



INTERVIEW WITH SURABHI PANDIT – 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 Surabhi Pandit 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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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.

Kyle Caldwell (KC): So tell me a little bit about how you came in to philanthropy, and then talk a little bit, if you can, about how you came into Community Foundation.

Surabhi Pandit (SP): Sure. So my journey in philanthropy started when I was maybe in eighth grade and I lived in Southfield and we had the Southfield Community Foundation and my older sister was a part of YAC (Youth Advisory Committee) to the Community Foundation and I wanted to do everything just like her, and so I would just kind of sit in on meetings that she went to and had no idea what it was about. Then as a freshman in high school, I got involved more closely with the work and it was an experience to me that was very different from other extracurricular

activities. I was one of those super-involved students in high school but it was a little bit different because not only were we doing community service work, but there was also this whole grant making component which nobody else was doing so it was obviously very cool at the time. I kind of just stayed involved through high school and found a lot of - kind of found myself in that work. It made sense to me. It was my way of impacting the community that - the geography of where I lived and the people that I really cared about. So subsequently, I stayed involved through the CMF network of YACs and I was involved in the state wide YAC leadership board, the MCFYP, and after that, I interned for CMF and then I worked for CMF so I kind of did the full progression of that whole YACer, growing up in that world. And then I worked after I graduated from grad school and worked at CMF as a public policy fellow. That kind of exposed me to foundations all across the state and I knew I definitely wanted to stay in Southeast Michigan. I wanted to be in Detroit and I wanted to stay in philanthropy and the opportunity came up with the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan so that's where I am now.

(KC): You talked a little bit about the work of being involved in your local YAC. So describe that work for me. Was it something that you knew about? Did you know about grant making before you came to your volunteer work with YAC?

(SP): Yes. I guess I didn't have a full understanding of organized philanthropy so I'd always seen my parents or friends and charitable giving - doing charitable things was always something I was exposed to, but the concept of organized philanthropy that there is a foundation or that there are several foundations out there that do work in particular issue areas that make grants, that, in a formal way, was new to me. Then being involved as a young person with youth-related grants was also new. The service part was something I was exposed to through other clubs but then the fact that we were doing service with groups that we made grants to was just completely different. So that was all very new to me at the time.

(KC): The organized philanthropy, the work that you were doing - you were working with other young people and they were discovering organized philanthropy. What was that learning through and with others - what was that like for you?

(SP): Once I figured out what we were doing and what our role was supposed to be or could be, I think it all started to make sense. My experience would not have been the same without the help and the guidance of our advisors, so we had a lot of adults who were allies to us who served as advisors to our grant making and they were just the right balance of involved in our work. They would serve as resources; they wouldn't make the decisions for us but would help us understand all angles of how we could make decisions. So there was a lot of learning with peers and among peers in managing those relationships. Additionally, as a YAC, you're a part of a Community Foundation so we had the resources of our entire board of trustees who were very prominent leaders in the community in various sectors. So my junior and senior year, because of Michigan's great laws, I could serve on the board of the Community Foundation so I was a trustee. I was 16 and 17 serving on this board of a Community Foundation. That time was my first time being on an official board where I had a vote and I could have some type of influence. I probably value that



experience more now knowing that I had done it so long ago versus when I was there because it was like, "Of course I would do this kind of thing, right?" But now I'm kind of, "Whoa." I was a very young person on a board that you'd be on as an adult. I think about it that way so there was a lot of learning from the adults in terms of a more formalized way of how organized philanthropy works, the management of that, the finances, all of those things that I probably wouldn't have got just trying to figure it out by myself.

(KC): I'm going to segue into something you mentioned earlier that I want to come back to.

(SP): Sure.

(KC): So you had mentioned earlier that, to paraphrase, as a young person you sort of got away with murder.

(SP): [Laughter]

(KC): So there was a lot of freedom that you had as YACer versus when you maybe came into a more professional role, a formal professional role. Talk to me a little about that.

(SP): I can tell you about my freedom as a YACer through a couple of examples. During my tenure in YAC, and maybe years before and after, Southfield was working to build a youth center. This is something that was in the making for years. You can look at old minutes and you would see 10 years, 15 years prior to my participation that that was something that the city wanted and community members wanted. So it had a few false starts and a lot of momentum at finite periods of time and then it would kind of die down as leadership changed. So there were a few of us on my YAC that really – we were like, "This has to happen. We're going to make this happen." It didn't happen during our time. It happened later but it still happened.

