From Attorney to Homeless Advocate, with Freddy Clayton of Orlando Union Rescue Mission

Andrew Olsen:                  Good morning. This is Andrew Olsen, host of the Rainmaker Fundraising Podcast, and I'm so excited to be here today with my good friend Fred Clayton, President of Orlando Union Rescue Mission. Fred, good morning.

Freddy Clayton:                Good morning, Andrew. Thank you for having me. It's a treat to be here.

Andrew Olsen:                  Awesome, man. Hey, I'm also really grateful that we can be together today in beautiful Palm Springs, California, at the Citygate Network Conference. It's always nice, at least for me. You live in a Florida beach community. I'm stuck in Minneapolis where we get 50 inches of snow every year, so it's nice to be with you today in Palm Springs. I'd love if you could just take a moment and share with us a little bit about yourself and a little bit about the mission.

Freddy Clayton:                Okay, first let me talk about the mission. We're 70 years old. We were founded 70 years ago, 1948, by four businessmen in downtown Orlando who identified what they thought was a crisis in homelessness because there were six homeless guys hanging around the city. So, in conjunction with a local Methodist Church in downtown, they rented some space and brought in four beds just for an overnight shelter, and in the ensuing 70 years the ministry has expanded. We now operate two residential facilities, a men's home where we take care of 120 guests, all single men, full time. They live with us and everything. Room, board, clothing, everything they need is free, and then we also have a family home where we take care of single women without kids, single moms with their children, intact couples with their children, and we now have four single dads with kids.

Andrew Olsen:                  Wow.

Freddy Clayton:                A total of 138 guests, including 67 kids 17 and under live with us.

Andrew Olsen:                  That's a lot of kids.

Freddy Clayton:                Yeah, it is. And what we try to do, the centerpiece of our ministry is our discipleship program. In that, we provide the education, training, counseling and other assistance our guests need so when they leave us they will be independent and self-sufficient permanently. So they escape homelessness for the rest of their lives.

Andrew Olsen:                  That's great. Now give us a little background on yourself.

Freddy Clayton:                Okay. By training, I'm a lawyer and businessman. I'm neither smart enough nor good enough to have been involved in ministry or missions a whole career. I joined the Board of the mission, the Orlando Union Rescue Mission about 10 years ago, and had founded and was running a business that we sold, probably four years ago, and was in volunteering about 20 hours a week at the mission to obtain approval for a new men's home we were investigating. We needed to make a change in leadership at the mission, so the Board asked me to become their interim president. I promised I would stay for six months and I'm now 42 months into my six-month tenure as president of the mission.

Andrew Olsen:                  I think I should say congratulations for this, but I don't know.

Freddy Clayton:                It has been an unalloyed blessing to be at the mission.

Andrew Olsen:                  That's awesome.

Freddy Clayton:                Most folks I know who work in the secondary occupation, I worked hard and I spent a lot of time, especially when we were starting and building businesses, but nothing has consumed me like the mission has. I never understood what it was to think almost every conscious hour of the day about our guests and the problems they face and celebrating the successes they enjoy as they begin to transform their lives.

Andrew Olsen:                  That's really interesting. So you made a leap from a legal career to leading a rescue ministry. I'm curious what have you found to be the greatest challenges in that transition, and what have you learned?

Freddy Clayton:                Well, interestingly, one of the first things I learned is that there are really different and distinct populations of homeless people. Now I know the terms that are involved, like chronically homeless and episodically homeless, that we think roughly 15 to 18% of the folks out there who are homeless have a physical or mental impairment that will ever prevent them from being independent.

Andrew Olsen:                  Okay.

Freddy Clayton:                Those are called the chronically homeless. Our ministry at the mission is we aren't focused on those folks. We're focused on the people who can become independent and self-sufficient and then to find out out that, for those folks, roughly 80 to 85% of homeless on the streets, at the risk of sounding harsh, they are not there by coincidence or because of someone else's actions. They have typically engaged in a series of bad decisions that rendered them homeless, so at the mission we understand, we can give them an apartment and some money but unless we change the underlying behavior, unless they go through a transformation, they'll end up homeless again in pretty short order.

Freddy Clayton:                So we have to work on the underlying causes that rendered them homeless in the first place. Unless we can do that, all we're doing is providing immediate relief but encouraging a recurrence of the homelessness issue.

Andrew Olsen:                  That makes sense.

