

**R. Tony Penn**

**President and CEO of United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona**

**Interviewed by Birgit Burton**

**Written by Anne Stanford**

Tony Penn is an inspiration to all he encounters. As the President and CEO of United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona, Penn successfully leads the organization that positively affected the lives of more than 230,000 children, families, and seniors this past year alone. A dynamic, visionary leader, he possesses a strong equity lens and guides organizations in achieving mission-focused goals and objectives. Among his many recognitions and accolades, Penn received the 2021 Man of the Year Award from Greater Tucson Leadership for contributing significant time, energy, spirit, and leadership, making a positive impact on quality of life in the community. He and his wife have two adult sons and 13 grandchildren.

The AADO Network recently spoke with Penn to learn more about what led him to where he is today, the mentors who influenced him, the art of fundraising, and what he hopes his legacy will be, among other topics.

Penn grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, with seven siblings and a wonderful mother in a humble household that was filled with love. He served his country in the United States Air Force before embarking on his more than 20 years in the for-profit sector as an engineer with Teradyne Corporation. At Teradyne, he was a senior principal engineer before being named regional manager, where he managed a 14-state area and customer base of more than 120 customers in electronics manufacturing. During this time, Penn learned how to return shareholder value and meet quarterly metrics. As manufacturing started to move offshore, he was faced with having to travel to Asia for extended periods of time. With two sons at home who needed their dad, he decided to transition to a new chapter in his career. Penn said, “I made a transition from what I call success to significance when I went back to school, studied nonprofit management, and went into the nonprofit sector.”

Before joining United Way, Penn served in fundraising roles at the YMCA of Greater San Antonio for nine years.

Now he holds what he calls the “greatest job in the world” and describes how the positive transformation the United Way makes in the lives of individuals is much more rewarding than meeting quarterly metrics and

returning shareholder value. He shared, “I get to see the smiling faces of those folks whose lives we’re helping to improve, people that we’re giving a hand up to and folks who are becoming financially stable, people who are becoming homeowners for the first time, many of whom have graduated from post-secondary education and are going on to great careers, and seniors who are getting a chance to remain in their homes and have a high quality of life... all the way to the end of life, which is something that our United Way started to engage in about three years ago.”

For Penn, fundraising is an important part of his job, and he considers himself the fundraiser in chief of his organization. Discussing why every CEO should be deeply engage in their organizations’ fundraising efforts, Penn said, “There’s nobody who is better positioned to be able to open the doors, make the connections, and garner the trust and confidence that is require to maximize the revenue, the investment, and the gifts for the organization than the CEO.”

He added that CEOs and executive directors are given a “sacred trust” by the board of directors of the organization “to also play that role and help the

organization be able to meet the mandate of whatever the mission calls for.”

Over the course of his career, Penn was profoundly influenced by two role models—General Colin Powell and Jerry Panas. Powell inspired Penn “to pursue not only excellence but also to pursue impact” during his time in the military and beyond, lessons that continue to serve him.

Panas was significant in Penn’s nonprofit career as he learned the art of fundraising from Panas. He credits Panas for teaching him how to run a consummate annual campaign, how to recruit great fundraisers and build a fundraising team, and how to diversify revenue streams within fundraising by being a successful major gift fundraiser. Penn also acknowledges how his friendship with Panas taught him how to listen with intensity to donors and investors in order to make their philanthropic dreams come true.

In addition to the inspiring influences of Powell and Panas on his life, Penn also has been guided by his faith. A church-ordained, seminary trained pastor, Penn leans heavily on his faith, which has supported him throughout

his career. He said, “Oftentimes, I can take that leap not being able to see the net but knowing that it’s there.”

Leaning on his faith helps Penn as he considers the biggest challenge that currently keeps him up at night, which is the fact that the wealth gap continues to expand. According to Penn, this makes the work that he does in social services—helping people to get to a level of financial stability, being able to live a healthy lifestyle, and maximizing their educational attainment—more challenging. He said, “My concern is that the zip code for which I am born should not be a limitation to my ability to achieve. But right now, I cannot say that we’re heading toward concrete solutions of being able to make that a reality.”

Reflecting on how he hopes to be remembered at the end of his career, Penn shared that he wants to make a difference through his legacy and put in place a plan for sustainability for all that he has been privileged to help build.