The benefit of Southfield was that all of the offices were located in a certain municipal complex so we had the mayor, the city administrator and then the Community Foundation which is a block down. I remember a few summers, I would just walk into the mayor's office and the city administrator's office and say, "Oh, I need this thing," and maybe at the time, looking back now, they were maybe shocked that a 15, 16 year old cared enough to want to go meet with the mayor and city administrator but they obliged for everything and there were things that I could do... I was attached to no politics. I brought nothing with me other than I'm just a kid who cares about the community and so did my peers. We came with a trusted organization. We were with the Community Foundation so people knew that we were legit in that way but now, I think about, okay, if I wanted a meeting with the mayor or a city administrator of some city, what kind of protocol would I have to go through to even get on that calendar?

Then there were no rules in that way. I mean even the advisors that I worked with maybe had to follow certain rules but I could just kind of do it and to this day, no one said that there was a problem with anything that we did. Through efforts of many people years later, the teen center opened but there was a lot of pushing that we were able to do. Again back to the adults who



cared and allowed that space, I think that's something that is maybe not mentioned enough but there were times where our board chair of the Community Foundation would present to city council and I would be up there with him and that's something that you don't see a lot. You don't see that priority of saying, "Okay, well it really is a Community Foundation but then these young people are the ones organizing, they should be here too." So I got that exposure at a very young age as well and I definitely got away with a lot of things that I think as an adult, when you think about what you're attached to the politics of anything, what organization you represent, there are so many things that you have to think about before showing up and how you can show up. When I was younger, I didn't have to. Maybe I should have but I wasn't thinking about it that way.

(KC): Speaking of your YAC experience, what would be your greatest accomplishment or thing that you're most proud of that you got done?

(SP): There's a tie. The teen center will definitely be up there. That was something that there were so many obstacles to get through that to happen and the YAC movement overcame those obstacles and that it was a project of the YAC was a really big deal. That's something that maybe not many people know now but those who were involved over the last 10, 15 years really know that that was something that young people made happen. Of course, in partnership with many adults but that was kind of spurred by that. I'll cheat and tell you another one. In Southfield, we had organized every year a youth diversity symposium and it was, in its time, a very big deal. I think in the best year, we got maybe 700 young people from all across the state to have a day long discussion on diversity, whatever it meant in that time period. We talked about Supreme Court cases; we talked about local issues all facilitated by other high school students. There were small group activities and we brought in speakers and it was just something, again, looking back now, I can think, "Well that was a pretty big deal," that young people were the momentum to propel that work because, again, if I think about today, organizing an 800-person conference, it comes with a different set of expectations.

(KC): What are some of your low points or disappointments?

(SP): The points in time where I think I was frustrated by the work was, one, when our participation was low so we would kind of go in waves of how many people would be a part of YAC. On a good year, we'd have 40 people which is pretty significant for a city like Southfield in terms of size. Then we would all of a sudden graduate a bunch of seniors, and then that recruitment...I think that recruitment issue is something that YAC's across the states still face. The "How do we get that good balance of people who care about the community, who are of different ages, represent different demographics, different diversity in thought, how do we get them all in a room together?" Some years we had that great balance and other years, we really struggled with recruitment because it's all about how do you market this as a cool club to join and how do you show young people that this is a place that you can make an impact. And logistically, it's outside of school so it causes some other challenges. That was maybe one of the low points. I think another low point would be when the communication between young people and adults, our adult advisors, was not as strong as it could have been. I think that really reduced morale... no



one's fault but I think there were times where...The YAC is definitely, an advisory committee of the Community Foundation and there were points in time where we kind of felt very empowered to be our own entity. We thought that people didn't know the Community Foundation. They knew the YAC and that was our pride in that and so there would be points in time where we had to understand our relationships to the Community Foundation and communicate a little bit better.

(KC): What about your YAC experience defined your leadership style?

(SP): What about my YAC experience defined my leadership style? Like how I lead now?

(KC): Yes.

(SP): I think YAC really taught me – because I told you about the waves of how we'd have a lot of participation and then low participation and just managing that – that a good leader isn't the person that does everything but the person who sets things up in such a way that if I left tomorrow, this would thrive – whatever the 'this' is. I think about that a lot now. It's not about necessarily my ability to accomplish something but it's my ability to help set the framework so that the task can be accomplished whether or not I'm there. That's how I think about leadership a little bit differently now.

