

Fulcrum Podcast Episode 5: A Servant's Heart

November 2019 (Mike Munroe, UAServe Champion)

Urban Alliance (urbanalliance.com/fulcrum)

Jaleith Gary

In today's episode, I had a blast getting to know Mike Munroe and learning more about his experience as a UAServe volunteer— a UAServe Champion, in fact, and how he's gotten a front row seat to how meaningful and rewarding volunteering can truly be.

Hey, Mike, can you introduce yourself for our listeners?

Mike Munroe

Yeah, my name is Michael Munroe. I'm a recent retiree. I retired three years ago. I was involved in social work for the last half of my working career and then got involved in volunteering, once I retired.

JG

Awesome, thank you for that. When and how did you first learn about Urban Alliance?

MM

It was January of 2018. Me and my wife had recently retired and we moved to Old Wethersfield. And we had just recently joined the First Church of Christ in Wethersfield. And I was trying to decide what I wanted to do in my retirement. And so I joined the Missions and Outreach Committee in the First Church, and they had upcoming—in April of 2018—they had an upcoming missions weekend. And Urban Alliance was involved in setting up the different places where we can go out and serve in the community. And so that's the first time I heard of Urban Alliance. So I was like, "Wow, this sounds good! I'm looking for something to do in my retirement. And God's really telling me, 'I want you to serve. I want you to get out and help people,' so when I heard about Urban Alliance, I said this sounds good. I think I want to go to their orientation."

JG

Okay, and what did you learn at the orientation?

MM

I learned that they are Christian-based and they're trying to match your abilities with somewhere where you might want to volunteer. So you tell them, "This is my aptitude: I worked as a social worker, I worked here..." and they try and match you with your aptitude to the volunteer opportunities that they have out there. I thought that was good, that they don't just throw you in some place. They said, "We're going to be thoughtful and try to match you with your gifts into a place that your gifts might be used the best."

JG

Awesome! How long have you been serving? And how has your experience been with us so

far?

MM

It'll be 20 months...yeah, I started January 31, 2018 so, coming up on 20 months. I thoroughly enjoy it; thoroughly, thoroughly enjoy it. I had a great experience with everybody at Urban Alliance. I volunteer at three different places and just had a great experience. I really couldn't be happier.

JG

Wow, yeah ... I mean you're very impressive. For those of you listening, the fact that he even remembers the first day that he served—I didn't give him any stats, I just want you to know ... just to give you an idea of his service—he's served for over 470 hours so far and he's not even been involved for 2 years, yet. He's also been serving at multiple sites in a day. Could you tell us more about that, actually? You are serving at three places, right?

MM

Three different sites, yeah. So on Monday, I come here to the same place, World Vision, and I work in a warehouse with Mike Bassett and Mario. And we work in the warehouse just sorting goods that are coming in. I had a background in warehouse. I probably worked, through my work career, my 40-year work career, probably ten years was in the warehouse. When I did the outreach for our missions weekend, the place that I volunteered was World Vision. And so I came here and I said, "This is really cool." I felt kind of a home. I had a warehouse background, and I met Mike, and he was such a great guy. So I said, "Mike, I'd like to volunteer. I have a nice background in warehouse. And so, this feels like a good fit to me." And so the next month, I started volunteering—it was May 14th. I started volunteering at World Vision and just really enjoy it. Just really enjoy it.

And then on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, I volunteer at Crossroads Community Cathedral, in the food pantry. And on Tuesdays, we take a pickup truck from the church and we go up to FoodShare. We we get our allotment of food—usually about 1000 lb—we put that in the pickup truck and then we bring it back to Crossroads. They have a food pantry there. So we offload the goods that we got from FoodShare and we stock the shelves. And then on Wednesday, the clients come in and we bring them down to the pantry. And they are able to shop and tell us what they want. They be able to choose from different goods that we have down there. A lot of food pantries, they just give you a bag for a family of four. But this, the clients are able to go down and choose what they want. So we really try and make it less stigmatizing. They have a choice and they're actually shopping.

