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MUSLIM AMERICANS FOR COMPASSION



The Rent We Pay: Examining the Importance of International Service

by Aaron Burch

By his own count, Dr. Bernard Strenecky has failed retirement five times.

How do you fail retirement?

The answer is simple. You fail when you love your work so much that there exists no reason to stop. Why spend your days playing golf when there are so many unexpected possibilities right outside your door?

“If you spend a whole lifetime doing what you love, it is not an advisable thing to retire to nothing,” Dr. Strenecky said during a phone interview in May 2021. “Teaching is my heart and soul. Everything I do comes back to learning and, whenever possible, I act as a guide for young people on their journey to find their passion and give them experiences.”

As the Scholar in Residence at Western Kentucky University (WKU), Dr. Strenecky promotes internationalization, student engagement and service learning. His goal is to find exceptional students and steer them toward a career worthy of their talents. Describing Dr. Strenecky in one profession, however, is a bit reductive. His broader role is that of a globetrotting mentor, spreading the gospel of community service to people of all ages, in all walks of life.

“Life is a contact sport, and the role of a mentor is extremely important. It is our social responsibility to provide knowledge to the next generation,” Dr. Strenecky explained. “I truly believe that I learn as much from my students as I’ve ever been able to teach them. If we work together, you provide me with skills, competencies, and knowledge. I reciprocate by sharing my experiences and opening doors you may not have seen.”

Spending time with Dr. Strenecky is very interesting, even remotely. He speaks deliberately and thoughtfully, bringing a curiosity and zeal to each topic mentioned. It’s hard not to be struck by the breadth of his experiences and the casualness in which he mentions circumnavigating the globe, serving as honorary consul to the country of Barbados, or co-founding the 501©(3) organization, the \$100 Solution. No matter what has been discussed, the conversation returns again and again to the unknown, the future. What’s next?

“Working with Dr. S is challenging and fantastic,” said Maggie Mercer, Chief Executive Officer and Board Chair for the \$100 Solution. “He’s one of the best teachers and mentors I’ve ever had. If you ever work with Dr. S, he will learn all the amazing things about you and tell everyone. He’ll be your champion in everything. When I was unsure of what to do with my life, he told me to shoot for the stars. That had a major impact on my career and my confidence.” The \$100 Solution is a non-profit born from countless collaborations, and Mercer is the latest in a lineage of exceptional young leaders at the organization’s core.

Although it was initially piloted through Dr. Strenecky's local Rotary Club Chapter, the \$100 Solution as it exists today was born in 2007. The University of Virginia asked the already accomplished Dr. Strenecky to join "Semester at Sea," an international program that places 600 bright students and two dozen thought leaders on a ship circumnavigating the globe. The ship and its passengers stopped at various locations along the way, providing a perfect incubator for students to practice the fundamentals of the \$100 Solution in unique settings around the world.

Onboard this Semester at Sea was a UCLA student named Zubin Davar, now the head of global business development at Google. His first project for the \$100 Solution was the development of an HIV/AIDS education program in Chennai, India. In this case, the \$100 went towards the purchase and distribution of prophylactics and continuing sex education.



"I was 20 years old. I had never done anything entrepreneurial. This was my first time taking a creative concept and seeing it implemented," Davar recalled. "The empowerment I felt put a huge wind in my sail. I felt accomplished and more confident to try other things of a creative nature."

As the fall 2007 Semester at Sea neared its end, Davar and the other students approached Dr. Strenecky to determine what would come next. Could this idea become an organization? They envisioned a program which combined professional development and global impact through carefully crafted service to others.

"The \$100 Solution is magic because it teaches young people how to serve others with just a small amount of money," Dr. Strenecky explained. "Right where you're sitting, within five miles of you, there are hundreds of problems that go unanswered because of the lack of funding. But you don't need big bucks to serve others. You can change lives with just \$100."

"Dr. S said, 'I love your ideas, but we need an organization in which you and your cohorts learn how to run an organization. We'll be here to support you and figure out how to make it work. People your age should make up the leadership and the Board of Directors, and we'll help you.' For me, this was not only exciting, but a life changing experience," said Davar, who was elected President of the \$100 Solution soon after.

Looking back on his decision, Dr. Strenecky is resolute. "The world doesn't need another group of 50 to 70-year-olds running things. I was much more interested in seeing what would happen if we turned over the creation of the program to young people. No one would be allowed to serve on the board once they turned 30. Those who are involved really know how to serve. They know the theory, the philosophy, the methodology. Most importantly, they know how to train others. Now the program is in its 15th year."

Throughout this evolution, Dr. Strenecky has maintained his role of mentor and provided valuable insight to the exceptional students who have joined the \$100 Solution to serve others. "Finding young people who have the passion and desire for service...they stick out. Often, they come and say, 'I want to do this.' When they do, I'm very happy to facilitate."

To be a good teacher, Dr. Strenecky explained, you must have many experiences. In his world, those experiences are international by nature. After finishing his Doctorate in education and curriculum design at the age of 36, Dr. Strenecky pursued education and mentorship all over the globe. He has visited 114 countries so far and provided teaching or consultation services in 50+.

"Everything has to do with culture. How do people around the world play the game called Life? We have the misconception that everyone plays the same way we do. It's not true. The goal of a true internationalist is to go into a new culture, regardless of language, and ask 'What is the belief system? What is the value system? How do they raise their children? What do they do for recreation? What do they eat?' It all comes down to 'Why?'"

