

CITY LIFESTYLE

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FEATURED ARTICLE

Women of Chandler

Meet Chandler City Lifestyle's 2024
Honorees



Photography by Lindsay Borg

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Christina Atwood, Nicole Earl

Co-Founders, Gathering Humanity

In 2016, Christina Atwood went on a local Facebook group to invite the community to help provide goods for an arriving refugee family she had learned about, and the response was so overwhelming it led to joining with Nicole Earl to start and run a nonprofit, Gathering Humanity. This grassroots organization provides essential goods to those experiencing resettlement. They organize community donations and volunteers in order to furnish apartments for refugees and others, helping make their house truly a home, offering not only a significant financial benefit but a warm welcome to new neighbors.

The organization is 100% run by volunteers and supported through donations. It provides ways to engage people of all ages to make a difference and serve the vulnerable arriving in our area.

“The vast majority of work is done in concert with four local resettlement agencies who notify us of refugee arrivals.

“We leave behind a sign in every apartment we set up that states that the items are gifts from people in the community that hope they find safety and peace in our country.”

Kelly Schwab

Attorney

A native Arizonan, Kelly Schwab was the first in her family to graduate college. As an award-winning attorney, she was hired for her “dream job” in 2016 as the Chandler city attorney and risk manager, where she provides legal advice in all matters of municipal law.

“I have a role of keeping Chandler a wonderful place to live and work.”

At an early age, Schwab’s parents promoted the idea of being active in the community to make it a place you want to live and thrive.

“My parents were great role models, and my childhood home was always open to those in need. My family continues this commitment, and we volunteer together in the community through school and work.”

Schwab also volunteers her time providing pro bono legal services to a local animal rescue organization, Halo Animal Rescue, and training municipal lawyers through the State Bar of Arizona.

Her bucket list includes arguing a case before the United States Supreme Court.

Madhavi Reddy

Entrepreneur

Madhavi Reddy is dedicated to connecting the community through an understanding of her Indian culture and making it approachable. She owns multiple local businesses, including ethnic grocery stores, a catering company, and Feringhee Modern Indian (named best new restaurant in 2022 and first from the East Valley to top the list), bringing the people of Chandler and the southeast Valley together through food.

“I’ve always had a deep desire to bring people together through food, celebrate diversity, and introduce the vibrant parts of Indian culture and cuisine to Chandler.”

With the belief that no one should go to sleep hungry, her businesses support several local nonprofit organizations with food and meal donations.

Reddy also gives her time and enthusiasm to running an Indian language school, Manabadi Telugu, where she has been a volunteer teacher for the past seven years.

“I love being able to help parents and children connect with each other through their culture.”

Karen Joseph

Community Organizer

Karen Joseph describes herself as a “community builder” and has been instrumental in giving back through various initiatives and organizations she has founded over the years, demonstrating her belief in the power of kindness, connection, and community.

It began 14 years ago when she established SEVEN Networking in Chandler, with the vision of bringing local entrepreneurs together to learn, grow, and prosper.

Joseph continued her efforts by founding Kindness Konnectors in 2017, a group focused on spreading love and kindness through community projects such as feeding the homeless, creating Mother's Day gifts for women in shelters, hosting spa days for seniors, and organizing flower arranging sessions for residents in memory care.

Joseph recently authored a book titled *Manners Are Magical!*, which offers fun and engaging activities to teach good manners to both children and adults. Inspired by her book, Joseph founded the nonprofit organization KIDS Kindness Org, which focuses on nurturing kindness in children and undertaking kindness

projects such as making valentines for veterans and assembling birthday boxes for seniors in low-income housing.

CC Cantabrana

City of Chandler

Raised by a family with deep Chandler roots, CC Cantabrana is a proud product of CUSD and began volunteering in her early teens.

She credits her passion for community to two people: “My mother’s example taught me the true measure of wealth is not in what we have, but in what we can give. Secondly, at the age of 7, Alberto Esparza played a pivotal role in broadening my horizons. Coming from a marginalized, low-income community, Alberto mentored me and embodied the idea of being the change I wanted to see, empowering me to dream big.”

