overall budget. But then we would have our partners talk about their specific area, and that helped us keep the topic of the



nonprofit sectors a whole in everyone's mind, but then allowed our partners to take a look at issue by issue.

(KA): And then they weren't giving up any by becoming members of MNA.

(SS): Right.

(KA): What would you say in terms of relative strength of Michigan's four infrastructure organizations in comparison with what's happening in other states and what might be some of the factors one way or the other?

(SS): The Johnson Center. When I take a look at you know other states, oftentimes they might have one or two of those types of organizations that really had a strong place within their state, but having all four allowed us to do things I think in a very innovative way. For [00:30:00] example for the Nonprofit Association, we were always trying to make the case to policy-makers that we were a huge economic engine for the state and that is why they needed to take us seriously. We were able to partner with the Johnson Center to say, "Hey, help us analyze some of these things," and then we would go out and then present those facts and then made us a stronger advocate in the end. We would often find from other states our partners saying, "Okay, you just did this great study. How should we do it?" We'd say, "Well, go to your Johnson Center." "Well, they might not have one." So we had had to sometimes find different ways of doing partnerships. They would have to find different partnerships, but the one thing that was really good not only from the four organizations in Michigan was that our state and national connections allowed us to kind of go around the country. I know there was a period of time that I probably went to 13 or 14 different states to really talk about how to strengthen their public policy arms of their nonprofit associations. We would do that. Part of our work was [00:31:00] not only to build the sector here in Michigan but was to help our national organizations groups like the National Council of Nonprofits and Independent Sector and the Council on Foundations, how we built those systems across the country. Having those four institutions already in Michigan who already had a strong history allowed us to do a lot of modeling of ideas and programs and then transfer them to other parts of the country.

(KA): Your board was supportive of you being gone doing that work?

(SS): It was. You know one of the great things you know I kind of learned early on from Dave Egner and Diana Algra who both kind of my first two executives that I worked under about how to empower others. I always say that that the staff that I built at the Michigan Nonprofit Association, the only success I ever had was because of the strong people and personalities that we brought into the organization. We would build kind of entire systems that would be run by these individuals that allowed me the opportunity to spend a little bit more [00:32:00] time in Washington D.C. There was a huge point where Senator Grassley and others were taking a look



nationally about changing the entire code on nonprofit organizations, on foundations and, because it was an interesting and dangerous time for nonprofits, Michigan, a number of us were tapped to sit on a panel for independent sector to provide the feedback to the Senate Finance Committee to make sure that we protected the rights of nonprofits for the entire country. I found myself almost every two weeks going out there. I was able to do that and position our dialogue, from a Michigan perspective on a national stage, because of the great staff we were able to build at the Association.

(KA): I didn't want to lose the thread of, what is it like to sit now on the other side and have particularly people who have been your friends and colleagues come to you and saying, "Sam, I need money. Sam, I need this or I need this." All of a sudden all of these people are coming to you where you have the political power.

(SS): [00:33:00] Sure. It's been interesting to be on the other side. Obviously, groups that I had worked with very closely now are coming, helping me understand their policy positions or what they're looking at from a budget perspective and so forth. It's been fun to be on the other side. I now find myself just like many others when I was advocating, having to look at the budget realities and the political realities and help shape some of that. One of the things that I wanted to do as a legislator as I work with these groups is really help them think through the entire process. Because I was on the nonprofit side and now on the legislative side I could say, "Hey, you should really now think about the next steps after you meet with me. Okay, how do we work through the different committees? How should you be looking at that?" So I'm trying to take some of my nonprofit experience and now my legislative experience to kind of help people through that process, my fellow nonprofit groups that are coming to us. It's been fun. It's been, at times, challenging because you know [00:34:00] why they're here and what they need to do and if we could find that extra money, the great work that they can do, but we're still in some challenging budget times.

(KA): You know it strikes me that people think of the foundation world as a mystery until you get into it. I'm sure the same is true for the legislative world. It just is a mystery because we don't know how it works exactly.

(SS): Right.

(KA): Who has done it well? I don't want you to give me the name of an organization. What do they do when they come to you where you think, "Wow, that nonprofit really is doing it right, it is coming to me in the right way with the right message." What are those characteristics of a really good call on you?