Freddy Clayton:                So the greatest challenge I have experienced is recognizing that neither the mission nor I can solve all those problems for our guests. As a Christian I feel compelled to do everything I can to help people, and at the mission I have an extraordinary opportunity to exercise that responsibility. I get to work with them literally on a daily basis and meet with them, and it breaks my heart and could discourage me when I see somebody who ultimately declines the assistance and doesn't let Jesus soften their heart. That's the way I describe it. That we immerse them in the Gospel because we know that long-term they can't be successful, typically in life or in the more profound issues in the human existence unless they get to know Jesus, so that's one of the things we really focus on, especially when they first move in.

Freddy Clayton:                So the challenge is being able to accept the fact that not all our guests are going to change either spiritually or functionally and not letting it discourage me. The thing that sustains me is seeing those guests who succeed. We had a young lady who, I got a call from a pastor, I happened to be at the office and it was probably eight-thirty at night and he had discovered a young lady living in a storage shed. He wanted to know whether we had room for her. Well, we did not have a bed and I said, "So, pastor, is she really sleeping in a storage shed?" And he said, "Absolutely." So I said, "We have a TV room that has a couch, and we can make that available. She can sleep on a couch. It's better than a storage shed."

Freddy Clayton:                So we brought her in. She had dropped out of school. She was 20 years old. She had dropped out of school in the 11th grade and had been defiant with her parents, and told us a story that her parents were abusive and didn't love her and none of it was true. Her parents, when she dropped out of school in the 11th grade, said, "Okay you need, in the interim, before you end up going back to school, you need to get a job and here are the rules if you want to live in our house." They were routine rules, curfew and behavior and no drug use and she defied it all. She became aggressively disobedient to them.

Andrew Olsen:                  Okay.

Freddy Clayton:                Eventually they ran out of patience and had to exercise some tough love and said, "You need to choose. Either you live by our rules or you have to live somewhere else." She, with what I consider kind of teenage bravado said, "Well, I've got friends who will let me live with them so I'm moving out." Those friends tired of the situation as quickly as her parents did, and so she found herself living literally in a storage shed, and the owner of the shed did not know it. She would sneak in there at night and sleep in there.

Freddy Clayton:                So we moved her in and for the first couple of days she was grateful and cooperative, and then she began chafing. Our program is restrictive and very disciplined. We have a five-thirty curfew and they have to sign in and out of our facility. We have an accredited high school on campus for our adults, and she had to go to school. She resisted all this. Finally, God began to soften her heart and we worked at a reconciliation with her parents. They came to visit her. We surprised her with a visit from her parents. This was probably three months into her tenure. She didn't know they were going to be there and, of course, there were a lot of tears and it was really, really wonderful and sentimental and she said, "I want to come home," and her mom said, "Great. We want you home as soon as you finish the program at the mission."

Freddy Clayton:                We have a graduation ceremony. She has been at the mission eight months. She is graduating on June 30th. We have 15 graduates this year, high school diplomas to award, so when I see her change her life and, let me back up a bit, when I see Jesus change her life, she accepted Him, began to recognize that she was at the mission not because anybody had abused her or somebody had conspired against her or the man had kept her down in some way. It was that she had made bad decisions.

Andrew Olsen:                  Sure.

Freddy Clayton:                And recognized that and began learning how to make better decisions, and so now we have this enormous confidence that when she leaves us she will be successful. She already has a job and at the mission, when they work, everything is still free. They give us their paycheck, we give them 25% back in spendable cash. 75% goes into a savings account in their names so when she leaves she'll have this nest egg.

Andrew Olsen:                  That's wonderful.

Freddy Clayton:                So she gets all the money and a forced savings account. What we tell her is that 75% you've been saving, that's what it's going to cost you to live in rent and utilities and insurance, all that stuff. That's what it's going to cost you, so everything you want to indulge in that's not essential is at 25%. So that's what you can expect your life to look like.

Freddy Clayton:                So when I see somebody go through that process and make that change and walk away with a life of dignity and hope, that's sustains me for those difficult times where people resist us and resist Christ and leave after a year before they're ready to leave, and they've got a job and they think they've done it. The term we use, they think, or they'll even say, "No, no, I've got this. I really don't need your help. I don't need God's help. I've got this now. I've been sober for a year and I don't need your help." It's never the case.

Andrew Olsen:                  For sure. Never the case for any of us.

Freddy Clayton:                That's exactly right.

Andrew Olsen:                  You know, the incidence of homelessness seems to be increasing nationally. In communities that I visit I see it all the time. I know that you all see it as well and you've been embarking, for the last couple of years, on a major campaign to increase your capacity to serve the homeless in the Orlando area. Talk to me a little bit about what's been most exciting to you in that expansion process.

