

When it Mattered

Episode 20: Frank Shankwitz

Chitra Ragavan: Hello, everyone. I'm Chitra Ragavan, and this is When It Mattered. When It Mattered is a podcast on how leaders deal with and learn from adversity. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. My guest today is Frank Shankwitz, the creator and a co-founder of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, a global charity that fulfills the wishes of children with life-threatening illnesses.

Chitra Ragavan: Shankwitz has taken the lessons learned from his early years of extreme poverty and homelessness and has spent most of his adult life giving back. A US Air Force veteran, Shankwitz served as an Arizona Highway Patrol motorcycle officer and a homicide detective with the Arizona Department of Public Safety. Retiring after 42 years on the force, Shankwitz has received many awards for his work with the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the White House Call to Service award from both President George W. Bush and president Donald J. Trump, and the Making A Difference in The World award from the US Military Academy at West Point, just to name a few.

Chitra Ragavan: Mr. Shankwitz, welcome to the podcast.

Frank Shankwitz: Thank you. I appreciate the invitation.

Chitra Ragavan: Your early years, as I said, were filled with poverty and homelessness and separation from one or other parent. Could you describe what those early years were like?

Frank Shankwitz: Interesting, I never thought they were that bad, but Hollywood made a movie about it, so I guess they were. I was born in Chicago, and, at two years old, my mother divorced my father and left. We never knew where, had no idea where she went. In later years, I figured out, because she would never tell me, that she went to Arizona. Ages two to five were just very happy years living with my grandparents, while my dad worked down on weekends, aunts, uncles, cousins, just a lot of fun times.

Frank Shankwitz: At five years old, I was in kindergarten on a playground, and a lady grabbed me, dragged me, and she said, "I'm your mother," I have

no idea who this lady was, and actually kidnapped me off the playground, screaming and fighting, but when you're five years old and you get a thump on the head, you kind of be quiet, and she said, "We're going to Arizona," but she took a strange route to Arizona, and we ended up what I later learned was Michigan, upper Michigan, Upper Peninsula, and this is a whole different lifestyle.

Frank Shankwitz: Our home for that summer she introduced me to was a tent and a campground right on Lake Michigan shores, and I'm going from a real nice city type livelihood to, all of a sudden, nothing and, again, very traumatic for a while, especially very little to eat, no food, and she's gone all day. She's working in this one little village that was close by, leaving me by myself, but it turned out to be somewhat of a good thing in the long run because I had to start learning survival, self-survival.

Frank Shankwitz: I just explored. I learned about the country life. I learned about the woods. I'm watching other people what to do. I even taught myself how to swim by just watching other people and actually began to enjoy that until the winter hit, and then she found, because it's just... We can't stay in the snow there in the tent, but she found just an old, old farmhouse, drafty and everything, and that was like that for several years up until 10 years old when my mother... when my father found us, and he went in to get the local sheriff to have her arrested.

Frank Shankwitz: During that time, she threw everything we had in... which wasn't much... In a car, and we started that journey to Arizona. It took six weeks, and, again, I had really no idea where Arizona was. I had watched some Western movies every now and then, and the reason it took so long is she would drive for half a day, she'd be low on money, she'd get a job at a local restaurant as a waitress, get enough tip money for gas, and off we go, and during that whole journey, we're sleeping in the car.

Frank Shankwitz: We just get outside of a little town called Seligman, Arizona, up on the northern part of Arizona, on old Route 66, and she ran out of gas completely, and it's the first time I'd ever seen her cry, and she said, "I have no money. We have no food. We have nothing. I don't know what we're going to do." A rancher stopped by, asked what's going on, and he said, "I'll go get some gas. You follow me to the ranch house and you can stay with us," until get settled.

Frank Shankwitz: Now, Seligman, Arizona, again, this little town of 500, hasn't grown much since, and this is in 1953 now, 500 people, predominantly Mexican, Indian. It was a railroad town, a ranching town, and the

rancher did take us in. We got to sleep for six weeks. Our bedroom was the kitchen floor and a couple of bedrolls, but, to me, this was just great. I mean, it was warm.

