



# OUR STATE OF GENEROSITY

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## Governor Jim Blanchard

### INTERVIEW WITH GOVERNOR JIM BLANCHARD – July 27, 2016

*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 Governor Jim Blanchard on July 27, 2016. Conducted by Kyle Caldwell, executive director of the Johnson Center and interviewer for *Our State of Generosity*. Recorded at the 2016 Points of Light conference. 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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**Kyle Caldwell (KC):** Thank you for doing this. What we really want to sort of start off with you is talking about your philanthropy. You have told your story before. You grew up in Southeast Michigan, in a single family. What did service volunteers and philanthropy and all of that mean to you in your development, and then later on as you became a Michigan leader?

**Jim Blanchard (JB):** Well, I never really thought about it as a kid. I was raised by a single-parent mom along with my sister in Ferndale, Michigan. What is interesting – I don't want to make it a sob story. All my relatives were college graduates. My grandparents were college graduates. They were social activists, community activists. My grandmother was the first female president of the LaGrange in Ohio. I grew up with a mother who was active in the American Association of University Women and active in our church. One of the things our church did at Christmas time was, you filled out a form where you pledged a gift of service, not a present for your family, a gift of service. It could be your promise to mow the lawn all summer or it could be that you are going to help at the YMCA or some community organization. I am from a family of activists who believe in public service but also in private service.

(KC): How did that form your education and your vocation? How did you choose both services?

(JB): Well, it's interesting. My mother and all of her friends – again, we had a lot of friends and neighbors who were very helpful to me, like teachers and counselors – were very interested in politics. None of them would ever run for office, but they were very interested in public service. My mother was a great admirer of Eleanor Roosevelt. She was always thinking about the poor, about people who were less fortunate. We never thought of ourselves as less fortunate even though I'm thinking now, growing up

without a father was different, especially in the ‘50s when you didn’t hear much about that. They valued public service, but also community service. They valued both. I was raised in a household, though, where going into public service would be something that was very much admired and respected. You don’t hear that much today, unfortunately. It’s interesting, though, that millennials—the young generation, the kids born between 1982 and 2002—they are very much into community service and community action, even if they are turned off by politics. In one sense, it is a very good development and in another it isn’t, but still you get something positive out of this new generation, this young generation.

(KC): Speaking of youth, you and your administration spent a considerable amount of political capital, as well as dollars, developing a youth program. You did a youth worker program that, for many, was seen both as education of work, but it also seemed to have an element of philanthropy—getting young people involved, getting them to think about something other than themselves. Did any of this factor into your thinking and in developing some of those youth programs?

(JB): I think it probably did. What concerned me when I became a governor (which was January 1, 1983) was we had 17% unemployment in Michigan. We had the lowest credit rating in the nation. We were tied with Puerto Rico for the lowest credit rating. Youth unemployment was 25% or 30% and, in the cities probably 50%. One of the things I thought of doing, and I modeled it after Franklin Roosevelt’s civilian conservation corps, was we created the Michigan Youth Corps, and we put to work 25,000 young people in community service that summer. They picked up litter along the roadsides, they worked in state parks, they worked in county fairs, and they worked in retirement homes, in nursing homes. It was all service, and they were paid minimum wage, although we had supervisors who were paid a little bit more than that. Part of the program also was—because for a lot of them it was their first job—teaching them how to create a resume. We had counseling, so they could use this as a springboard to another job the following summer or a real world job if they were not in school. Of course, we encouraged them to finish school as well, or go on to a higher education.

(KC): Do you see this similar interest of young people today? You mentioned that this generation seems to be interested in service or in national service. Do you see similarities in what you developed back then and what you are seeing in young people serving today?

(JB): I think so. I am not as intricately familiar with all the different programs today, although I am still involved in public service myself, mostly behind the scenes. What was interesting was in May and June 1983, we had a lot of people say, “Those young people, they don’t want to do it, they don’t want to work. They are lazy. They don’t care. They are not going to do it.” We had others say, “Well this program needs to be specially tailored for the very poor.” I said, “No. We want it for everyone.” If this program has a badge of inferiority attached to it, no one’s going to want to serve. I want it for everybody. I want it for kids from well-to-do families as well as from very poor families. What was interesting was they said, “It can’t work. It won’t be done.” I said, “It has to be done.” We had slots for 25,000 kids. Sixty-seven thousand young people applied. We were heartbroken that we couldn’t take care of all of them. It is true years later we didn’t need that much because the economy was doing well. There were jobs available for young people, but I hated to have a whole generation idle in the summer between school years, whether it was high school or college.