Soon after graduation, her love for the Chandler community began in earnest with an unwavering commitment to public service. In her current role with the city’s DEI Division, she is dedicated to creating equity and inclusivity.

“I think it's so important to make people feel included and valued. Witnessing someone realize they are seen and appreciated is profoundly fulfilling to me. It's about creating a space where every voice is heard and respected and creating a sense of community and belonging.”

Lenore Dembs

Chandler Fire Department

Firefighter Lenore Dembs has spent over 25 years of dedicated service with the Chandler Fire Department.

Her nominator writes, “She is humbly dedicated to serving the community and defines what it means to give maximum effort in all things she does. Her fellow firefighters would attest to the fact that if you think you are going to outwork Lenore, you will be disappointed.”

Her service to the community of Chandler represents the highest level of professionalism. Dembs was honored by her peers and the department as the 2023 EMT of the Year. This is an award given to an EMT that exceeds expectations in all capacities of their job performance.

“I feel we are on this earth to help each other. Through my job, I can help people on possibly their worst day.”

Something you may not know?

“I was inducted into my high school Hall of Fame for volleyball, basketball, and softball, earning the most letters in the history of my school.”

Loan Dao

Dentist

Loan Dao, self-described as one of the “boat people” in the 1980s, faced ferocious pirates and an unforgiving ocean to come to the U.S., only to spend two years in a refugee camp.

“I live the definition of resiliency and determination.”

Now this 18-year resident has a thriving dental practice in Chandler, as well as owns several assisted living homes, but she hasn’t forgotten those in need. Dao gives her time to many community events and causes and

donates free dental care to Mission of Mercy. She is an ASU founder of Project Humanities. Early on she set goals for her three children to be good citizens and pillars of the community and leads by example.

“Discipline and obsession will take you further than passion ever will. You just need to love yourself enough to know you deserve more, brave enough to demand more, and disciplined enough to work for more.”

Something that might surprise you?

“I’m a podcast junkie, listening to at least 10 a day at 1.5x speed!”

Dr. Janet Drez

Volunteer

Eleven years ago, inspired by God, Janet Drez and her husband intentionally left their beautiful Ocotillo home and moved into an abandoned house in the Galveston neighborhood with the purpose of opening their home to those in need and follow Matthew 22:37-39, “loving your neighbors as yourself.”

There is not enough time or space to list all the ways Drez gives back to her community but volunteering at schools, leading Bible studies, and hosting teen nights in her home a couple of times a month are just a few. She also creates and organizes free week-long day camps for 80-90 elementary kids during spring and fall breaks.

Being positive and enthusiastic in the face of hardship, sadness, or weakness has the power to change the situation, offer solutions and breed joy in the journey.

Something that might surprise you?

“I taught entrepreneurship and marketing at Mesa Community College.”

Cindy Grigory

Teacher, Skyline Gila River

Cindy Grigory recognizes that a true education includes more than teaching the basics and requires hands-on practices, teamwork, and creative problem-solving. Her tenure includes teaching at Title One schools, Skyline Gila River Reservation, and students with learning challenges.

“My students push me to continuously seek out solutions to help them overcome obstacles.”

They will confirm her favorite mantra comes from a Disney movie, “From failing we learn, from success, not so much.”

Her nominator wrote, “She is a compassionate educator with a singular focus: closing the literacy gap that exists based on socio-economic status. Her love for her students and her passion for literacy is infectious.”

Believing literacy is a basic need, her bucket list includes starting a free dyslexia clinic for low-income children.

Something you may not know? She twirled fire batons in high school!

Kristine Carpenter

Teacher

Kristine Carpenter has served Chandler School District for 28 years as a teacher and administrator. Just starting out, she was particularly impressed by another teacher, “She taught me the importance of nurturing and caring about every student and showed me the impact that teachers have on a student’s life. It shaped me into who I am as a teacher today.”

Carpenter is also all about kindness and the role it plays in our society. To impress that upon students, she partnered with another teacher to start a Kindness Kids Club designed to promote kindness in numerous ways to help others during challenging times. With over 50 members, their good work has even been featured on local news programs.