Frank Shankwitz: We had some food. I mean, they were helping us out as much as they could, and I enrolled in school, because I had jumped from school to school, and this was actually the first town we had ever lived in. We'd always lived somewhere out in the country, and I got a job as a dishwasher at 10 years old, and my mother got a job as a maid, and after about six weeks, they found an old, wrecked travel trailer for us to live in, fixed it up enough where we had cold water, no shower or anything like that. In fact, it didn't even have indoor plumbing, but we had other facilities we could use.

Chitra Ragavan: That's when you met somebody who would turn out to have an incredible influence on your life.

Frank Shankwitz: Exactly. As I said, 10 years old, washing dishes, I'm getting off late one afternoon. I'm watching a man. I've been watching him, a little Mexican man across the street building something. He's got the frame up and starting on the interior work, and I just went over and I said, "Hi. What are you doing?" and he said, "What's your name?" and I said, "My name is Frank." He said, "I'm Juan, and, from now on, your name is Poncho," meaning Frank in Spanish. Just the smile on this guy's face, and I immediately liked him.

Frank Shankwitz: He said, "Grab a hammer kid," and I said, "I don't know what to do," because I never had a father figure teach me anything like carpentry or any type of skills like that, and Juan became my father, my mentor figure. He really took me under his wing, as they call it, and just taught me so many things, the biggest thing, work ethic, about integrity, character, and after we... He introduced me to music. He introduced me to sports, which I had never played before, just got me involved in all the little things, and along with the other town people. Like I say, it takes... They say it takes a village to raise a child. That was true in this little town of Seligman.

Chitra Ragavan: Why do you think he took such an interest in your life?

Frank Shankwitz: I don't know. I really don't know. I mean, he had children of his own, but that was just the way it was with these small towns as I learned especially when you're by yourself or whatever it might be. Everybody is always helping one another, and that was a big thing that he said, and after a couple of years, he said, "Frank, when you can, I want you to give back."

Frank Shankwitz: Now, this was 1950s. Give back is a popular term today, but it wasn't then. I said, "Juan, what do you mean give back? We don't have a thing. The poor people are helping us," and he said, "You don't have to have money to give back," and this is the biggest lesson. He said, "You can give back your time," and he gave an example. "Look at Mrs. Sanchez, the Widow Sanchez. She is always bringing you beans and tortillas, helping to feed you, helping you out a little bit, but look at her yard. It's a mess. You're big enough. You can go over there and clean that yard. Weed it. Clean it up. Help paint that porch. The same with Mrs. Ortega. They're always helping you out. They've got an old caboose from the Santa Fe Line. It's going to be their home now, and they're trying to paint that. You can go over and help them and get that out. Give back. You don't have to have money," and that lesson has stayed with me my whole life.

Chitra Ragavan: Hard work, too. You worked some really hard jobs at an incredibly young age, including for the Santa Fe Railroad when... during that time in Arizona. Not a lot of kids would be able to pull that off. What was that like?

Frank Shankwitz: It was fun, and what's you're talking about, they say it was the division point for the Santa Fe Railroad, meaning, the trains, the freight trains, the passenger trains, when they came in there, they would change crews and then they would also add... If they're going across the mountains eastbound, they would add the big steam locomotives in those days to help pull the freight trains over the mountains, and in the engines itself, there was always a big ice cooler in there, water cooler, and the crew always hated hauling ice up and down. These things are so heavy, and we found out that if we did that for them, me and a couple other kids, we'd get a quarter.

Frank Shankwitz: Now, that's a lot of money for pocket money, because every money I made as a dishwasher went... helped my mother, so we got a quarter, and that was our spending money, and then, also, I got into junior rodeo, bull riding, and the entry fee back then was \$3, but I would just find jobs all over town. I'd sweep. I'd mop. I'd help, whatever I could do the little businesses around town besides my job because that was my extra spending money, so it was a lot of hard work, but it was fun. It was rewarding.

