

If Not You, Then Who?

by Lockheed Martin IS&GS Communications

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submitted by Jeff Boxell



“If not you, then who? If not now, then when?”

As I look back on the stepping stones of my journey into service and justice work, that simple phrase sticks out as a spark that helped ignite my passion for helping others. I can recall 10 years or so ago the first time I heard a guest speaker at my Unitarian Universalist (UU) church challenge the congregation with this phrase. He was pushing us to find our passion, our purpose, and run with it to do something to better the world. And so I did – maybe crawling at first, but now I run. And I thought there might be some goodness in sharing my steps along the way in hopes it might inspire others to take their own journey.

I had done my fair share of volunteer work up until then, as Step One on my path was coaching my oldest son in all his sports until he reached high school. I had two excellent mentors in my high school boxing coaches, who showed me how a coach could teach far more than a sport with their instruction. But coaching kept me from engaging the community on a number of social issues that I was starting to become passionate about, and I began to look for something rewarding and helpful to supplement my coaching.

I recall going home that night after hearing that talk, examining what I was really good at and what I thought might best benefit a group in need, and hatched a crazy plan for Step Two on my path – being a hospital clown (clown haters be darned!). I knew I was great with kids; had a knack with voices (I entertained my own children with their stuffed animals over the years); loved to make people laugh (especially my Mom who raised seven kids through some very tough times); and knew there was sadly a ready audience of ailing children who needed their spirits raised. I was so enthused I went out and put together my character that week, joined a clown school, passed the background and blood tests and was clowning at the Ronald McDonald house and M.D. Anderson three months later.

Now those in Houston who have seen me running the company picnic games know this is not much of a stretch for me. My love of laughter was a hit with the children at the hospital, and I relished bringing a bit of joy into the lives of the kids and their families. But it was my clowning at the Star of Hope homeless center that opened my eyes to a different side of service work, and led me to my next step - working with the homeless and those born into a cycle of poverty.

With the nation still engaged in war with Iraq, there seemed to be less concern and resources for those struggling with poverty. I saw the direct impact this had on children born into destitution, and it inspired me to continue to branch out and begin serving at the Loaves and Fishes Soup Kitchen in downtown Houston. A group of dedicated volunteers from NASA and Lockheed Martin prepare a salad and serve lunch there every Tuesday (and they still do to this day, contact me if interested).

This experience further exposed me to a side of poverty I had only read about – mental illness. I got a first-hand, at times gut-wrenching, glimpse into the lives of those living on the streets, many battling mental illness with little to no professional or community assistance. Seeing this other world, just a few blocks from Minute Maid park, was eye-opening and helped change my perspective on helping those in need.

At this time, the position of community service lead opened up at my UU church and I was asked to take the reins. Step Four on my journey was assuming a leadership role, planning and engaging folks in community service work, and working with local charitable organizations, women's and children's shelters and food pantries. While this new mission required me to reluctantly drop clowning due to time constraints, I embraced the challenge of leading others into the charge.

Those active in volunteer work know that maintaining a balance between work, family and volunteer life is an ever-changing and always challenging endeavor. But I have found that working with good-hearted people from all walks of life, each with their own unique impetus for doing what they do, out assisting those in need, is a very rewarding call. Including my family in these activities helps with the balance. Nothing makes me more proud than working side by side with my son and his friends cleaning up the bayous at Trash Bash or delivering groceries to the elderly.

I have since moved up to be the co-lead of our Service and Justice Ministry, moving also into the advocacy side of justice work, and collaborating with other UU churches in the Houston area. It seems most of the justice issues I am passionate about are represented by some key individual in my life that serves as my inspiration - be it family, friend or co-worker. It is that human element that enables us to be a better person and community advocate.

I have also taken on additional responsibility by leading our contract's Diversity and Inclusion Council at work. What started as something simple has grown into something bigger-nothing spectacular, but something positive nonetheless. I encourage you all to find your own path and take that step forward. Some may leap in head first, while some may dip their toe and wade in cautiously. I say to you, "Come on in, the water is fine!"

A friend of mine told me recently, "Jeff, you can't save all the world." I responded with a favorite short story of mine, which I will share with you:

While walking along a beach, an elderly gentleman saw someone in the distance leaning down, picking something up and throwing it into the ocean. As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, picking up starfish one by one and tossing each one gently back into the water. He came closer still and called out, "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?"

The young man paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean."

The old man smiled, and said, "I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?"

To this, the young man replied, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

Upon hearing this, the elderly observer commented, "But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!"

*The young man listened politely. Then he bent down, picked up another starfish, threw it into the back into the ocean past the breaking waves and said, "**It made a difference for that one.**"*

Jeff Boxell is the lead of the LM Houston FDOC/IMOC Diversity and Inclusion Council. He is a Software Engineer Sr Staff and has worked as Software Engineering contractor at JSC for the past 30 years - the last 20 with Lockheed Martin. Jeff is a NASA Silver Snoopy award winner, Lockheed Martin Space Flight Awareness Honoree, Rotary National Award for Space Achievement nominee and was recipient of the President's Volunteer Service Award in 2005. He is a passionate humanist and writes this article with the hope that someone reading it might be spurred on to make their own leap into service and justice work