Volunteering is also an important part of her life. From leading a traveling student musical group to fundraising for students needing special tutoring to helping young children with special needs have a fun day of sporting events, Carpenter leads a life of servant leadership.

Something you may not know about her? When she was 20, she was a contestant on *The Dating Game* in Hollywood.

Megan Jhaver, M.D.

Physician

Having a life that was defined by service since she was a child, becoming a doctor seemed a natural path for Megan Jhaver. Describing herself as a true empath, she has a very hard time seeing others in pain or sadness, which seems ironic for a doctor.

In her internal medicine practice, mentorship is an important part of her life.

“I believe that each of us has an integral responsibility to help educate our youth and to provide equal access to education. Our communities thrive when our children are educated and equipped with the most powerful tools.”

She is also very passionate about serving globally. Having been the lead and only physician on three medical mission trips to Haiti or serving on two construction mission trips to Nicaragua building homes and latrines for poor families living in awful conditions in the barrio, Jhaver knows, “There really is no feeling in the world quite like serving and helping someone you have never met before and expecting nothing in return. It is simply the best feeling in the world!”

Lt. Donna Reno

Chandler Police Dept

To describe Donna Reno as “curious” might be an understatement! As a child, she always wanted to be a detective and was interested in homicide cases, especially serial killer cases.

“I have always been intrigued with the psychology of why people commit serial crimes.”

After an initial interest in the FBI, Lieutenant Reno started her career with Chandler PD in 2007, and over the years, she has served with numerous duties from patrol operations to community services to wellness training, including the Special Victim’s Unit, School Resource Officer, Professional Standards Section, Watch Commander, and the Training Section. Throughout her career, she has been active in teaching many topics both within the department and many community groups.

Something you may not know?

“If my vision had been 20/20 as a child, I would have gone into the Air Force to fly fighter planes and then become an astronaut. I am fascinated about how vast space is with such a variety of things going on that sometimes are incomprehensible.”

Jacki Ryan

Intel

An Arizona native, Jacki Ryan went to the same junior high and high school that her father did. She and both her boys graduated from the University of Arizona.

“Go Cats!”

She has always been a “helper” and follows in her family’s footsteps with their deep roots and history of public service in Chandler. Her past and present community service speaks volumes on her commitment to Chandler, including with the Chandler Museum Foundation, Chandler Service Club, Chandler National Little League, CUSD, and Intel volunteer opportunities.

Her nominator writes, “Her tireless efforts have left an indelible mark on our community, from organizing local events to volunteering for charitable causes to mentoring youth and supporting the elderly. Jacki’s genuine compassion and kindness shines through in every interaction, creating a positive and inclusive environment for those around her.”

Something you may not know?

“I practice Spanish every day on Duolingo.”

Sheryl Keeme

Neighbors Who Care

Sheryl Keeme describes herself as a “nonprofit groupie.” I am a community mobilizer from way back.” She has recruited and trained volunteers across the country for the American Cancer Society, raised money riding hundreds of miles on a bike for the National MS Society, and has worked with many nonprofits with missions as varied as the people they serve.

As a founding board member of Sun Lakes Memory Café, current board member of For Our City Chandler, and executive director of Neighbors Who Care (NWC), Keeme is committed to bringing the community and its resources together to help aging Chandler adults and those suffering from dementia. She had volunteered with NWC for many years before being named executive director and brings her experience in nonprofit management, fundraising, and marketing to the organization.

Keeme is also a writer and book coach, helping people tell their stories and self-publish on Amazon.

Shelby Arians

Arians Family Foundation

With a successful banking career, Shelby Arians still makes giving back a priority, serving on multiple boards and volunteering with organizations including ICAN, Boys and Girls Clubs, Chandler Dream Center, CUSD, and City of Chandler.