Chitra Ragavan: The next big change in your life happened when you finished eighth grade and your mother came back. What was that like?

Frank Shankwitz: Backing up just a little bit, at seventh grade, she left me. She said, "I can't afford you anymore. You're on your own," and this would be devastating to I think most kids. It was to me. I go to Juan, and I said, "What do I do?" and he said, "I heard what's going to happen." He said, "I've arranged for you to live with the Widow Sanchez. She's going to charge you \$20 a week. You make \$26 a week. For the first time, you're going to have six extra dollars in your pocket," but he also said, and this is the lesson that stayed forever, "Always learn to turn the negative to the positive."

Frank Shankwitz: I said, "What do you mean by that? My mother just left my home, just left our trailer," and he said, "Living with the Widow Sanchez, you're going to have your own bedroom for the first time. That's a positive. She's the best cook in town. That's a positive, definitely. You've got indoor plumbing at your place. That's a positive, and she has the first television set in Seligman, Arizona. Wow. That's a big positive," so I always learned that lesson. Whatever happens, the negative things, work to turn that to the positive, a lesson taught from Juan Delgadillo.

Chitra Ragavan: Then your mother came back.

Frank Shankwitz: At the end of eighth grade, she came back up and she said, "I need your help. I need you to move to Prescott, Arizona." This is a town we're in now. It's up in the mountains in Northern Arizona. She said, "I can't afford to live. I don't make enough money. I need you to move and get a job, a full-time job and help support us," meaning, her, and I did, and, Juan, one thing I told... We didn't have a close relationship, my mother and I. We never did, but Juan said, "Remember, she is your mother. You respect her. You always respect her," and I did. I remembered that lesson.

Frank Shankwitz: I came to Prescott, got a job right away at a grocery store as a bag boy and, eventually, over the years, ended up with an assistant manager training by the time I graduated high school, but, again, in Prescott, so many people helping me out, my coaches, my teachers who just take me under their wing, and I just appreciated everything they were doing for me.

Chitra Ragavan: Then you ended up in the US Air Force and then on to Motorola, and then, in a strange twist, you wound up with the Arizona Highway Motorcycle Patrol as an officer. How did that happen?

Frank Shankwitz: When I got out of the Air Force, Motorola was looking for people with top secret clearance, which I had, because this was the Atlas Missile Program now, and they were having trouble finding

graduate engineers. They could not pass the drug test. Now, this was in the middle '60s, early '70s, the days of sex, drugs, rock and roll, and Motorola were looking for us. They hired us, sent us to school. We used the G.I. Bill also for college, and just a great job, just a great career, ended up in statistical engineering, which my math teachers in high school just got a big kick out of, determined failure rate on certain missile components, like I said, a great job, excellent money, and several of my friends who joined the highway patrol from high school days kept saying, "Frank, with your background, you should really join the patrol. You've got a police background," which I did in the Air Force."

Frank Shankwitz: I said, "Guys, I make in one week what you make in a month, and I'm just not going to do that salary change." But I got bored at Motorola. Number one, I'm living in the city. I don't like the big city of Phoenix just because of the crowd and everything. I was small town boy, and it was the same thing over and over even though I have to say Motorola was excellent, and, just on a whim, I put an application for the highway patrol and, out of 1,000 applications, they chose 50, and, again, the majority of those failed because of the fact they couldn't pass a drug test and said, "Okay, I'll accept that position." Obviously, it's the greatest decision I ever made because, 42 years later, I retired.

Chitra Ragavan: It was also a life-threatening decision. You had a motorcycle crash that literally flatlined you. What was that like, and how did that happen?