And then, on Thursdays, I go to Hartford City Mission in Hartford—it's an after-school program, Noah After-school Program, which is a program for children in Hartford from Grade 1 - 5. And we teach them about Jesus, we teach them about God. We have homework help, fun time and we just try ... really the goal is to teach them about Jesus and teach them about God and the Bible.

JG

That's awesome. I just want to say thank you, first of all, for your service and for your servant heart. It's really admirable, and it's very encouraging and inspiring to see somebody so dedicated. I mean, you're retired. You've "paid your dues," so to speak, and you still find time to get up every day, just about—Monday to Thursday, that's a full work week for some people—and you spend your time serving others. And so I just wanted to say thank you on behalf of all of us at Urban Alliance.

MM

Yeah, some people say, "What's wrong with Friday?"

JG

Nothing's wrong with Friday!

MM

"Why aren't you volunteering on Friday?"

JG

Did you have an answer?

MM

I say, "Four days is enough. Even God rested on the seventh day."

JG

Exactly, exactly. So what would you say has changed about your community or even yourself since you've become a volunteer?

MM

Yes. I've definitely changed. I'm much more confident. I, just recently through my work at Hartford City Mission with the after-school program, I recently became a Sunday school teacher at First Church of Christ. And I would have never done that if not for my experience at Hartford City Mission. It's given me a lot more confidence in dealing with children, and behavior, limits and things like that. So definitely, that has given me more confidence to get out and do other things in my church, in my community. It's definitely helped me grow, just as a person and being more confident in my abilities.

And I'd like to think that I've helped the community in just reaching out to people. What I like to do, especially at Hartford City Mission and Crossroads is build relations—build relations with the people I'm meeting. I go to Crossroads Community Cathedral and meet the clients. And you get to know them. The people keep coming back every month, the same people, and we're building relationships and finding out about them, finding about their families, praying with them and I really think they know that they have someone else who really cares about them. Some people just like the fact that you can give him a hug. I had one lady today say, "Geez, my husband

doesn't even hug me! Thank you so much for that hope you gave me." We're trying to build relationships—with children, with people who are in need. So that's my, kind of, "give back" to the community.

JG

What stood out to me in what you said was that you were able to build your skills and confidence to be able to serve children in another community in another way, right? So now you're a Sunday school teacher, planting those early seeds of knowledge of Jesus and what He's done for us, just by way of having been involved in Hartford City Mission. So that's really neat.

It's important to build relationships with people and that's something that's very important to us here at Urban Alliance. We want to be in relationship with everyone that we're working with. It's important to us to get to know people like you, Mike. It's important to us to get to know all of the program leaders that we're working with. Because by knowing each other, we're able to help to identify what our strengths are. You know, our tagline is "leveraging strength to change lives." I know sometimes people think taglines are just you marketing things, but no, for us it's really a way of how we go about doing our work, and how we see the community and see our position in the community. It has to be a fulcrum, so to speak right, balancing all of the strengths.

MM

Jaleith, I 100% agree with you. That's my big thing. You can just go there and do your hours, but go a step deeper and get involved. We pray with people right in the parking lot as we're bringing their groceries out to their car. We have a moment of prayer, actually before we even start the whole food pantry process, we get all people together in a big circle and we pray with the volunteers in the clients together. So it is... it's much more than just showing up and doing a job. It's forming relationships and caring about people. People know if you care. I really get that feedback: "Hey you care about me and I appreciate that."

JG

That's amazing. That's really important. Thank you.

So Mike, what would you say to someone listening who's looking to get involved in the community through volunteering?

MM

I would say definitely get involved with Urban Alliance. The people here are great.

JG

Oh, thanks.

