



WINNING OVER A CITY

One neighborhood does not make a city make – especially a city of a million people. Much of Tucson still looks as Lancaster’s neighborhood did before he and his neighbors went to work – too much concrete, not enough vegetation.

But the change that Lancaster and others in the city have sparked is real. “There’s been a long steady effort to increase awareness and increase participation by the public,” says Catlow Shipek, one of several other water warriors who have taken up the cause. “It’s blossoming.” Tucson’s government has adopted ordinances that encourage rainwater harvesting for residents and mandate it for new commercial construction. New standards for street design are also in the works.

To Lancaster, the real proof is the changes he sees average Tucsonans making across the city. “What’s great is I can be riding my bike just about anywhere in town, and I’ll come across an individual or a neighborhood, sometimes even a business or city project where there’s an aspect of this going on,” he says. “Whereas, ten years ago – no way.”

Like anyone who spends so much time thinking about water, Lancaster often talks in terms of cycles: cycles of water use in a home or neighborhood, the larger cycles of nature found in water recirculating through sky and earth.

He has come to see human progress, too, as a kind of cycle, an endless circling back to traditional knowledge we have neglected or forgotten, which is then combined with new learning to take us another step forward. +

“Everything we’ve talked about, it’s all just simple shifts, inexpensive shifts, but 180-degree shifts,” he says. “Yet if we look at the heritage of this place, they’re fully in line with the past.”

His own journey, too, can be seen in cycles: leaving the desert only to return with a different perspective, gaining a new appreciation of old ways, cycling through despair over how things are to forging a resolve to make them better. It’s been a long and sometimes difficult road, from a boyhood imaging fanciful desert civilizations to an adulthood dedicated to recreating a way of living in tune with that landscape.

But today, that cause has been taken up by many, and Lancaster hopes to see it taken up by many more. “The thing is, anybody can really do almost all of this,” he says. “It’s really not hard. It just takes a little work, and it can make such a difference.”

In the largest sense, what Lancaster has learned points the way for a world that risks running low on the most basic ingredient of life.



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THE UNDERWOOD FAMILY SONORAN LANDSCAPE LABORATORY



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“The potential is already here,” he says, raising his face to enjoy a damp snowfall that would send most of us scurrying toward shelter. “Let’s just stop draining it away, let’s welcome it, and let’s embrace it.”