(KC): When you think about your current role in the group, the background, the diversity of religious backgrounds, the varying life experiences that you now deal with, what did you learn about diversity and being inclusive through this work?

(SP): I'm currently a program officer at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan and we're a regional funder. The way the work has made me open up my eyes to how I think about diversity is that we work with several non-profit partners all across the region and each of them has very unique needs based on the type of work they do, where they're located. I personally feel like it's my job to be able to effectively communicate to our board members and I think the way I've thought about diversity is everybody shows up to the table in a different way and it's that level of being able to clearly share to others what the needs are because I believe that everybody is well-intentioned and sometimes there can be these barriers in understanding what diversity and inclusiveness actually mean, because there just might not be that awareness that this is actually a problem here and this is actually the need and this is actually a success of this community. I think people might just not know. They might come to the table not understanding, and being able to communicate that has been very eye-opening in terms of, not really punishing people for not understanding, but really helping bring them along with me on the journey of understanding how non-profits work.

(KC): You talked a little bit about working with and through others – so a collaboration. In Michigan, philanthropic infrastructure has been around for years formally and seems to be very collaborative. Have you noticed that, and has this notion of collaboration influenced the way you've come to the field and the way you work?



(SP): Absolutely. I think you hit on the word of organized philanthropy, and I would have to give a shout-out to CMF and MNA and the Johnson Center – organizations that have been set up to facilitate that collaboration. I used to work for CMF and that collaboration is what was happening every single day and at that point I could see how organizations like those could help facilitate relationships that people might not be able to access on their own. So being a member of any one of those groups affords you some access to saying, “Well who else is doing this project? Can you put me in touch with 10 people who’d do this?” And I was that person who could do that at that time. So now I’m in a place where I’m calling on those same resources to say, “Okay, now I’m thinking about this. Who in the state is even doing this? Can I have this contact information?” We’re talking about issues that we all care about and we’re figuring out what collaboration means and sometimes collaboration ends up in a funding collaborative in my world that everyone’s putting in some amount of money to achieve a particular task. Other times, it might just be informally gathering some peers and saying how do you think about this work? What does this mean for you? Or, we’re a regional funder and so I’m often asking people on west side of the state or the northern side, “How do you think about these issues and what does the need look like for you or what do the assets look like for you?” So whether it’s informal or formal and often facilitated by our state-wide organizations, it’s very important to my work and I see it all the time.

(KC): You’re also involved in organizations outside of Michigan. Do you talk about the Michigan environment, the Michigan infrastructure, the Michigan climate of collaboration, and if so, can you describe it?

(SP): Absolutely. I think the best example to give about this is actually through YAC. When I worked at CMF, I would get phone calls all the time about “How do you guys do youth philanthropy? How are you so successful in Michigan?” People all across the state wanted to know what made us go and I think obviously through the partnerships with the Kellogg foundation, talking about permanently endowed funds made this happen, but then also that there was this network. It wasn’t just that everyone was working in isolation. So when I go to other states and we’re talking about the success of certain programs, I can often come back and say, “Well you know, YACers from all across the state meet once a year. There are hundreds of them and they talk about their projects and they talk about what they’re doing, and a place like CMF facilitates that space.” Or in terms of the foundations at large, we get together quarterly or monthly and we talk about these things and I think everybody knows that Michigan has a very robust network of non-profit and foundation partners. I think it’s important. I’m always talking about how none of us are working in isolation and that we’re always calling each other to say, “What are you doing? How can we be a part of that?”

(KC): Thank you. Every generation coming into the sector sort of brings a new way of thinking, some new ideas. Have you noticed that as you’ve come in as a young leader that you brought new ideas, new thinking to the field and if so, what would some examples be?

(SP): I think in terms of the giving side of philanthropy, the charitable giving, what’s changed over time is (and even in my own lifetime, I can tell you when I was younger, I used to think this) that



being charitable or being a donor to something meant that you had a lot of money and that was something I could do when I was much older. So when I'm 65 or 70 and I've retired, then I can give away money, this is what I'm going to do. I think as I've grown up through philanthropy I have seen that the trends are changing, that people want to feel immediately connected to an issue or something that's happening in the community and want to feel like that \$5, \$10, \$50, or whatever donation is actually going to make a difference somewhere. I think foundations, especially Community Foundations, are also paying attention to that, and they have to, right? And have to figure out how to cater to some of those. Of course, we need those million dollar donors to do the work that we do but there's also a space for younger people who want to feel like they're a part of the work, and I think a lot of those people come out of the YAC movement who say, "I did this as a 10th grader and I feel some desire to give something." I mean it's starting there so I think that's something that's changing over time with a new wave of younger people. There's a handful of us like me who went through YAC and now are at a foundation in Michigan which is really nice to see that which will only grow over time.