Once you understand why people do what they do, you can then ask 'How?'



One of the most prominent examples of this international mindset can be found in Dr. Strenecky's relationship with the Caribbean nation of Barbados. It all began when a former classmate asked Dr. Strenecky to assist in the management of a grant program training Barbadian teachers in literacy. Meanwhile, in the city of Louisville, Kentucky, which Dr. Strenecky called home, a significant portion of the student body was African American, but there were very few African American teachers.

"I was asked if we could bring the Barbadian teachers to Louisville. There, they could become better teachers, and it would provide a chance for our students to learn from teachers who shared their skin color. The program was a huge success. At its peak, we had 30 teachers and their

families here in Kentucky. They came, prospered, and took what they learned back to Barbados," he said. That was just the beginning.

Building off the success of that program, Dr. Strenecky helped a team of University of Louisville faculty and students develop an International Service Learning Program in 1997. Forty-five team members visited the country of Barbados for 10 days to understand the culture and history of the island nation's inhabitants. Soon the program was expanded to the country of Belize as well.

For his efforts in teaching the people of Barbados, Dr. Strenecky was awarded the Gold Crown of Merit by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth for outstanding contributions to the development of the country of Barbados. This is the highest honor bestowed on a non-Barbadian citizen. He was also designated the Prospect-Goshen Rotary Club's Rotarian of the Year for his contributions to international understanding within the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Dr. Strenecky now serves as Honorary Consul to Kentucky from the country of Barbados.

"Dr. S has a very evolved view of how to interact with organizations and communities. He recognizes that each individual within the project affects its success," Zubin Davar said with reverence. "His ability to connect with others and inspire them to deliver at a higher level is exceptional. He also has a very good read on the ebb and flow of people's energy. That allows him to keep relationships going over a very broad, extended period of time. When he calls on someone, they're excited to work with him in any capacity. He understands on a fundamental level how to create a vision for success."

Sometimes these projects begin at home, as was the case for Play Ball Puerto Rico, a non-profit founded by Dr. Strenecky's grandson, Lawson Strenecky.

"I remember it was Thanksgiving when Lawson (then 13) asked me about Puerto Rico and what he could do to help the people suffering from Hurricane Maria," Dr. Strenecky said. This was late 2017.

"The heart and soul of Puerto Rico is baseball. That's their passion. Lawson said that helping the teenagers, helping the children of Puerto Rico, would benefit the whole country. He decided to raise money to fix the baseball fields and buy new equipment. I had a connection with Rick Redman, the VP of Corporate Communications at Louisville Slugger. They got involved and helped out big time."

After a well-received visit to Puerto Rico, Lawson and his grandfather continued making connections and building on their success. Soon, Play Ball Puerto Rico was formally established. A board of directors was determined, and it



was certified as a 501©(3) non-profit. Involved organizations throughout America now include the American Congress of Puerto Rico, the American Amateur Baseball Congress and the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez. The United Nations Association of the United States recently partnered with Play Ball Puerto Rico as well, on a new project titled “Fields for Dreams.” The program’s goal is to refurbish baseball fields in communities of need nationwide.

“I have a favorite quote. ‘Magic only happens when magic is allowed to happen,’ said Dr. Strenecky. “For whatever reason, sometimes people don’t want magic to happen. Lawson is a special kid. He’s an outstanding athlete, a Governor’s scholar, and he has the heart of somebody who wants to serve. He’s a junior in high school with his own 501©(3). Lawson allowed magic to happen, and it did.”

There is seemingly no boundary or barrier that stops Dr. Strenecky and his work for long. He has established partnerships with countless groups including from local units of the ROTC to the United Nations. His impact on others is palpable, even in brief conversation. Most recently, Dr. Strenecky, the Prospect-Goshen Rotary Club, and Dr. Waqar Saleem of Muslim Americans for Compassion have started an interdenominational partnership between Episcopalian students and Islamic students.



“We’re putting together an organization for kids to begin \$100 Solution projects independently,” Dr. Strenecky explained. “Students with different religious backgrounds working together, learning how to address social problems from an interfaith lens.”

Rotary Clubs around the world host Interact Clubs for students age 12-18. These groups are designed to help members learn leadership skills and think outside of their comfort zones. The Interact Clubs of Rotary District 6710 (Western Kentucky) will make up one half of the teenagers taking part, while students from Louisville’s Islamic community make up the other half.

“Many of the students in rural areas, this is the first time they’ve worked closely with anyone different from themselves. Although we’ll focus on projects, the most important piece of this endeavor is that kids learn about each other,” Dr. Strenecky said. This multi-cultural project will begin during the school semester in 2021.

“The ability to leverage, network and share a community is one of the most rewarding approaches to life,” said Zubin Davar. “Dr. S taught me to think that way, and I continue to learn from him. He also helped me keep things fun. It sounds simple, but creating fun is the key to longevity in the teams you work with. It makes everything you do better.”

Although his 80th birthday will be here soon, Dr. Strenecky isn’t slowing down just yet. He and Eileen have more trips planned, more mentorships to consider and more lives to touch.

“It may sound like I’m all over the place,” Dr. Strenecky laughed, “All of my projects are through the lens of service. Muhammad Ali said it best. ‘Service is the rent you pay for being a member of democracy.’ Service is not an option, it’s a social responsibility.” After all, if you love what you do, you never have to retire.



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