MM

You get great support. They match you...to try to match you with your gifts. And then they check

up on you see how is it going? Is this a good fit for you? Is this a good match? So they just don't throw you in there and kind of forget about you. So that's one thing I like. Right after the first month, they contacted me and said "Mike, how's everything going?" And also I would add, it's a Christian-based organization. I would highly recommend people who want to deal in a Christian-based faith to go to Urban Alliance.

And then I can say ... and I'm going to use the word again, relationships ... the relationships with volunteers. I have a whole set of friends now at Crossroads Community Cathedral, and we come together. And I now have people that I know, a set of friends, that if I had was in trouble, I could call these people may would be at my house in a minute. And we really have a team of people there. So you're meeting other people. And that was one thing I left with my work retirement—the relationships you have at work. Where are those relationships going to come now? And that was a big part of work—relationships. And now you're retired. You're stepping back. You don't have those relationships.

But through volunteering, I have all these relationships now, with people at World Vision, with people at Urban Alliance, with people at Crossroads, Miss Abbi over at Hartford City Mission... so, I'm getting all these relationships that I lost when I retired and now I have friends—we pray together; I know they care about me, we go out after lunch, you know after our volunteer shift, we may go out for lunch... things like that. So you're connected with people after your retirement.

JG

That's really awesome. That it didn't even occur to me, but I guess I would be hard-pressed to find some friends like the ones I have here at UA. Thank you.

You know what? I'm really curious to know if there is any experience you've had in your volunteer time with UA or at one of the host sites that stands out to you?

MM

I would say the one experience that I had was with a woman at Crossroads Community Cathedral. She was a woman who was homeless and she kept coming every month to get some groceries. And she was basically ... she was living outside. She was living on the street. And so I'd always try and give her a little extra because I knew her situation. And we would pray with her and everything. And then two weeks ago, she came up to me and says, "Mike, I got an apartment..."

JG

That's awesome!

MM

"...my own apartment!" And she gave me a big hug, and we had tears and she even confided in me, "It's kind of weird! I've got this place where I can go home, and I've got a lock, and I've got a

key and I've got a door..." And so ... I'm getting a little teared up now, just thinking about it. It was just such an experience because we've been praying together with her. And I knew she was having a real tough time. I mean, I can't even imagine living outside in January or February. And so she was able to get an apartment and we shared that moment. It was a wonderful time. And those are the things—we've had a number of moments like that at the Crossroads Community Cathedral.

JG

That's beautiful. Do you know how long she'd been facing homelessness?

MM

A year and a half to two years.

JG

Wow!

MM

So yeah, it was a struggle—a struggle for her. We've also had people...just to go on...people who have a hard time going to a food pantry. It is very stigmatizing to them. We've had people who are crying, sitting outside, and they say, "I never thought I would have to use a food pantry. This is so shaming to me. I used to have a job where I made \$50,000 a year, but I lost my job. My husband divorced me. And now I find myself so ashamed." So we just go out there, we hug them, they cry with us, we pray with them. We take a minute and we try to put a smile on their face and say, "Hey, we're doing God's work. There is no stigma, no stigmatizing from coming in here. Just let us help you. We all need help."

JG

That's part of the value of setting up something like open choice. Open choice is when a pantry or program that provides resources in a way that the client gets to choose which resources they get. So earlier, you mentioned that most food pantries would just hand you a bag. But at Crossroads they have client choice, which allows people to just pick which groceries they like, which is more similar to what everyone else gets to experience when they go to the grocery store. It's certainly more dignifying and validating of their worth and affirming of their worth, certainly de-stigmatizing the idea of using a food pantry.

MM

Can I add to that?

JG

Yes, please!

MM

Another thing that I like about Crossroads is that it's a church based...it's by word of mouth. So when you come in and you say "I need help," you don't need to prove that you're poor. If you go

to some other food pantries, you need to prove how much your income is. You need to prove how many people are in your household with envelopes with names and addresses on. And you need to use your food stamps first before you come...