(KC): If you were designing the 21st century landscape and you were to improve the system that we have now with a magic wand, what would you change?

(SP): What would I change about the landscape of non-profit work?

(KC): Yes. Non-profit work, the philanthropic landscape, foundations. Surabhi, I've given you the wand and you change this thing about this sector, what would you change?

(SP): So as much as I said we do great collaborative work, which I believe, I think there's a lot more space for increased collaboration. Not just among the foundations or among non-profits, but between both. I think a lot of that is kind of stifled because of power dynamics and there is this kind of grantor-grantee kind of divide that often comes up. And that's sometimes inevitable and sometimes we can totally be fixing that, right? So I think that I would change – you're giving me a magic wand so I can change structures, right? – how we're built inherently to think that someone has to be doing the giving and someone has to be doing the receiving. Can we be partners at the table? We don't have to sit across from the table, we can all sit next to each other, right? So figuring out how we can kind of let those barriers down and work more closely together, because too often those power dynamics get in the way of effective work.

(KC): When you think about your own personal leadership role, you mentioned that you didn't come to this alone. Who were your mentors? Who were your idols? Who were people that you'd say "That's somebody who really taught me how to be the philanthropic leader that I am," and can you name some?

(SP): Yes. I happily will name Rob Collier because he has been someone who I've always stayed in touch with, and he's always stayed in touch with me. That meant that throughout high school, throughout college, throughout grad school, there were points in time where I just talked to him and told him what I was doing. I think that there's a lot of value in those conversations where you



don't need anything or want anything at that time, and too often I think people forget that those are important to maintain. So Rob has been an influential leader nationally and globally but I think something about... it feels good to know that when you're a young person, to know that there is an adult who cares about the work that you're doing and wants to see you succeed. That could look very different over time, and so when I was in high school and [Rob was] encouraging me to think about MCFYP and then continue to think about CMF employment. Then later it was to think a lot bigger and to figure out who to connect me with, and so it's just really nice to have role models like that.

(KC): How do you think you can get more young people involved in this work and get them to serve, volunteer, and be involved in the YAC?

(SP): I think I mentioned this before that recruitment has been an ongoing struggle. Having been a part of the YAC movement, having helped facilitate a lot of conversations in that space, recruitment seems to be the one huge barrier to growing and it's because, again, how do we message ourselves? How do we brand ourselves to talk about youth philanthropy in a really effective way? I definitely know, for a fact, it's growing and it has grown significantly over time. I think more spotlight for YAC work among the Community Foundation world is only going to elevate the presence of what YAC is and now there are people - I mean even our YAC in Southeast Michigan has just grown tremendously. It's just devoting resources to do very targeted outreach and know that you need to do a specific thing to get more YAC members. But through YAC, it takes a lot of effort to be very thoughtful about bringing a group of young people together, especially in our case. We're a regional funder and so how do we bring that group together? I think it's just getting more people involved, [which] means community foundations putting in more resources to be even more (I know that they are very thoughtful) more thoughtful about how to get diverse voices to the table.

(KC): Do you think that the interests of young people have changed [in ways] that formal philanthropy doesn't address? Does it meet their needs? Does it meet their interests?

(SP): I think that the most successful YACs across the state have had a good balance of all those of things. So the formal aspect of grant making, plus service, plus other leadership opportunities all combined have - that addresses the need. I think that if you just brought a bunch of young people to the table and said, "Here's a proposal, read it, you get to make a decision," that's cool. That does one thing but it doesn't address all of the other needs. Then you say, "Okay. Well, here we want you to go talk about this grant in front of our board," and then "We want you also to volunteer in this space." I think getting that holistic aspect to philanthropy, YAC is a great place to do it because otherwise you kind of...as you grow up into the professional space, you sometimes either end up on one side or the other or one place or another and you can't do all of those things at the same time. So YAC is a great place to be able to be doing that.