Frank Shankwitz: The highway patrol started a... went on to start a motorcycle unit. It was a 10-man squad that we worked the whole state of Arizona, two weeks at one town, two weeks at another, and we initially, in fact, trained with California Highway Patrol. Our equipment was identical, our uniforms almost identical, but one of our duty assignments was a little town called Park, Arizona. It's during Easter break. A town of 2000 gets flooded by kids from all over California, and these are the college, high school students, growing to 85,000 in this stretch of a 17-mile highway, and in a chase, a high-speed chase with a drunk driver, 85 miles an hour, when another drunk driver folds directly in front of me, and I couldn't do what they call a break and escape, and hit him broadside at 85 and was pronounced dead at the scene.

Frank Shankwitz: I was told later the crash was spectacular, but we're talking now, so... but an off-duty emergency room nurse stopped at the scene. My partner tried to revive me. He couldn't do it. He called in the code 963A officer killed in the line of duty, and she said, "Let me

try," and he said, "He's dead," and we're talking. Obviously, she didn't listen and perform almost four minutes of CPR and brought me back to life.

Chitra Ragavan: You literally died and came back to life.

Frank Shankwitz: Yes. Yes.

Chitra Ragavan: That must have been profound. It would be profound for anybody. I mean, did it make you rethink your life in any way?

Frank Shankwitz: It did. It took about several months, for recovery, and I had a massive brain injury, skull fracture, broken bones, a lot of missing skin, and it didn't scare me as far as wanting to go back to work, but during the time, just before going to... actually go... release... going back to work, I had to go to the counselor, psychological counselor to make sure that, psychologically, mentally, we're okay to go back to work, and one of the things she said to me in one of the last sessions was, "You realize you died, and God spared you for a reason, and now it's up to you to find that reason why you were spared," and kind of a depression state right then, but, two years later, I found that reason when I met a little boy who inspired me to start the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Chitra Ragavan: Tell us about this young boy. This was 1980, and you met him, and what was his story, and how did you meet him?

Frank Shankwitz: Yeah. His name was Chris. Chris was seven years old. Chris had terminal leukemia, and his heroes were Ponch and Jon from the television show CHiPs, which was very popular during that period. In fact, when we would go on our 10-man unit, it would be two-man teams going throughout Arizona, the grade school kids, "Hey, Ponch. Hey, Jon." It was great. It was a great PR talking to the kids, and he told his mother, "When I grow up, I want to be a highway patrol motorcycle officer just like Ponch and Jon."

Frank Shankwitz: For people that don't know about CHiPs, it was a show on NBC that ran several years about two California Highway Patrol motorcycle officers and their adventures. The demographic was about seven to 14 with the kids and, because of Erik Estrada who played Ponch, seven to about 50 with the ladies, but... and I'd never met this boy, and a friend of the family contacted the Arizona Highway Patrol and explained, "We have this seven-year-old boy. Is there any way he can meet a motorcycle officer?" and I just happened to be that motorcycle officer that they chose.

Frank Shankwitz: Now, I had no idea what to expect. I got a phone call that, "This little boy, we've got permission to pick him up in our state police helicopter at his hospital and fly him to our headquarters building, and we want you standing by when a helicopter lands to meet this little boy." The helicopter approaches. I see this big grin, looking out the door, and I expected our paramedics to help him out of the helicopter. This little boy just come off IVs. Helicopter lands. The doors open, and this little boy just runs over to the motorcycle, big grin, "Hi. I'm Chris. Can I get on your motorcycle?" "Of course, you can, Chris."

Frank Shankwitz: He had watched the show CHiPs so much, and, as I said, our equipment was identical. He said, "This is the red light. It's going to turn around. This is a siren. This is this. This is that. What's in your saddlebag? The same as Ponch," and we're all laughing. He's having a good time, and I look at his mother, and she's crying, and I didn't understand it, and then it dawns on me. She has her seven-year-old back. He's just having so much fun, a typical seven-year-old instead of laying in a bed with IVs.