(KC): We're thinking now of transitioning from your administration, thinking about philanthropy at large. During your tenure, you were able to help steward legislation that made tax credits available to community foundations. Why bother? Why is that?

(JB): Well, it was really interesting, and I give Dottie Johnson a lot of credit and her colleagues and other people interested in foundations. They made me clearly aware early in my tenure as governor, that Michigan had her unique position in philanthropy; that we had a lot of really significant foundations, as well as local community foundations; that we were a state with big-time foundation activities, and it wasn't just Kellogg or Mott or Kresge, for example, which were well-known. There were a lot of others. I thought to myself, "We can help leverage their activities to help build a better Michigan, a better quality of life." It can't all be done by the government. Our resources, as everybody knows, are limited. If you are the governor of the state, a great state like Michigan, a mega-state, and you could leverage their activity and help them, encourage them, that is really a good thing. The idea really came from the Council of Michigan Foundations and their allies, the non-profits, etc. They came up with the idea. We simply grabbed it because I thought it was a no brainer. My staff was all supportive. All of them. It was a no brainer.

(KC): Do you recall if it was a hard lift for the legislature then?

(JB): I don't recall that it was a hard lift, but I must tell you it was now many years ago. I think it was just trying to get people's attention to it. But anytime you are dealing with a tax credit or tax deduction, it's not easy because then they will say, "Well, I want it for this or I want it for that. If you're going to do this, I want it for my pet project." We had to convince people that this was in the state's interest. It was in the interest of our entire state. It was really in the national interest. There is something about the United States that is unique. That is the charitable, non-profit, activist sector of our society. It's something we've had for a couple of centuries. Alexis de Tocqueville talked about it in his book, *Democracy in America*, and that's different in most countries.

(KC): Do you think that in your Ameritime role now— and you're looking at other states and you're looking at other governors – a lot of your work is now international. There is a tremendous amount going on internationally: transformation, community change... Do you think that philanthropy can, and should, play any role in helping society figure out where to go with all these changes that are going on?

(JB): Yes, there is no doubt. You see it more in the cultural areas. For example, I am Vice Chairman of the National Archives Foundation. When I see it in Washington, the diplomatic area – I am actually past chair of the Meridian International Center which is the leading public diplomacy center. Both of these organizations complement things that could have been government functions, but there are limited government resources. I think that is true across the board. There is so much that could have been done to improve the lives of the people through foundations, through community foundations, and they all have, as you know, certain mandates with their charters that they try to follow. Some are dealing with infrastructure, hard stuff. Some deal with soft power, but they all have a role. It also gives people a chance to participate in their own time. Again, it's more than money, as all of you know. It's also time and interest and support and encouragement. The nice thing about foundations, non-profits, charitable work, and community work is that people end up feeling that they get more out of it than perhaps the people they help. It makes you feel better about yourself and your world. If you are able to do things



because you want to do them— because you think they are important, that you are not forced to do them or you are not paid to do them— it just makes people feel really good about life.

(KC): I am going to ask you first off if you are comfortable talking about your own philanthropy. If you aren't that's fine, but if you are, I would love to hear why you and Janet thought about that gift... and a very substantial gift. It was one that goes to your alma mater and everybody could understand that. But the way you structured it, you obviously wanted that gift to do something. Can you talk about it with me?

(JB): I am a proud Spartan. I have two degrees with Michigan State. I was active in student government there. I feel like I got my political start there running as class president. I am a big Spartan booster of football and basketball. I actually had endowed scholarships in football and basketball. I started thinking, "Gee, before I leave the scene, I have to do something on the academic side and do something to encourage young people to go into public service." It was more than just a major gift, which it is. It also allows me to be involved. I put my time in it, too, in terms of working with the department of social science, the political science department, the economics department, and history department, and working with students and their professors and teachers. It is the money that brings in well-known speakers to try to inspire people into public service. It can also be private service. Our very first speaker was President Bill Clinton. He talked as much about private sector community service as he did about running for office. I thought that was interesting. That was his idea. It really wasn't mine, but yes, we want to inspire young people to go into service, however they do it so they can build a better world, and we want them to know they are needed. They are needed. It's that major investment I am making but it's also my time and Janet's time.