(KC): We're on the final stretch here, just a few more questions. We know that giving and serving traditions vary by community. So is there anything that philanthropy or young people should be



thinking about as they think about the next generation and bringing them into philanthropy? Are we diverse enough in our thinking? Are we broad and inclusive enough in our thinking? You mentioned recruitment is a challenge. Are there really clear concrete ways we should be thinking about that sort of inclusion?

(SP): I think there have been a lot of underrepresented communities participating in organized philanthropy and it's not because necessarily the resources aren't there, but the rationale for understanding why my \$1, my \$1,000, my \$10,000 – why it matters and what the impact is hasn't always been clear. So just in my thoughts of how philanthropy works anywhere, it's – okay if we really want young people to be participating, let's go target the young people and say, "Well, we're not asking for a million dollars today but this much money or this much time can start this relationship where we can work together." I think that those kind of targeted levels of engagement are things that need to be paid attention to and much more intentional than I think they have been. I guess we all understand the pros and cons of how foundations, whether Community Foundation or not, spend their time and resources in cultivating relationships but there's a lot of value. I mean if you came to me today and said, "I really want you to be involved in this foundation movement" and whether it's money or time or expertise, I would feel something. I would feel a level of commitment if I was approached in that way even though that I do have something to give, even if it's not some really large check.

(KC): So would you just take a minute and just explain, or portray, how you would explain to a newcomer what is this thing we call non-profit infrastructure in Michigan. What is this whole CMF thing, MNA thing, Johnson Center thing, Commission? How do you explain all that stuff to a young person coming in to the field?

(SP): Okay. I had to do this at one point so I should be able to tell you. I kind of think about CMF, MNA, Johnson Center, Commission, all as resource hubs and kind of as parent organizations, and so any part of the non-profit sector that you fit in to will fall under one of those organizations, whether as a member or a partner, in some kind of way. So if you're working at a foundation, you should be in touch with CMF because you can be connected to a network of your peers. Same with MNA and your non-profit. Actually in my world today as I talk to non-profit partners every single day, I'm probably saying MNA all the time, "Do you know that MNA does this thing?" and if I'm talking to foundation peers, I'm saying, "You know CMF has this. You should check out this resource." So I think of them as resource hubs for different parts of the sector and that no matter what you do in a sector, you fit into one or more of those categories and you should be using them as your resource.

(KC): Great. I have one last question to go back on. You touched on it, but it's unique to you and I would really be interested in your thinking. You started as a YACer and you came up through the foundation set of work, but you actually caught fire with working in public policy – kind of a sticky area, that. It's a space that many young people – complain. So what was that experience like, to go from the local sort of community center advocacy work you're doing there to doing some pretty meaty state wide policy work?



(SP): So I think what prepared me to do that... My graduate degree was in social work and within social work, I studied social policy and evaluation. So I kind of had the social work lens coming into public policy in that way and it was very hard. What I'll tell you what's hard about it – like you said when I was younger, walk in to the mayor's office, do this, do that, and in my own right, I felt like I was making things happen. Then when you get to state government and foundations and you try to make those connections, you can really see how the inherent infrastructure of both sides, in this case state government and philanthropy, can really either help move work or can hinder the work from moving. I served as a public policy fellow for CMF and it was great because I think I could bring the issues that were important to foundations across a spectrum: health, aging, children, and youth. Any of those issue areas and connect it to how policy was happening or not happening at that time in the state.

I think that a lot of people – and I mean, Kyle, you and I have been a part of this conversation for a long time now of can foundations, can philanthropy participate in public policy? Is there a role? And a lot of people just say, "Oh we don't do that." But they are doing it and so I think a lot of my work there was helping my foundation peers understand. You are participating in advocacy in this way. These are the things that you're already doing and if you called it this or you did it in this way, it could elevate the profile of this work. There was just a lot of learning, I think, happening on all sides of that conversation to see how foundations could have a louder voice in this space of work that you're already doing. I think that's something that people can think of as a barrier in public policy participation because it sounds like that thing over there. But it is definitely something that everyone's participating in, but just to what level of how we can formalize that. The CMF and MNA both provide a lot of tools to do that so being the fellow at CMF helped me understand what tools actually existed and to try my best to help others figure out that too.

(KC): That's great. That's all the questions I have for you. Is there anything that we didn't cover that you wanted to share?

(SP): I think that's everything.

(KC): You did a great job.

(SP): Thank you.

(KC): Thank you.

End of Recording