Chitra Ragavan: You only knew him for a brief period before he died and, when he died, it had a major impact on you and your fellow officers in the Arizona State Police.

Frank Shankwitz: Yes, and going back a little bit, he became the first and only honorary highway patrol motorcycle officer in that time in the history of the highway patrol, complete with a custom-made uniform we had made for him, his own badge and especially his motorcycle wings. That was the most important thing. In fact, when he came up to me after we presented the uniform, which was the following day, and said, "I wish I could be a motorcycle officer," he's a police officer, "but I wish I could be a motorcycle officer," and that's the first time I heard that word wish, and we just teased him a little bit. We set up some traffic cones. We found out he had a little battery operated motorcycle that his mother had for him in place of a wheelchair.

Frank Shankwitz: We put him through the test. He came back, "Did I pass?" "Yes, you did Chris." "When do I get my wings?" and those were custom-made. It would take a couple of days. I get the call that the wings are ready. I pick them up. I get another call that Chris is in the hospital. He's not going to survive the day. I'm authorized to go the hospital. I went to his room. His uniform is hanging by his bed. Just as I pinned on the wings, he came out of the coma. "Am I a motorcycle officer now?" "Yes, you are, Chris." His wish had

become true, and he passed away just a couple of hours later, and I always like to think maybe his wings helped carry him to heaven.

Chitra Ragavan: After he died, the police had a ceremony for him, and you were at the funeral.

Frank Shankwitz: Yes. See, our commanders learned that Chris was going to be buried in a little town, Kewanee, Illinois, and they contact me and my partner and said, "We would like you to go back and give him a full police funeral. We have lost a fellow officer," which we did. Now, this is before Internet, but the media picked this up, and we were met by Illinois State Police, city police, county police to give this little boy a full police funeral. He was buried with honors in uniform. In fact, his grave marker reads, "Chris Grecious. Arizona Trooper." Flying home, I just started thinking about, "Here's a boy who had a wish, and we made it happen. Why can't we do that for other children?" and that's when the idea, the Make-A-Wish Foundation was born maybe 36,000 feet over Kansas or something.

Chitra Ragavan: That was 39, almost 40 years ago. How many children has the foundation granted wishes to since then?

Frank Shankwitz: It's just amazing, all because of this one little boy, and we are now worldwide, over a half a million wishes just because of this one boy.

Chitra Ragavan: That's an incredible statistic. Do you remember a couple of your early favorite wishes that you granted?

Frank Shankwitz: Yes, and there's so many, and I was the first President, CEO, and, also, I had to make a career choice. I couldn't do both. After three... a couple of years, I just said, "We've got to turn this over to professional people. Surround yourself with people smarter than you," because we had never taken a salary, and we realized we had to start paying some people, but our... Actually, to answer your question, our first official wish is probably my favorite because it opened up a door that I'll explain, and this is again a seven-year-old boy.

Frank Shankwitz: When we started this foundation, it was for children with terminal illnesses. None of the children survived. Leukemia was a death sentence in those days along with the other cancers, and, now, through the grace of God, modern medicine, that's why we changed our mission to children with life-threatening illnesses, more and more children are surviving, but, again, a seven-year-old boy named Frank, nicknamed Bopsy Salazar, and I was his wish granter. In other words, the one that went out to interview him, to

find out what his wish actually was and just to meet this little boy, and he wanted to ride in a hot air balloon, and he wanted to be a fireman. I laughed. "A fireman? I'm a policeman. You want to be a fireman?" and he wanted to go to Disneyland.

Frank Shankwitz: We only grant one wish, but we're starting to get so much press that I told our board, "We're going to grant all three wishes for this little boy because we're going to get so much press out of this," which we did. He got to be the fireman. The Phoenix Fire Department just went all out to make him an official fireman. He got to ride in a hot air balloon. I knew the friends up in my area that had a hot air balloon, but going to Disneyland was a little different. We had never really thought about a travel wish, and we had very little money in our bank account.

