



Insider's Look at Grand Canyon

Webisode #008 – Ranger David Smith Interviews Park Employee JD Gonzales - Transcript

DAVE- Welcome podcast listeners – this is Ranger Dave Smith sitting here today at Grand Canyon National Park the week of September 18 as we get ready to celebrate Spanish Heritage Month here at this park and all National Parks across the nation. There's a bunch of stuff going on in the park the next week or so...primarily what we are going to be doing is having a number of exhibits that emphasize Spanish cultural heritage at the park with the 1540 expedition of Coronado that came to the park and brought Señor Cardenas to look over the side; and we will be talking about Father Garces who came here as part of the Anza Expedition in 1776. We will be giving a whole bunch of bilingual programs along the rim of the canyon in Spanish and English to talk about natural history to talk about cultural history on September 26. The real highlight of the day will be the debut of the Ken Burns film on our national parks we will be showing that evening as part of our 7:30 program at the Mather Amphitheater. If you happen to be up here that weekend in our sister community of Tusayan just outside of the park there is going to be an all evening celebration of Spanish heritage and culture, down at the campground in Tusayan, just across the street from the IMAX theater with free music and food and plenty of dancing. So if you happen to be in Grand Canyon on those days, please stop by Tusayan, get some free food, enjoy the music, do some dancing, and meet some new friends at Grand Canyon.

] Well, today I have the special honor of hanging out with JD Gonzales. JD is the shop manager here at Grand Canyon National Park and he is in charge of all the maintenance operations for all the vehicle operations as part of the park's fleet. And as part of Spanish Heritage Month, we are interviewing employees who are Hispanic and what it is like to work here. So, JD, how are you doing?

JD-Just fine Dave, thank you. Doing well today.

DAVE-So JD and I had a really great opportunity this last year, he and I were both in a leadership academy together. We spent the last eight or nine months studying how to be good leaders in the National Park Service. So it's great to speak with him for a while. So JD, I don't know a lot about your history with the park - when did you first come to Grand Canyon?

JD-I started with the Grand Canyon in 1994 -

DAVE-And what were you doing before you came to the Grand Canyon?

JD-I was working with the Bureau of Reclamation – another agency in the DOI out of Socorro NM and transferred to the Park Service.

DAVE-So most of your adult career, you've been working as a civil servant.

JD-Yes – I started with the military and then got on with the copper mines and NM sand then I got on with the government in 1984 – I've completed 30 years – going on 31 – including my military service, so I'm still going.

DAVE-As I recall, 30 years is kind of a magic number in the park service. You're close to retirement...or maybe not so close...

JD-I will be 100% eligible to retire in four years at the age of 56, so that's my magic number.

DAVE- Excellent ... I've got a much longer way to go myself so I'm not quite there yet. So, what drew you to a job at Grand Canyon? Why did you want to work for the park service instead of the Bureau of Recreation?

JD-Well, I remember as a little kid, always coming to the Grand Canyon, born and raised as a Native Arizonan, my parents also, we always came to the Grand Canyon. We used to come here as little kids, I remember coming here playing on the rim, all the time. Running around, going to the gift shops, trying to get my parents to buy us things. Mom can you get me this, Dad can you buy me that. And always seeing the rangers... probably seeing some of the interpretive rangers. Always said that would sure be nice. So it took me about 24 years and I finally got here. I've always wanted to work for the park – it has always been a fantastic place. Being a native Arizonan, you know...this is a wonderful place to work.

DAVE-So where were you living in Arizona when you were born. What community were you in?

JD-Well I was born and raised in a little town called Rey Sonora Arizona, which is now an open pit copper mine. It's not Kennecott anymore; I'm not sure who owns it now. But, it's a little bit south east of Superior, Arizona where I'm from. But I was born and raised in that town, and when the mine expanded, they kicked us out of that town, and we moved to Superior ... in second grade I moved to Superior. So I was raised there.

DAVE- So, as a kid, did you do a lot of camping in National Parks and National Forests? Or things like that?

JD-We did, we did. In the summers my father always took us out. We would go to Slide Rock ... Slide Rock was a big thing back then. Down in Sedona – then we would make the trip up here. And then we would come up here and camp for a couple of days. And head on back home.

DAVE-Well, Slide rock is still a big thing; I hear it from Tourists all the time. So, one of the neat things about Grand Canyon compared to other National Parks is that it is so big. During the summer time, we have about 3000 in the Grand Canyon Village area, and the park hires on somewhere between 550 and 600 employees during the summer, so there are a lot of families here. There's a school here. You have a family – did you raise your kids here at Grand Canyon?

JD-We came here in 1994, and my children were young. My daughter was not in school yet, my son started school... I don't know what years they were, but they both went to school here and graduated from here.

DAVE-Both my kids are going to school here right now and it is a decent school to have them both at. So we're having fun.

So, for folks that are maybe new to Arizona, maybe they are recent residents, maybe they have just moved here from Mexico, what does Grand Canyon offer to someone who is a tourist.

Ya, it's a great cool thing to see, people like looking at that gash in the earth there, but what kind of things do you enjoy here?

JD-What I enjoy seeing... what I enjoyed as a kid, is the culture, the native culture, is what the Northern Arizona, Grand Canyon represents. It's the native culture. That something that has always caught my interest. And as for little bit different cultures, there is a lot of Hispanic too. The little community of Tusayan just outside of the park is starting to build a little bit. But it's the southwest culture is the one thing that attracts the people...

DAVE-So when you were a little kid, do you remember seeing the Hopi Dancers on the rim of the canyon?

JD-Yes, I remember them all the time. And not only the Hopi dancers, I think that there was more cultural influence in the canyon. The dancers of course and there were always vendors selling stuff, and I know that stuff stopped a while ago, but I always remember the dancers.

DAVE-Great. Well, JD I look forward to working with you for the next few years before that magic date comes and you get the chance to retire, but its great knowing that we have people like you working here, helping to keep the fleet going - we wouldn't have a fleet without you. You know, we've been getting all of these new hybrids, recently, into the park, and I would imagine that this is a whole new challenge for you guys.

JD-Yes it is ... a whole new challenge. Believe me, you need to know how to service them and it is not the same as gasoline powered vehicle. It's a challenge.

DAVE-I was just talking to some of the protection rangers on the way here and they were saying that on one of the challenges when they have an accident with a hybrid or one of the electric cars, is safely getting out to the car and not worrying about shock or something like that.

JD-Well like I said, Norman and I have taken some classes and it is different. But, in the case of an accident, most of these cars are automatically grounded, so there is not much chance of getting shocked.

DAVE-Well, this morning when I got up, it was just around 40 degrees which means winter is just around the corner, so I've got to ask if you guys are prepping and getting ready for winter activities in the park.

JD-We are. We are getting up and starting to make orders and getting everything ready, getting the plows checked out.

DAVE-Well, good luck. I hope it's a beautiful winter and not too cold, but still nice and white over Christmas. And it's a pleasure working with you at the park.

JD-It's been nice Dave. The same here. Like I said this has been a dream come true to work at a park here in my home state. Like I said, I enjoy the culture here, it's beautiful and this week, being Spanish Heritage week, and I think it will be nice to see what is brought up to the park.

DAVE-Just a reminder, on September 26, if you are in the neighborhood, please stop by the park. One of the neat things about the weekend is that it is a fee free day here at the park, so there are no charges for anyone coming into the park. We will have a variety of special programs in the park, and we will also be having a recruitment table here with the US Forest Service and the National Park Service, telling folks about different jobs in the park service and in the forest, if you are interested in that type of career. So this is David Smith signing off for this pod cast, Enjoy your park.