(SS): I think, those organizations that actually do the research, that come in with data, they say, "Okay, this is why we're doing what we're doing." If they're coming in for appropriations, you know,



the question is about leverage. What are you doing that is pulling down the state resources and then what does that mean to real life? What does this mean to your clients? What does this mean to the people in your community? Can you quantify that? [00:35:00] Can you quantify why we're using state or sometimes federal resources that are coming through the state for your types of projects? The groups that I have been most impressed with are the ones that come in and they show that they can leverage state and federal resources five times over, 10 times over because of the work that they're doing with their regular philanthropy and their regular volunteers. It's that type of partnership. Those groups who can understand that piece and how to partner with the state, what is the state trying to do or has done in the past they're not doing that this nonprofit is now working on. I think those types of conversations, coming in with a plan with really data driving that plan, has been the most effective groups to receive resources and to get the ear of the people that are in charge of the committees that they're often in front of.

(KA): Thanks. It strikes me that you came out of the sort of the flowers and music world and you moved into the cynical kind of [Laughter] business [00:36:00] politics world. Is there a big difference between the cultures of the two worlds, between the nonprofit world and the legislative world?

(SS): Well, I think some of the people are the same. I find that there's an interesting mix now that I'm in the legislature of people that I run into on a regular basis whether they are the nonprofits that are active in helping shape public policy and so forth. There are a lot of similar players and partners under both. I think, obviously, in the nonprofit sector we are so mission-driven. Sometimes on the political side of the equation, we're more politically driven so even though the mission should be X, logic would say you should do this. My colleagues sometimes don't act in that way, right, and so having to really then take a look at how we have to take the political side and make that work at the same time as making the mission side. Even though there's always been politics in nonprofit organizations, it's not as heavy as it is [00:37:00] now on the legislative side. I think for me personally I was training nonprofits on how to get involved in the legislature, what they should do, and oftentimes I would end my presentations by saying, "You, you should also run for public office because we need nonprofit professionals now in the legislature because you would really understand these issues." Eventually I found myself saying, "Well I can't just be giving out that advice." I eventually have to take it myself and that's why I ended up running.

(KA): Yes, your finger was saying, "You," and suddenly you were looking in the mirror. [Laughter]

(SS): Right. Absolutely.

(KA): Let's do this. What other – what lessons would you take from the Michigan experience that you put the Brazilian nonprofit association made up of six nonprofits or you know some new... you've been in those countries. Where they – what advice would you give them based on your experiences, your experiences in Michigan?



(SS): I think there's a lot to learn [00:38:00] but at the same in the end every country is different. Every community across this world is different. You really have to tailor-make whatever best practice that you've seen in America or some other country to your community. When I worked with international nonprofits, I was very careful not to come in and say, "This is what we did in Michigan or this is what we did in the United States," because I do think every place is so unique. I do think there are some best practices, especially in these partnerships between NGOs and government and how those can really help move things forward. I think we should be able to take that opportunity to learn and to share, but then each group and each community has to really make it their own.

(KA): I'm going to switch and ask you about your path.

(SS): Sure.

(KA): When you were thinking about coming over, was there anything that you wanted to make sure you say for the record that I haven't asked you? You know, what we're trying to do is capture lessons learned [00:39:00] as well as the history and the sort of experiences like you did some work in Detroit. I don't know if there's something from that that you'd like to the hopper. This is your chance to kind of tell your story about your work first and then about you.

(SS): Sure. Well I guess on those pieces you know the one thing that I've seen throughout this whole process you know for me personally is that philanthropy and nonprofits are involved almost in every major change that we're trying to do in the state of Michigan. If it is the change of the budget on a statewide level or if it's college attainment or if it's helping re-shape a community like Detroit, philanthropy and nonprofits are at the heart of all of those issues. So for me coming from that community originally, getting my start there and working my adult professional life there, it's great to see that and it's great to understand that, [00:40:00] if we are to help re-build neighborhoods within Detroit. It's not just government on its own. It's not just the Mayor or the City Council. It really requires the nonprofit sector and the foundations sector to be working together. With the New Economy Initiative when I came back to the country, Dave Egner was there and he asked me to come in and help him think through some things on workforce development. We were able to bring government together with nonprofits and foundations. Again, having that kind of thoughtful, collaborative approach, I think we were able to create some great new organizations and help fund some existing organizations in a different way, because we were able to use some of the same things I learned from my first day on the job about how you build a collaborative partnership. We're still doing those things. It just is a reminder that there's not going to be any major change in the State of Michigan unless it involves a partnership between government, local nonprofit organizations and philanthropy.



