

*When a horrific life event landed [Larsen Jay](#) in the hospital for weeks and it was evident that flowers made his hospital room a jungle of joy. A selfless jester to share those flowers became a privately funded and sponsored nonprofit, Random Acts of Flowers.*

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Lucas: Welcome to the Bridge the Gap Podcast the senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas. We are in a very energetic space here at the NIC Conference-Chicago. There's a lot of energy behind us, there's events taking place, so when you hear this background noise that's what's going on. We got a guest on today, we're so excited to have this story be told. We have Larsen Jay and he is with Random Acts of Flowers. Welcome to the program.

Larsen: Thanks for having me. I appreciate being here.

Lucas: So you and Josh have known each other for a little while, Josh tell us how that relationship started and I can't wait to hear more about Larsen story.

Josh: So good question Lucas, it actually came about not even about Random Acts of Flowers. So I have known personally as a provider in senior living about, I called it a ministry, but the mission of Random Acts of Flowers because we were a recipient. Our communities. Which I'm not going to let the story out of the box yet, but just know it goes back that long, and I was like what is this all about? And then I actually got to know Larsen. Larsen is very influential in our area, our neck of the woods in Knoxville, and I got to know him even outside of Random Acts but huge heart. I can't wait for our audience to hear this very unique mission, but Larsen, thank you for taking time. You came all the way up to Chicago to talk with us from Tennessee and I want our listeners to know more about you, your story and your background before Random Acts and how you got there.

Larsen: Okay, so before Random Acts. Yeah, so it's interesting I now run a national organization centered around the giving of flowers. And ironically I know virtually nothing about flowers because that's not my background. I was originally a film and television producer. So my background was as a producer, producing feature films, television shows, documentaries, that was my passion. It was storytelling at its core and that came in different forms, whether it be an educational video or documentary in Nepal or even a feature film shot in east Tennessee or some of our work in Los Angeles. And so that was my world for so long and I had a great life, a full life and a great career and and really it lead up to 2007, and if I can just get into the story of how it all became.

I'm sort of a DIY fix it guy, I like to just do projects and do it on my own. And I owned a warehouse on the northside of Knoxville, that was kind of like my guy oasis. My get away from the world with tools, cars, junk and all kind of stuff. And I was just doing a simple DIY project one early weekend morning, up on the roof up and down up and down, and I was kind of fixing it Florida style, which is throw a tarp on it and deal with the next year. And I was going up and down the ladder, up and down the ladder, and for some reason on the fifteenth or sixteenth time I stepped on the top of the ladder, the bottom collapsed out from underneath me and I fell about a story and a half face down on the concrete and really shouldn't be here today with you here in Chicago. And so I was really lucky but really severe injuries. I broke my left arm, my left wrist, my right wrist, my right elbow, my right femur, my nose and ten skull fractures just like that. This is ironically the year that I went to Everest Base Camp on a documentary project, came back just fine. I went to British Columbia on a helicopter trip, came back just fine, you know all this stuff where you should get injured but came back fine and it happened to be this freak accident.

I was in the hospital a few days in ICU, 10 days on the trauma floor and that sort of first week of putting your life back together and trying to figure out what the new normal is, is hard to describe but one of them that was really interesting is I got an amazing outpouring of support and that came in the way of flowers. Now most guys have never gotten flowers, have either of you guys ever received flowers?

Josh: I don't think so.

Lucas: I send them to Josh occasionally.

Josh: Yeah that doesn't count.

Larsen: It's just one of those things that societally it's not the case. But my support from people, friends, family, people from all over the country that had heard about my accident, came in the way of flowers. And the first few days were really kind of a fog for me but after I came to and started to deal with that recovery time, more and more flowers started being delivered to the point where the florists were kind of joking that all they were doing was driving from their shop to my room because it filled up so fast. It also timed really interestingly with every time I had a real emotional drop, a really tough time trying to figure out how do I put all this back together? What

happened? You know, what am I going to do? How am I going to be different physically, you know all those things that you deal with in trauma.

