

'Stories of the Street' aims to humanize Phoenix's unhoused residents

Changemaker grant helps ASU students publish book that shares the lives of homeless people in their own words

By Risa Aria Schnebly, ASU News
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When Sreevarenaya Jonnalagadda first volunteered at the [André House](#) homeless shelter, she wasn't sure how to act.

"I didn't know what to do with my legs or my hands — I was just, like, standing there," recounts the Barrett, The Honors College student.

The [Street Medicine Phoenix](#) volunteers Jonnalagadda had arrived with were there to collect vitals and administer medicine to the people at the shelter. Jonnalagadda was there with a different goal: listening to people's stories.

Jonnalagadda is part of a team of students that has not only spent the last two years distributing clothing and household items to unhoused people, but also taking the time to try to get to know the people they were serving. Of the many unhoused residents they talked to, 58 agreed to have their stories shared as part of a book that the team of students just published, called "[Stories of the Street](#)."

According to Michael Demangone, a medical student at University of Arizona's Phoenix campus, the goal of the book is to help humanize Phoenix's unhoused residents.

"People are living on the street for many different reasons," Demangone says. "I thought that if we could get all these stories, put them in a book, and share that book with the world, then maybe someday someone will read it, and start to view unhoused people more as human beings that are very complex and very different — just like all of us."

Demangone came up with the idea for the project three years ago, when he was first volunteering with Street Medicine. His volunteer work forced Demangone to reckon with his own negative

perceptions of unhoused people, perceptions that he wanted to unlearn.

“Instead of just doing medical stuff, I thought maybe I’ll go out and just try to listen to people,” he says. “I just wanted to see them as people, and I figured that in order to do that, I had to hear their stories.”

So, he tried it. But after several instances of going out only with the goal of listening, he started to question if he was just wasting people’s time. Then, one encounter changed his mind.

“I was listening to a woman talk for like 10 minutes, and I kind of felt like, ‘Oh my gosh. I feel awful. I have nothing to offer her. I’m just listening,’” he says.

“And then at the very end, she thanked me. She said, ‘Thank you for listening, because no one ever does.’ And that’s when I realized the power of listening, and of stories.”

That experience inspired Demangone to recruit other students to help him do the same. He reached out to Barrett, The Honors College to find undergraduate volunteers. He figured that many undergraduates probably held negative perceptions toward unhoused people like he once did, and that volunteering with the project could be similarly transformative for them.

When Jonnalagadda joined the project, she admits that she had negative perceptions of unhoused people, too.

“The majority of people I’ve talked to in my personal life have this naive perception of what homelessness is or how homeless people behave. But when I started talking to all these people and reading all the stories, I found out that there were a lot of reasons someone could become homeless.”

One of the stories that stuck with Jonnalagadda first came from a man who spent every Christmas season working as Santa Claus in malls around El Paso, Texas.

“I went to malls as a child, and I obviously went up to Santa Claus to get my picture taken. I could never imagine that someone who’s sitting up there as Santa Claus didn’t have a home to go back to. It’s crazy to think about,” she said.

Jonnalagadda was so inspired by the project that last April, she led a team of Barrett students in pitching it for an [ASU Changemaker Action Grant](#), ultimately winning \$2,000 to fund the publication and distribution of the book.

“It was such a great feeling,” Jonnalagadda says. She was just a first-year student when she won the grant.

In addition to featuring the stories of 58 individuals, "Stories of the Street" is full of photographs and illustrations that bring the stories to life. Now that the book has been published, the team aims to get the book in the hands of policymakers, researchers and public libraries around Phoenix metro area in hopes that it can transform the public’s perception, too.

Participating in the project has changed how both Demangone and Jonnalagadda see and relate to strangers, something they believe will help them provide better care in their future medical careers.

“A lot of people just want to be heard, just want to be loved. And you have to really get to know them to be able to care for them the best in medicine,” says Demangone, who recently got accepted into a residency program to become an anesthesiologist.

“I think that’s made me want to learn every patient and their story.”

Jonnnalagadda is taking similar lessons away.

“Participating in this project has really made me want to try to communicate with people. If you try, they’ll often try back. That’s been a big lesson in my personal life as well.”

Danny's story (aka Santa Claus)

One page in "Stories of Street" shares the story of an unhoused man who works as Santa Claus. Full text below:

My name is Danny, but they call me Santa Claus.

I am originally from California, and this is my fourth year being Santa Claus. I get flown out to malls in El Paso, Texas, to take pictures with families and children as Santa Claus. I think it is a fun job and I just want to keep doing it.

What is your favorite part of being Santa Claus?

I just love watching the kids having fun and enjoying themselves. The company pays for my flight tickets. I also get a king-size suite and Uber drivers so I can get around every day. I get paid about \$5,000 for 18 days. Besides El Paso, I was Santa Claus throughout Arizona. I did hospitals and schools. I went everywhere.

So, where are you at right now in life?

I'm homeless because I got a divorce. My ex-wife's niece and nephew convinced her to divorce me. We were living in their house and they evicted me and got a restraining order against me. We had been married for 36 years. We still talk to each other 3-4 times every day, because who knows her better than me. If I have a problem or she has a problem, we still call each other. Just to talk. My grandpa told me just three things. One, you don't argue with women because even if they're wrong, they're right. Two, never hit a woman. Three, men were put on this Earth to take care of women, so do the best you can at it. I live by these rules.

Is there anything you would want the world to know about people living on the street?

They are also human, just like you. And they are having some difficulties right now. But anybody who helps those of us that are here is very much appreciated.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Barrett, The Honors College students joined the University of Arizona's Street Medicine team to distribute resources to unhoused residents of Phoenix and collect their stories. Image credit: Michael Demangone

Text image(s)

STORIES *of the* STREET



The "Stories of the Street" book cover.

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