But we're a faith-based organization. So we are just word of mouth. People come and say "I need help." We don't ask any other questions. We just find out how many people are in their family—basic questions like that, but we don't pry into it ... it's the honor system. And so that's what I like about it, too. I think it's stigmatizing to prove that you're poor: you need to go here, need to prove that. "I only make this much and these people really do live in my house. And I already used my food stamps. And I'm really out. And this is my last straw." That's what I like about Crossroads is that its faith-based and because of that, we don't have to jump some through some of the red tape hoops that other people do. And I really think that the clients appreciate that, too. Because to prove that you're poor is sometimes degrading.

JG

I would imagine so ... I don't want to know what it's like to have to prove that I'm facing poverty or food insecurity, which is very common out here.

Thank you for sharing that, Mike, and thank you for sharing your perspective with us. Did you have anything else you wanted to share with our listeners?

MM

I just can't say enough how much I appreciate this. This was a God thing. I was searching ... What should I do in my retirement?...And all of a sudden, Urban Alliance came—no lie, within the next week, Urban Alliance came into my life. The first 6 months or 7 months of my retirement I was kind of hanging out enjoying that I didn't have to wake up at certain times, but then thought, "Well, I need to do something here." And then Urban Alliance came, and I said, "Wow! This is this is exactly what I was looking for! They're faith-based. They're going to match me with my gifts. And then we'll be able to go out and help people."

I really can't say enough what a blessing Urban Alliance has been in my life. I like to think I've been a blessing to the people that have interacted with through this.

JG

You know, you've certainly been a blessing to us and the community. We're certain of that. It's always, as I said before, it's always very inspiring and encouraging just to see someone so dedicated to helping others. And you have such a great personality. For those listening, when he first got here, he was just the man of the hour and had the whole office in stitches. So, I imagine that the people you're serving and working with and coming alongside in their challenges appreciate your personality, too. And that you're a blessing to them as well. So thank you for that.

MM

Yes. The people that we deal with, they come in here and—you know what they tell the volunteers? “We always leave here with a smile.” They love it. We have fun with them. We’re serious when we need to be serious, but fun when we need to be fun. And they say, “You know what? I like coming here because I always leave a smile on my face.” And that’s what we try and do.

JG

Well, thank you so much for your time. This is my first time meeting you but I’m glad that I finally got to meet the famous Mike Munroe. Your name is said all the time. You are top of mind quite often because of your dedication, and your commitment and, obviously, your relationships with our staff as well as our host site leaders. So I am glad and blessed that I got to meet you today.

MM

Well, thank you.

JG

You’re very welcome. So what’s it like for you when you’re done serving?

MM

I tell you, Jaleith ... I have something I call “volunteer high.” When I get out of there, I’m almost electric. I feel so good. And I used to be a runner, and we used to call this a runner’s high—once you’ve got those endorphins in your body working. It was like a natural high. And when I get done volunteering, whether it be at World Vision, or Crossroads or Hartford City Mission, I walk out of there and I’m jazzed up. And I’m ready to go! The other day I was so tired, I said, “Do I really want to go in here?” And I went in and when I get out of there I was on a high. And I went home, and my wife said “You must want to just rest now” and I said, “No! Let’s go out to eat! I am psyched now!” And she goes, “Wow.” And I said, “Yes!”

And so, I call it a volunteer high because you just feel so good with what you’re doing and how you’re helping people. I get as much blessing as I think the clients that I work with get blessing. We were talking about that today, the volunteers, how much we get blessed—so blessed to be able to do God’s work. And so, yeah, I just want to share that. It’s a great feeling when I get done.

JG

That’s awesome! Thanks for giving us that little anecdote. That’s great.

Thank you for joining us for today’s episode. To learn more about Mike’s experience or how you can partner with us to strengthen programs and meet practical needs in transformational ways visit urbanalliance.com/fulcrum