(KC): You call it the Spartan Statesmanship Award for Distinguished Public Service. That says not only that you were trying to encourage people into service, but a certain kind. Is there a message there as well?

(JB): Well, just to encourage service I dreamed that up. I loved it. I dreamed it up. It wasn't the university's idea. I just thought it sounded great and you know, we have an Oscar-like award. It's just fun. It just makes me feel so good. I don't know what else to tell you. By the way, we are giving it this year. It's going to be Ken Burns. We are not – it's not just people who have held elected office or appointed political office. Yes, we will include diplomats and governors and presidents, but journalists. You'd be interested in that, and Ken is a filmmaker and historian. That's going to be really interesting. We want to make it fun for everybody, too. Inspiring and fun.

(KC): Those are all of our large formal questions. I wonder if there is anything about Michigan's philanthropy that we didn't talk about, or any of your philanthropy that we didn't talk about and you want to make sure we get to.

(JB): Well no, I mentioned earlier I think Michigan has always been noted for having a great deal of philanthropic activities, a lot of significant foundations and a lot of encouragement. I would say also one of my predecessors who became a friend, in fact Janet worked with him, George Romney. He was really into volunteerism. Part of that was his faith which we also find in the west side of our state. It's actually what took...every faith has a different way of wanting service, but as you know, there was an emphasis on service through George's Mormon upbringing, and really a de-emphasis on government doing things. Although I must say George Romney gave us our modern constitution which I appreciated because I was



a benefit of it. It gave a lot of power to the governor. It was always nice to follow a guy that knew how to run things, but we'd had people like that. You mentioned Russ Mawby, you know there are others at the Mott Foundation that I worked with, and of course Dottie and the whole crew. She brought a whole crew to meet with me on this issue of giving and how to encourage it. We have been a major state that has led in that area, and will lead in the future.

(KC): I apologize. You just gave me another great question and I can't miss the opportunity. There was a sort of continuity of statesmanship between Governor Romney, Governor Milliken, you, and Governor Engler, even in those latter two, for me, it's a pitch battle for you too. But, we have seen you work with John Engler on the bridge-crossing and other things. There is a certain statesmanship.

(JB): Yes.

(KC): It's unique, it seems to me. Can you talk a little bit about it?

(JB): I think there's a bond between people that have had the same office, a very high-privilege challenge and honor, and there is a bond that connects people, absolutely. I think you'd find that with presidents as well. There's President Bill Clinton who travelled over to Southeast Asia after a tsunami with President H.W. Bush. Later, he was in Haiti with President George W. Bush. We collaborated here as well, and I have worked with Governor Milliken and Governor Engler in different things, including our connections to Canada, which are very important; the new Gordie Howe Bridge, a big deal and important for all of Michigan, not just the Detroit area.

[side conversation]

(KC): If you just want to spend 10 seconds since listing off people that you know you've worked with like Bill White or Russ Mawby, then we'll just make sure we edit that into the archive.

(JB): Yes, well they are many. I hate to list a group because there's so many I would leave out because there are - but yes, certainly Russ Mawby and Bill White, and others. At the Kresge Foundation, for example - several in Detroit...It's a really active group. John Lore, you know of course. The thing about philanthropic leaders is they generally play a little bit on the guilt people have for not doing enough for their fellow human beings, but they make it easy for you, the leaders. They lead by example. They make you feel good when you do something to help, whether it's contributing financial resources or time or ideas or influence, like lobbying for things. They make you feel good and they try to stay a little bit in the background, so that the people they recruit help you get some recognition as they are going about their service. I think that's the other thing. It reminds me of what the late former Senator Pat Moynihan once said about Washington. I think it could apply to philanthropic leaders, which Pat Moynihan said, "Washington is a city where a person of great ability and good will can accomplish an enormous amount, provided they are willing to let others get the credit." That could be said of our philanthropic leaders in Michigan.

(KC): Thank you. That's perfect.

(JB): All right?



(KC): This is wonderful.

End of Recording