She also helps run her family’s foundation, the Arians Family Foundation (AFF), founded by her in-laws, Bruce and Christine Arians. AFF supports Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) to make sure that children who are involved in the court system as a result of abuse or neglect by their families receive the love and help they need. Locally, Arians started a chapter called S.P.E.A.K – Serving With Purpose To Empower And Advocate For Kids, creating a voice for those in the foster care system.

Something you may not know?

“I played soccer for 15 years and used to race Hobby stock race cars with my dad and brother on a dirt track.”

Erica Maxwell

Educator

Erica Maxwell has served more than 25 years in local educational institutions, both as a teacher and administrator including CUSD, Gila River Indian charter school, Chandler-Gilbert Community College, and ASU. She was also appointed as Arizona’s first associate superintendent of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion for the Department of Education.

As chairwoman of the city’s Human Relations Commission, “I am fueled to pursue equity and create more inclusive and compassionate communities for all. I remain steadfast in my commitment to effecting positive change.”

Maxwell co-authored a book with her daughter, Jessica, *Beauty With A Birthmark*, which teaches children empathy, understanding, and acceptance as they learn to embrace themselves and what makes each child unique.

Kristy Blackwell

Attorney

Co-founder of the law firm Stuart & Blackwell, Kristy Blackwell is focused on adoption, guardianships, and juvenile law. She is a fellow of the Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys and president of

the Arizona Adoption Coalition, a statewide nonprofit dedicated to promoting adoption and improving those services.

Blackwell's mission is to bring children who need loving homes to families who want to grow. She also focuses on educating the community about adoption and resources to prevent children from falling into the foster care system.

Her firm often takes on pro bono cases and volunteers regularly in the juvenile law clinic through the Arizona Volunteer Lawyers Project.

"Many we help are grandparents or relatives who want guardianship but need help because the system is expensive and overwhelming."

Something you may not know?

"I absolutely LOVE bears!"

Karen Self

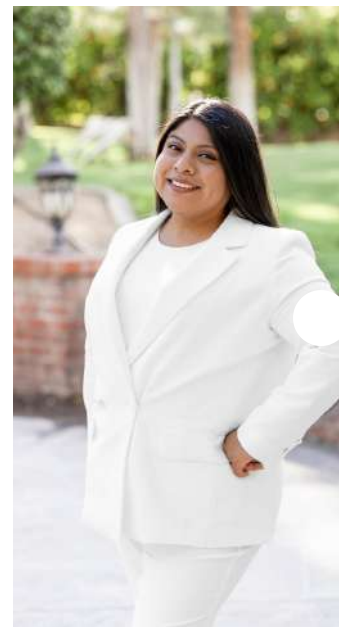
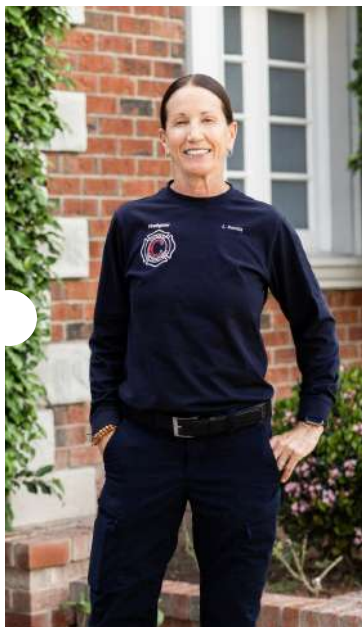
Teacher, Coach

Seton Catholic girls basketball coach Karen Self is on her way to becoming the winningest coach in state history. Her many coaching awards and accolades are well deserved. After 32 years, her Sentinels have won 83% of their games, won 15 of 17 appearances in the Arizona State Girls' Basketball Titles, were the state's runners-up four times, and have been the region champs 30 consecutive years.

Self doesn't just teach her players basketball skills. Each season her team works with local charities to help raise awareness for their cause. She also runs charity event games and volunteers her time to provide

summer basketball camps each year.

“I tell my players that winning is a by-product of doing things correctly. I try to embrace the idea of growth through failure. Fail, fail again, fail forward. The only way we can grow is to learn through experience. Sometimes we have to get something wrong to figure out how to get it right.”



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