(KA): Good. Thank you. Great job. I do [00:41:00] want to ask you about your personal journey. Your mom and dad were philanthropists and you gave away money as a kid? [Laughter] Where did you come – tell us about your family.

(SS): Sure, sure. My parents both immigrated to this country in the 1960s. My brother and I were born and raised in Livonia, Michigan. They came from a country, obviously, a large democracy. Their families were involved in India in politics and so forth and so for me kind of the conversations around the kitchen table and so forth were always about the big issues facing a community, facing your state, facing your country. We would talk about those things. They've never really understood nonprofit organizations. I know it was a struggle when I tried to explain my first job why I was doing that. So there wasn't a strong background because they came from a country where there were NGOs, but they weren't as prevailing as they [00:42:00] are in this country. So it was kind of an area that I think they were learning on, but the values that they taught us as immigrants about giving back to the country that provided you this opportunity, about being involved in your community because that's what's expected was something both me and my brother took on. My brother ended up, you know, being an Executive Director of a nonprofit organization and doing a lot with community building in Detroit. My path took me to mostly statewide nonprofit organizations, but it was specifically that kind of commitment to public service that they had instilled in both of us that kind of led us on that pathway. I do remember that conversation. They said, "Nonprofit? Do they pay you?" You know, the common thing you hear from people sometimes when they don't understand the sector but that was something they were I think over time they became very comfortable with it. They were very confused with if there were jobs there and so forth. Not only was I trying [00:43:00] to explain nonprofits to the world, I was explaining them to my parents as well.

(KA): That's what we're paying your tuition to do? [Laughter]

(SS): That's right.

(KA): Can you point to any point where you began to realize that this was the path that you wanted to take?

(SS): Yes, there were actually some very specific moments in college as I was working with a group called Into the Streets that was started by the group called COOL, the Campus Opportunity Outreach League. It was that period of time in the early 90s and late 80s where the "me" generation was being really talked about. You know, my age, my cohorts really only cared about themselves. There was a group of college presidents nationally who actually said, "That's not the people that we know on our campuses. We want to change that kind of image." They were really talking about service and service learning, so I got really involved with that specifically went to Camp Miniwanca as a college student to talk [00:44:00] about what we could do to transform service. I remember specifically being there. I still stay in touch with some of the advisers that I



met there about service learning and what you could do in local communities. I was still on a pathway to get my law degree and that was what I was still thinking, but then I ended up doing an alternative break program. It was right after Homestead and the Hurricane Andrew that had gone through that period of time. There was a group of about 50 of us from Michigan State University who went down and specifically worked on a number of homes and the family I worked with was just an amazing family. They're rebuilding their home, but the father would still volunteer with a couple of people down the street that were a little bit older and needed some more help. It was really strange for me because I'm like, "You had this devastation happen to you. You're still rebuilding your home." I remember the conversations that I had with him and about how he said because he had so [00:45:00] much still with his health and his family being safe that he felt he still had to help others. I think it was a combination of those types of experiences on the campus that I decided I wasn't going to go the law degree route. I was going to work for a nonprofit organization, so I've never regretted that choice from that point forward.

(KA): Have you thought about, and this is still early in your personal family life, but how you might raise children or what you might do with your own passing it down?

(SS): Sure. We haven't had children yet but that's in our plans. I think we've always been supporters of volunteering, both me and my wife. I know when I was working with the volunteer centers, we really pushed this concept of family volunteering. How do you volunteer as a family? I think it's a great way to teach children your own personal values but then also about the community that they live in. I know we've talked that kind of [00:46:00] family volunteering would be part of who we are as a family as we start down that pathway.

(KA): I didn't ask you about being Mayor. Anything you learned from that experience – I mean again, how old were you when you were mayor?

(SS): I got elected to the City Council at 24 and then I became Mayor, I think I was 34. I was a little bit older, but I was still the youngest mayor at that time in the city's history. Again, I took the nonprofit elements that I learned, you know. It's about how do you build the right coalition? How do you bring people...at the age of 24 when you're just right out of college there's a lot of people skeptical that you should be making decisions for their community. I used that kind of thinking that I learned from nonprofits to build not only a campaign structure, but once I got elected to really talk about the issues. I spent 12 years in local government. Representing a university community was a great thing for me because it was a community that was willing to invest. It was a community that [00:47:00] appreciated volunteering and appreciated nonprofit organizations, so I was able to do that at the same time as my other nonprofit passions and so it was a great fit.