Freddy Clayton:                Well, two things. First off, the consequences of our campaign in an expanded facility where, right now we have, I mentioned earlier, we have 120 men living with us full-time in our men's home. We'll increase that to 210 guests when we move into the new facility within 30 days. So we'll be able to take 90 more men in Orlando off the streets and provide them an opportunity to transform their lives. That is the single most exciting aspect of it.

Freddy Clayton:                Now, there are different components to that. We'll be expanding our internal ministries and we'll provide a more intense and focused substance abuse recovery program. We'll be able to reach out to community partners and organizations that generally serve the same folks we do, especially ones who are Christ-centered, so we will enhance our ability to serve because we will be working more closely with more organizations.

Andrew Olsen:                  Okay.

Freddy Clayton:                In the process, we needed to raise a total of about $6 million, and that has been both a challenging and a rewarding experience. We went around with this whole process backwards, kind of. The initial impetus for building our new men's home was our current men's home is in downtown Orlando and it sits on a city block that is immediately adjacent to the Amway Arena, which is where the Orlando Magic NBA team plays. The Orlando Magic have bought up our city block. They are now our landlord... With the idea that they've already designed and are initiating developing the partnerships to do this build, a $200 million retail, residential, office complex on this site.

Andrew Olsen:                  Okay.

Freddy Clayton:                We occupied about one-sixth of that site and it will shock most of your listeners to understand that our use wasn't necessarily consistent with their vision for their new complex.

Andrew Olsen:                  I can imagine, yes.

Freddy Clayton:                One of the programs we have is an emergency shelter for our men where we have about 40 men who check in every day at 3:30 in the afternoon and we provide them overnight shelter, food, chapel service, and a place to sleep and then reverse that in the morning. Then they're on their way and we use that as a recruiting tool for our long-term program. Well, the Magic probably didn't envision enthusiastically the idea of our 40 guys waiting outside and using the lobby of the new upscale hotel they're going to build on that site as their congregating place before they check into the mission.

Freddy Clayton:                So they had an incentive to make it attractive to us. They've been a wonderful partner through this, and they said, we want to do this as soon as possible. It's costing us. They had already bought three-quarters of the entire city block before we worked out a deal with them, so they'd already invested millions of dollars and every day is time, cost and money, so they want to get this done as quickly as possible. So they said, "We'll find you another place," and they worked with us on finding the new location. We began renovating an old motel to serve as our new men's home before we began a capital campaign.

Freddy Clayton:                So we have reversed the normal process and I would tell everybody out there, "Please don't do what we did." Raise your funds. If there's any way, raise your funds first, and then begin construction because, first off, you don't have to worry about whether you can raise all the funds and second, people typically give more enthusiastically to an idea of a building that's coming out of the ground or that's going to be renovated than to retire debt.

Andrew Olsen:                  For sure.

Freddy Clayton:                In ours, the Magic were kind enough, gave us interest-free loan for the renovation to the extent we needed it. We're paying it off as we raise funds, so it's all going to work out. We'll be debt free by the end of this year, so it worked out perfectly. God had a plan in this. At the mission, we felt uneasy at times about this. We hated the idea of assuming a lot of debt, but it's worked out and it's been beneficial, and it's allowed us to develop our new facility and open these new ministries. It would have been two years, really, before we were able to do so otherwise, so we're extraordinarily grateful for the entire process.

Andrew Olsen:                  You came to the mission with, I suspect, a lot of great connections to the business community because of your prior work. I think our listeners would appreciate hearing a little bit about, throughout your campaign, how you actively engaged the business community and also how you worked with individuals to bring them along, get them excited about what was going on at the ministry. Talk a little bit about that.

Freddy Clayton:                That's interesting, because that's one of the things I really thought that I was bringing to the mission when I came here. My prior professional environment had been the business community in Orlando and what I found out, and this shouldn't have surprised me but I'm really slow-witted and thick-headed, so I don't appreciate things as quickly as I should. Very few of the folks who are good targets for development both because they have resources and they have a heart for the kind of ministries we conduct knew about the mission.

Freddy Clayton:                Now, I was in exactly that position about ten years ago when the chairman of our board asked me to join the board. I should be embarrassed and humiliated to admit this publicly but I have no conscious so I'm not, that I made a bunch of flimsy self-absorbed excuses why I couldn't join the board, about bing too busy, and I was occupied in so many other worthwhile endeavors and our board president said the perfect thing. "I understand, Freddy. Tell you what, just come but and take a tour of the mission. That's all I want you to do."