Frank Shankwitz: Our secretary kept calling the Disney people and their public relations, "We're the Make-A-Wish Foundation. We got a boy in a wheelchair. Could he get in front of lines, plus free admission?" They turned us down, and we learned later they get these requests, bogus requests all the time, so they're very careful what they do. They'd never heard of us, and the secretary said, "I don't know what to do." I said, "Let me call Disney. Give me the number," and I called, got the secretary for public relations. "Who is this?" Instead of saying, "I'm Frank Shankwitz, the President, CEO of Make-A-Wish Foundation," I said, "This is Officer Frank Shankwitz, Arizona Highway Patrol," and got her attention. She said, "What can I help you with?"

Frank Shankwitz: I said, "I need to talk to the Director of Public Relations." "What about?" I said, "I have a warrant for one of your people?" Guess who I got to talk to immediately, but, the minute I got the gentleman on the phone, I just said, "I just lied to you. Here's my name. Here's my badge number. Here's my supervisor's name and his phone number. All you have to do is call right now, and I will be terminated, but will you please listen to my story?"

Frank Shankwitz: They did listen to my story. Disney had Bopsy over there, and his mother. She's a single mom. The press picked this up, and that really started the boost for Make-A-Wish plus Disney, now almost 40 years later, one of the biggest sponsors, I mean, just all these years supporting us, and hundreds of thousands of kids have gone to one of the Disney World, Disneyland, whatever, just because... If you're going to lie, at least qualify the lie a little bit.

Chitra Ragavan: You said there was another wish that had a strange way of coming back around in your life.

Frank Shankwitz: Yeah, we did. Thank you for reminding me of that. 2017, we completed filming our movie, Wish Man, which was filmed up in Northern Arizona, my area, and I was one of the... I was technical supervisor and consulting producer, location scout, and working with the script supervisor, and, usually, every day on the set, her and I were one of the first people on the set, and we would look at the set design for the day. We'd look up the dialogue, the script, the continuity if we're continuing a scene, and she knew who I was, and this is a lovely young lady named Kennedy Del Toro, out of New Mexico originally, and the third day into the filming, and she's... I said, "Good morning." She came in and gave me a hug and started crying, I mean, really crying. "Kennedy, what's wrong? What happened?" She said, "I'm a Wish child."

Frank Shankwitz: Now, the people around us, now everybody's starting to cry because you're talking about a full-circle movie is being made about my life. We have a Wish child as part of a crew. When she was... I think was a 13 or 14, she had a life-threatening illness, and she wanted to be... learn how to be an actress and go to Hollywood. That was her wish, but she was too ill. When she turned 17, she went into total remission, and the New Mexico chapter said, "You still got your wish. Do you want to do that?" "Yes, I do." She went to Hollywood. They sent her to a acting school, but, during school, she became very interested in the technical side, and when the school was over, the director said, "Would you like to be an intern for the script supervisor?" which she had never heard of. Yes, she did, and halfway through the summer, one day, the regular script supervisor didn't show up. She took over for the job as an intern. The next day, the lady didn't show up again. The director said, "She's fired. You're hired," and this young lady is all over the world on film projects just having the greatest time.

Chitra Ragavan: That must have been extraordinary to see a wish you granted, and here was this person, healthy and successful and inspired probably by the wish that she was given.

Frank Shankwitz: Oh, yeah. Yeah, and we stay in touch, and when we had the premiere in Hollywood of the movie, I made sure that she was the one of the special guests and introduced her up to the stage in our Q&A following the screening, and the crowd just went wild. I mean, it's just a great story. I'm so happy for her.

Chitra Ragavan: I know the movie was really probably a wonderful next chapter in your life, but it also was... had a negative impact in that you parted ways with the Make-A-Wish Foundation as their official spokesman.