I was having a real tough time and another couple of bouquets would show up and by the end of the first week I kid you not, we had thirty to forty bouquets all over my hospital room. Now if you've ever been in the hospital room you know how tiny they are and how bleak, industrial hospitalization is. In its colors, in its look, its feel, its smell all that kind of stuff. Those flowers and that outpouring of support, essentially turned into a jungle of joy and happiness. One of the things I noticed was the reaction from everybody when they came in the room, so whether it was a doctor or nurse or even a janitor or somebody dropping off food or somebody that I knew was coming for a visit, the minute somebody stepped in the room they would perk up and they would see the flowers and they would go oh my gosh. It would make the room smell better, look better, everything about it sort of lifted them up emotionally and it was really amazing that first week.

Now I don't sit well for very long, I get a little antsy and so I was really going stir-crazy after a week of being in my hospital room, bags, and casts and all the other stuff and I simply asked to get out of my room and kind of get outside or just out of my room. I finally convinced the nurses and my family to get me in a wheelchair which took a long time to transfer me in, and when I left my room which was truly a jungle of joy, happiness, support and love, I entered that stark industrial environment of hospitalization. As I was rolling through the hall of the critical care floor I just remember seeing how many rooms had no flowers, no plants, no visitors just absolutely lifeless and it was such a contrast to my environment. I just said we've got to go back and it was really a bit of a selfish act to say this is the right thing to do, I'm not going to ask permission, I'm not going to follow protocol, I just knew it was the right thing to do. I asked to go back, and we took all the cards off my flowers, we loaded them on my wheelchair, and we just started making deliveries. that's how Random Acts of Flowers started from July 29th accident in 2007, to here we are today.

Josh: It's an amazing story and the fact that now fast forward, it's like one hundred thousand a year.

Larsen: A year. We're getting ready to celebrate her five hundred thousandth delivery to somebody in a healthcare facility and we're doing over a hundred thousand a year. So most of our growth is in the last couple to three years and we started obviously just as one small organization in Knoxville. It was really during my recovery that I kept thinking about the people I interacted with it and the very first person we ever did delivery to I'll never forget she was right next to me in the room. All week we had heard really awful sounds coming from next door of

pain and suffering and when we went into that room, it was a woman that was in full headgear traction, really in bad shape. Completely alone in a hospital room with no one and nothing, and we gave her a big bouquet of flowers and she went from the desperate eyes of 'I'm done, help me', whatever you don't want to see in somebody's face, to smiling and crying in two seconds. That just made such an impact and so I was going through recovery, I kept thinking if somebody must be doing this. This is kind of a no-brainer right? With food banks, grocery stores or retailers or restaurants give their food to food banks and they recycle them. So who's doing this for flowers because weddings, funerals, special events, grocery stores, wholesalers, distributors and no one was and so I came up with a half clever name and a couple ideas and a year to the date of my accident we started as a simple nonprofit organization in Knoxville, Tennessee. And now we're in four cities in four states and growing as a nationwide movement.

Josh: Well, so Lucas and I, our listeners don't have the benefit of having experienced this simple nonprofit mission because there's nothing simple about what you guys do as far as the process. I first-hand witnessed, I got to go on tour with what you guys did or what you do. Talk to our listeners, give them just a little bit of this process and this volunteer team. It was really impressive to see all these volunteers that were like a team. A large team only in one of the offices. There's many of them, but how many volunteer hours and these people are so happy and I'll tell you I want you to touch on the point of the impact you're also making in the lives of the volunteers.