Freddy Clayton:                I took a tour and it not only changed my perspective, it changed my life. I saw what God was doing there and I said what we now call the four magic words, "I had no idea." I did not know there was an organization doing that in Orlando, to that many people who desperately need the help, all for the love of Christ. So I realized, what I really need to do with my friends and colleagues and contacts in the business community is get them down for a tour and show them, because they say almost to a person, "I had no idea. Oh my gosh, you mean you want me to participate in this? I would love to."

Freddy Clayton:                Now, sadly, they don't all say that as quickly as I would like them to, but it changes their perspectives. Those folks, even the non-believers out there, realize that we are just about the only program in Orlando that offers a long-term solution to the homelessness problem.

Andrew Olsen:                  Wow. Okay.

Freddy Clayton:                And, because I work in downtown Orlando, I know the businessmen in Orlando are concerned about the number of homeless who, to be candid, bother their clients and customers. I have enormous empathy for those businessmen. They don't want to hurt or ignore or neglect anybody, but similarly they don't want their clients sand customers to be hassled. They're looking for a solution. My experience has been that the solutions that most of the government organizations come up with are stop-gap measures or are primarily visual impacts. We'll hide the problem without worrying about a long-term solution.

Freddy Clayton:                When I talk to businessmen, they see that the mission provides a long-term, permanent solution for every individual who succeeds in our program and they respond to that, both from a professional interest and from either a spiritual interest because they realize that we really are Christ-centered. We tell all of our guests, the only reason we even have an operation is because we realize how much God loves us and all he wants us to do is share that love in a specific way, and the mission's way is by helping the homeless.

Freddy Clayton:                Every other believer out there has a ministry in which they try to share God's love. That's what we've got to think is called The Orlando Union Rescue Mission to share it. People respond because they really do see we love our guests. We hold them accountable, and we give them the tools they need to equip themselves for long-term independence. People respond and so what I try to do is call people even if I have to beg, plead, threaten, anything, implore, just to get them to come take a tour. I know that as busy as any businessman is, he has 45 minutes in the next month to take a tour. That's what I'll do. I'll say, "Come on. You tell me how busy you are. Look, I've been there. I started and built two businesses that we sold. I know how much time you spend there, but you've got 45 minutes to come out and take a tour."

Freddy Clayton:                Inevitably, I wear them out. I do. I hope it's in a nice way, but I wear them out. I'll say, "Okay, can't do it this week? I'll call you Tuesday." So I warn them, "I'm calling Tuesday." They ultimately realize that I'm not going to stop calling until either one of two things happen. They come down or they mistreat me so badly that I'll quit, and I am very, very durable. I can take a lot of mistreatment before I realize what they're doing, and most of them are nice people. They don't want to do that.

Andrew Olsen:                  Yeah. You know, it's so interesting that you say that because I think one of the biggest mistakes that we make in our industry is we stop asking when it starts to feel just a little bit uncomfortable.

Freddy Clayton:                Right.

Andrew Olsen:                  Not realizing that, if we can just sustain the uncomfortable experience a little bit more, it's usually that third or fourth or fifth time that we make the ask that someone actually says yes to us, whether it's for a gift or even for a tour. So I appreciate hearing that you guys are pretty tenacious about your approach to that.

Freddy Clayton:                One of the things I realized is that, specifically for the tour or for meeting, when I got to the mission, we had a lot of long-time donors who may not have given a whole lot, but they've been really, really regular. They've been enormously faithful to the mission, and we didn't even know any of them. We had never met them personally, so I began calling them, and all I said was, "Let me come by and thank you in person." Almost to a person, what they said was, "No, no, you don't need to thank me." Eventually what I would so is say, "Okay, I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for me because I need to thank you because we haven't done that. Would you please indulge me? Do me the favor of letting me come by and meet you and thank you in person?"

Andrew Olsen:                  Interesting.

Freddy Clayton:                People, especially generous people, and they've already demonstrated their generosity by giving, they want to accommodate you. So if you ask them for a favor as opposed to starting out by saying, "No, look, it's for you," and I do that. I do say, "Andrew, please let me come. You are so generous. So faithful. You have transformed so many lives with the mission. I'd like to come out and thank you in person." And because you're generous and you're unassuming and self-effacing, "No, no, you don't need to thank me. Knowing that the mission is using the funds appropriately is all the thanks I need." I must have heard that 200 times and they're sincere.

Andrew Olsen:                  Sure. Yeah.

Freddy Clayton:                I would persist. I would write them a note, then, and one of the things I have found is a hand-written note... Now, I have the world's cheapest stationary. I do. It is a notepad with probably 20-pound bond paper and it just says, I think it may say, "From the desk of Freddy Clayton" at the top. I write probably eight to 10 personal notes a day, at night, to donors and to prospects and mostly they're just thank-you's. I get more expressions of gratitude and more attention for hand-written notes than I do anything else because people have told me no one does that any more.