Frank Shankwitz: Yeah, and after, like I said, when started hiring people, and this was in 1982, '83, I became what they call Wish Ambassador. The Make-A-Wish Foundation would send me all over the United States even as far as Guam and Saipan and Tinian for meet-and-greets, for galas, for keynote speaking, and it was just... When the movie started, they wanted to take control of the movie, which the studio would allow, and they just got real upset with me for some reason, and just I'm not part of it anymore officially.

Frank Shankwitz: Now, I still promote the Make-A-Wish Foundation all I can. It's not about me, and whatever their issue is, that's fine, but it's about the kids, and I still raise... Everywhere I speak, I'm on a speaking circuit continuously, I promote the Foundation along with the foundations I'm associated with and anything we can do. It's about the kids, not about me.

Chitra Ragavan: Are you sad that your relationship with them ended and that something you helped start you are no longer formally associated with?

Frank Shankwitz: A little bit, but, I mean, it's not something I dwell on. It changes. Some days, you're the frog. Some days, you're the prince. It comes back and forth, but it's also given me the opportunity now to advance, to help start other nonprofits and be on the board for other nonprofits. It's something that I wasn't able to do before, so it's given me the opportunity to branch out and to help so many other things that we're involved with.

Chitra Ragavan: Let's go back to your parents. How did your relationship with your parents and also your relationship with Juan... I think we have a lot of important loose ends we want to tie up in this story, particularly your mother, considering that she essentially kidnapped you from your dad and then abandoned you and made you work at one point, took all your money and generally was not the most ideal poster mom at least in the early years.

Frank Shankwitz: Yeah, and, again, like I said, we never, even later years, never had a close relationship, but I respected her and showed respect because she was my mother, but as she got into her more senior years like about 60 years old, she got very involved. She was living in the Phoenix area and, all of a sudden, got very involved with veterans, the VA hospital down there, going in and volunteering, spending a lot of hours helping the veterans, even driving a van, picking them up, taking them back and forth to places, in fact even received awards from the VA out of Washington, D.C., for all the hours that she spent.

Frank Shankwitz: She also got very involved with what's called a crisis nursery, and these were little babies, they called them crack babies, that the mothers were addicted to crack, cocaine and so on, and would comfort them, would just cuddle them, would spend hours just holding them as they're going through these withdrawals, so she became a whole different person and lived 'til the age of 90, and we just stayed in contact all the time. I tried to help her as much as I could. Again, she's my mother. I respect her.

Chitra Ragavan: Did you have any ill will towards her for the treatment of you in your early years?

Frank Shankwitz: Not at all. Not at all. In fact, someone said to me several years ago, "Having a weird mother helps develop character."

Chitra Ragavan: I'm a mother, so I'm comforted by that.

Frank Shankwitz: No, not at all. If my life hadn't been what it is, maybe none of this would ever happen, and especially learning how to take care of myself.

Chitra Ragavan: What about your dad and Juan?

Frank Shankwitz: We'll start with Juan first, and, again, I stayed in contact with him. Juan passed away about 10 years ago now, lived 'til his middle 80's, but I stayed in contact with him continuously. I would go up to this little town of Seligman, and then, when he passed away, I'm now very close friends with his family, with one of his sons and their family, and, in the movie, there's only three names in the movie that are real, myself, my wife Kitty, and Juan, and I lobbied very hard that we could use his name because I wanted to pay back to Juan for everything that he did to me, and one of the biggest thing is I was able to invite the family at the Hollywood premier on the red carpet. They got to walk the red carpet, so just to show the respect and honor for Juan, and then, my father, I did stay in touch with my father mostly by telephone, by... because he lived in the Chicago area, but then I did get to visit him several times, and the last time I did see him in fact was when we went back in 1980 to bury the little boy, and he died a year later.

Chitra Ragavan: Reading your book and talking to you the other day and watching the movie this week, I was just wondering how you could maintain the spirit that you maintain. A lot of people would become embittered and fail in life with a lot less adversity. How did you manage to prevent that from happening?