Larsen: Absolutely. So Random Acts of Flowers is really simple we are a food bank for flowers. We take flowers that would otherwise be thrown away after a special event, a wedding, grocery store, wholesaler, wherever there's a flower that's used or unused we take it, mostly all volunteers run the program and it comes in and we give that flower a second life. So one of the great things about the giving of flowers is one, it's a universal gesture that cuts across all races, religion demographic, income, languages, disabilities. I mean, it is universally something that cuts to the core of humanity and then on top of that, you know, the giving or the use of flowers usually has meaning and purpose, whether it be a celebration, a remembrance, a wedding, love, whatever the case is and we're giving it a second chance to give to somebody else. So we gather all these flowers, we have volunteers that break them all down to its core materials. We sort of weed out all the stuff isn't going to last or hasn't lasted yet, we compost all that, it's a hundred percent recycling program. Then we rebuild it as a brand new bouquet, we put a card on it that's very personalized and then we go out and within twenty four to forty eight hour period we're taking those flowers, recycled, repurposed them and then taking them to patients in that hospital, healthcare facility, nursing home, whatever the case may be. We focus exclusively on the healthcare industry because I have a big belief that if you can positively impact that mental health and emotional health of somebody then that ties to the physical health. And so our sort of book ends with that but it's simple in the fact that when the flowers are processed and they walk out the door and our volunteers knock on that door they say, have a great day, keep smiling, I

hope you feel better. Just words of encouragement, a little bit of random acts of kindness with flowers.

Josh: Well, so as a recipient of Random Acts of Flowers before I knew you and before I knew this whole mission, I had a small mission-driven, faith-based senior care community and something as simple as small vases of flowers on the dining room tables. I remember we were battling with how do we liven up this dining room for these seniors which breakfast, lunch and dinner was like the highlight of their day and have more than a salt and pepper shaker or this old dead arrangement on the table. And you guys just magically started these bouquets and these flowers started showing up. The comments and the feedback we got from that. So even to that extent, just seeing people's lives be brightened up. But one of the fascinating things I saw when I went in and I saw the actual volunteers in your warehouse is I saw some widows and some people that have been through some tough Knox in life, like traumatic, emotional things that are, their purpose for that however, many hour shift they came in as a volunteer was to give back and it seemed like their lives were being positively impacted right?

Larsen: Yeah this was a byproduct of the mission I never expected. So I was always focused on the recipient in the healthcare facility but what we quickly learned is that Random Acts of Flowers it's almost become the new knitting circle for a lot of people. Most of our volunteers, not all, but most of them are women, you know forty five to eighty five. There's empty nesters, there's widows, there's people who are actively involved in the community or retirees and they have formed friendships, they've formed new communities. But what I really learned is that Random Acts of Flowers is floral therapy at its finest and that has a different meaning and purpose for everybody.

So if you're a florist donor of ours and you just had a wedding and you want to recycle those with us, you're going to get something emotional out of knowing you helped the community through your celebration. If you just had a funeral and your family is mourning, you're going to get something emotionally out of knowing that you helped pass on the memory of that loved one to somebody else and made their day a little bit brighter. So even at the very beginning, through the entire process and then the volunteer who's created that bouquet knowing that it's going to go to somebody who is really having a hard day. It's therapy for everybody all along the process and that's something I just never understood until very long into the setting up Random Acts of Flowers, but it's that human connection that the flowers has to emotion, to somebody that maybe really in a hard spot or somebody that just needs a little boost of energy.

Josh: Well, so now fast forward a few years later you have this rapidly growing mission, again I can't help but call it a ministry, and you've got a great supportive board. I know one of those

board members, Dan Noir who's very well known in our space. He runs a huge outpatient therapy and rehabilitation program that serves our industry very well, you put a lot of thought into this and even done some research on like the positive implications of what you're doing in that mission. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Larsen: Yeah, absolutely. Now we get feedback all the time directly from the people we serve, so without a study or a medical study we know the impact it makes day to day. We get calls, letters, emails, voicemails. A lot of times people say you're the only person who came to see me or what a bright spot or gave me hope or encouragement, but we also went through early on and said is there real science behind this and we found studies at Harvard, Rutgers, UMass, Kansas State, that all said that the giving of flowers has a positive emotional boost that has a positive impact on somebody that can lead to better outcomes and can reduce anxiety, stress. There's study after study after study that says even just displaying flowers near you lowers blood pressure and does all kinds of things. And then just recently Pew Institute did a study, the Pew Research Center did a study that was all about senior isolation and it talked about the importance of, especially in the senior care community, that isolation factor and the amount of time that people spend alone. It was staggering to me, it was saying obviously isolation is linked with negative health outcomes, less cognitive stimulation, sedentary states, even medication regularity and medical emergencies. The study said sixty-year-old plus seniors is twenty two percent of the US population of seventy three million people and that's growing quickly as you guys know, but sixty plus Americans are alone for more than half of their day.