Andrew Olsen:                  It's a lost art.

Freddy Clayton:                I will tell you, it's not fun and I wish I could tell you that I am so grateful that I'm filled with inspiration to do it and that I love doing it every night, it's one of the most fulfilling things I do. It's not. It is a pain but I won't go home until I do it. I'm a very undisciplined person, so I have to impose discipline on myself and one of the ways I do it is simply writing those notes at night. So when I talk to somebody and he won't let me come see him, I'll write him a note and say, "I hope you won't mind if I call you in two weeks." So I put them on guard, and I've also told them, so they're not mad at me when I call because I've already warned them I'm calling.

Andrew Olsen:                  Sure.

Freddy Clayton:                Then I'll ask them for the favor, "Just let me come by." It really is, I tell them, "I promise you it will be no more than 10 minutes." If he doesn't respond, if we don't get engaged, I'm gone in 10 minutes. Typically what happens is I start telling stories about the mission, like this young lady I told you about. That's what they want to hear. They want to hear that God really is moving in these lives and that their money is making a difference. And that's what I tell them. These ministries exist and these success stories occur because you are generous.

Andrew Olsen:                  Absolutely.

Freddy Clayton:                You are transforming these lives, and once they hear the stories, then they want to ask about the mission, typically.

Andrew Olsen:                  That makes a lot of sense. So we are just about out of time but I want to ask you one last question that I think would be helpful to many of our listeners. If you dial the clock back four years to your initial onboarding at the mission as the president, if there's somebody else who's kind of in that space right now that's just taking new leadership role, what are the one or two pieces of advice that you would give someone to help them launch successfully into a role like yours?

Freddy Clayton:                The first thing I would tell you is what, for me, has been the biggest surprise and the biggest blessing and that is get to know the guests. Go out and meet the folks you're serving. Once or twice a week, I get up really early and I hate this but I try to do it with a smile. I go and eat with our guys at the men's home. They eat at six in the morning, so I got to get up and dressed and out and at the men's home at six in the morning to meet the guys. It makes such a huge difference in their lives, and I get to know what they're really like and what problems they're encountering and difficulties they have. As a result, these people are now friends so I will take them out, just myself, and we'll go out and do community work projects.

Andrew Olsen:                  Wow.

Freddy Clayton:                And they love it. They love going out and helping, so we now have this... We've begun working with some inner city communities in Orlando cleaning up neighborhoods. We'll show up with 30 guys and we'll help the neighborhood association clean up and then we'll provide a cook-out. We'll bring our grill and cook-out at the community center and feed everybody.

Freddy Clayton:                But it's because we get to know the guys. So I'd say the first thing to do is get to know the guests who are living at the mission or, if you don't have a full time residential, who are the guys staying with you at night? Get to know them. That will both inspire you and give you insight into what they're like.

Freddy Clayton:                The second would be to build a good team. I was incredibly blessed to inherit most of our team. We had a really good infrastructure of faithful, dedicated saints in place who have the same heart to help the people. There's no way one person can do anything, especially in a growing mission where you're looking to expand your ministries. There's no way you can do everything. You have to learn to delegate and to trust the people, and the only way you can trust them is if you have good folks working there.

Andrew Olsen:                  Absolutely.

Freddy Clayton:                So to the extent I can offer anybody advice, I make no warranty about the value of it, but that's what I'm going to tell you.

Andrew Olsen:                  Man, I appreciate you being here with us today and sharing. Thank you so much. It was great to have you.

Freddy Clayton:                It's been my pleasure. It's a treat to be here, and good luck on everything.

Andrew Olsen:                  One last thing. If somebody listening to this podcast wants to get in touch with you or wants to learn more about the mission or maybe spend a few minutes just learning from you, what's the easiest way for somebody to get in touch?

Freddy Clayton:                I'll give you my phone number and my email address.

Andrew Olsen:                  That's great.

Freddy Clayton:                My email address is fred[dot]clayton@ourm[dot]org, for Orlando Union Rescue Mission, .org. It's fred[dot]clayton@ourm[dot]org. My cell phone number is 407-928-6375. 407-928-6375. I'm available, sadly, 24 hours a day because of the nature of what we do. I hope you can tell from this podcast what I love to do almost more than anything else in the world is talk about what the mission does.

Andrew Olsen:                  That's awesome. Really appreciate it.

Freddy Clayton:                God bless you.

Andrew Olsen:                  You as well.

Freddy Clayton:                Thank you, Andrew.