Frank Shankwitz: Good surroundings, I guess, the people I work with, especially... One of the things, I was on what they call a Fatal Squad for the Arizona Highway Patrol. They developed a 10-man team, gave us some of the most significant, magnificent training you'd ever see, college courses, everything, and, the average patrolman, he can investigate a fatal accident, but it will take him several weeks to put this together. He's got the training, but not the specialized training that we had, and this takes him off the road literally for a couple of weeks. There's not a patrolman out there, and with the training we have, we were two-man teams, they would send us all over the state to these horrific fatal accidents, just body parts all over the place, and, after a while, that starts getting to you, and they didn't have counseling back in those days, but you found your own support group with your peers in that that you could just say, "Wow, man, I'm going crazy on this." "Let's talk about it," and, fortunately, now they do have, years later, where you go into the counselors and start talking about that, but I also happened to find a private... a friend that was a counselor, so I would go talk to her quite a bit, too, and I got to get these ghosts out of my head, so that's how we dealt with it.

Chitra Ragavan: I was thinking this is a podcast about your leadership, but, in some ways, it's a podcast also, this episode, about mentorship and the importance of mentorship, and you were surrounded by mentors, and, without them, do you think your life would have been a lot different?

Frank Shankwitz: Oh, definitely, definitely, and one of the things, like even high school, when I'm moved from eighth grade going up to, now, this town of Prescott, a little bit bigger, a different school system, and they wanted to put me back into eighth grade because of my math skills. Now, I tried out for the freshman football, and the coach said, "You're going to be on the first team immediately, and... but we're going to have to put you back to eighth grade they said." The coach said, "No, you're not. I'm going to work with him all summer, and then we're going to take the math test again," which I passed, but, again, here's an example of something, helping out. I'm always grateful for that. In fact, I still stay in touch with that coach, he's in his late 80's now, and always get a kick talking to him.

Chitra Ragavan: You now have a biography about you and you have a movie that was made about your life, both called Wish Man. You've gotten two honorary doctorates and dozens of awards and accolades. Looking back, do you have any thoughts about your life, where you were, and where you are now, and the importance of adversity in creating leaders like yourself?

Frank Shankwitz: It's character building. I mean, I had a lot of things, and I know there are several kids I'm sure that went through the same thing and they even do today, but it's all character building. It all develops integrity. I have no hard feelings of anything. In fact, I'm happy. I'm pleased with everything that's happened to me over my life. I never expected these awards. My wife says I need a bigger den because I'm running out of wall space, but just... and, again, this... It's something that I never thought about, I never sought, and all of a sudden it's happening. I don't know if I mentioned it to you that I received my star on the Walk of Fame in Las Vegas, which was a...

Chitra Ragavan: Congratulations.

Frank Shankwitz: ... big, big honor. I'm just two stars down from Elvis Presley, who I had met in my earlier career, so that's fun to be there.

Chitra Ragavan: That's wonderful. I can honestly say that you are the first podcast guest here who has literally died and come back to life, so that's just one reason I'm extremely pleased to have had this conversation with you. It's been great having you on the podcast. Thanks for being on it.

Frank Shankwitz: I appreciate being a guest, and thank you again.

Chitra Ragavan: I think it's particularly awesome to be able to talk to you during this Thanksgiving season when we all have so much to give thanks for and so many people to thank, and hearing you talk about gratitude I think is a really important lesson for all of us.

Frank Shankwitz: Yeah, and the message of the movie and the book is everyone can be a hero. Just help somebody out, as simple as that, and, especially what you said with the holidays coming up, there's a lot of people that do need some help.

Chitra Ragavan: Thank you very much.

Frank Shankwitz: All right, so long.

Chitra Ragavan: Frank Shankwitz is the award-winning creator and a Co-Founder of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, a global charity that fulfills the wishes of children with life-threatening illnesses. I highly recommend reading his book, Wish Man, and watching the movie by the same name.