Josh: Wow.

Larsen: And then for those who live by themselves, it's even greater. It's ten hours plus. So a third of those older adults report spending almost all their measurable time alone. So imagine really a ministry like ours, it has an opportunity to walk in the door with no strings attached. And this is the beauty of the program. We don't charge for the program. It's all privately funded or sponsored and we literally have the opportunity to walk in and say I don't want anything from you. I'm not selling you anything, I'm not preaching to you, I'm not asking you to sign a petition. I'm just saying that someone in this community cares and there's an opportunity to have a better day by just keeping you smiling and seeing these flowers. And it's really, really impactful on a core human-level.

Josh: Well, I love this. So Lucas you and I get to talk to awesome people. We're blessed that we get to do this not even as a day job. We just get to do this and so we don't have to be paid to do this. We love doing this and you're a prime example, Larsen, of of something that we love to showcase on our show. I've witnessed it from the receivership end of it and seeing how positive

it is to our families that we serve and I can vouch for it. I was never approached by anyone at Random Acts that said hey, you know make a donation because we brought you these flowers and there's tons of volunteers needed. This is privately funded, this is a sponsor funded, so tell our listenership what what are some of the needs and how can people help meet the needs of your organization?

Larsen: Well the primary need is support, financial and support from companies, private individuals, family foundations, that's it. There are so many flowers that come in readily depending on the season, depending on the opportunities we have with a connection to people. There are tons of flowers. There are amazing volunteers. I mean, we're ninety nine percent volunteer driven and they come out of the woodwork every single week. And as you know, there are no shortage of people in the senior care facilities or healthcare facilities or hospitals to serve, so those are sort of never the barrier points. Really the only barrier point is financial support, corporate support and sponsorship to be able to expand the program and sustain the program long term.

As a nonprofit organization we're sort of at the mercy of a philanthropy and since we don't want money to be the barrier between us serving the community and not, so we don't charge. We don't walk and go hey, would you like these flowers, you know blah blah blah. So it's really that community support, that national support, somebody looking at this and saying I value this as a part of the community and I want to support it going forward.

Josh: That's awesome. Well, I would encourage our listeners if you're out there, we're actually going to make sure our listeners are connected with you in our show notes because I know they're going to want to be talking to you about hey, how can I volunteer? I know you're getting requests all across the country for people that are like hey, how do we start this in our neck of the woods? How can we get an office here to where we can do this? Obviously that oftentimes cost dollars.

Larsen: Of course, of course.

Josh: And so there's also a very generous audience we have out there that I know would love to rally around and figure out how in the world they can help get this going in their neighborhood and further your ministry. So, love that.

Larsen: I don't understand why Random Acts of Flowers couldn't and shouldn't be in every city across the country if not the world. We've mentored groups in London, Norway, Hong Kong and all around the country who are popping up and saying we're inspired what you do, how can we do it too? Because there's no shortage of flowers. There's no shortage of people that need that emotional boost and that mental health, that positive impact and so if we can be the catalyst in between the two then we're helping solve a little bit of a problem. At the end of the day, we're not going to cure cancer, we're not going to build a building, we're not going to change education, some of these massive social issues but we're going to nudge the world in a real impactful way just a little bit and I think that's worth it. It's worth investing in kindness and compassion.

Josh: I love that.

Lucas: Incredible. Larsen Jay, Random Acts of Flowers, great conversation. I am inspired by your story and inspired by the outcomes here. So thank you everybody for listening to another great episode of Bridge the Gap.

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