

Visionaries -Working to Make a Difference

by Claudia Manzano Herrera

Whether it is due to losing a friend or offering to help an elderly person, there's something in our lives that inspires us to do good for others. These are the motivational stories behind the visionaries who created non-profit organizations which are among the Arizona Women's Partnership grant recipients.

After tragically losing a loved one during 9/11/01, **Carolyn Manning** created something wonderful out of anguish; namely, a welcoming program for refugees who were being misjudged and rejected at the time. **Welcome to America Project**, for which she received a CNN HERO Award in 2014, continues to welcome refugees by providing these families with household furnishing to help them make a transition into their new homes in Metro Phoenix and Valley-wide.

Jeanne Devine considered there had to be more assistance for underprivileged women and their children. She, along with her peers, strongly believes that it's key for these individuals to have an available system for education and professional development. As Jeanne puts it: "I started **Unlimited Potential** educational programs to encourage involvement of low-income women in positive social change within their own South Phoenix community."

Jennifer Crews, founder of **Desert Sounds** in Mesa, saw how powerful music was for her little one's learning. Jennifer didn't hesitate to offer other kids the possibility to have a musical instrument to interact with. Crews adds: "We named our first project for our son Jeremy because it puts music within the reach of many, many other kids."

"Our goals remain the same to this day: promoting community wellness, lifelong health and family togetherness among families across the reservation, as we strengthen Navajo identity and culture," notes **Tom Rigenbach**, founder of **Y.E.S for Navajo Youth** in Teec Nos Pos, AZ

Founder of **Alice's Place** in Winslow, AZ, **Dr. Greg Hackler**, recognized the need for a safe space for those who have been affected by sexual assault and domestic violence. He explains: "Julie Greer, a social worker at the local hospital, could not find placement for victims of domestic violence in need of shelter and safety... I was motivated to make the organization work..."

About Care was founded by **Barbara Bradley** because there was a need in Chandler for the elderly (mostly women) to remain in their homes and to live independently for as long as possible. About Care tends to the health and well-being needs of this vulnerable population.

A similar mission is present at **Neighbors Who Care** which was formed by a group of local community leaders to address the needs of the elderly: transportation to medical appointments, food instability, and companionship.

There are many who reassure a safe and welcoming environment. This is the scenario for **Maria Patterson's Wonder Mother** who founded **Angel Heart Pajama Project** in Tucson. Maria mentions:

“Mom was forever grateful for us having been given an education and for the many gifts we have received...She loved children and wanted to make sure that children in need were given love, pajamas, books and other items for comfort, especially those who were removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect.”

Care and concern inspired **Mary Gloria** from **Pan de Vida** in Queen Creek. “I was motivated when a great number from Latino countries arrived in town. Some walked the desert, others paid Coyotes who packed them in box trucks; many suffocated. They lived in washes or vacant lots and were beaten. They came to provide for their hungry families back home.” A community garden and numerous social service projects are the result.

At **Somali-American United Council of Arizona** you can find support with cultural adaptation. **Dr. Mohamed Ali Abukar** founded this non-profit in 2006 after experiencing and evaluating the needs of the newly arrived multi-ethnic community of refugees from over 12 countries. Their focus is on ESL, literacy, and job search skills.

Losing a loved one can be painful and difficult to face. This is particularly seen in young children who may not understand the circumstances. According to **Juli Schragel**: “I was inspired to start **Billy’s Place** (a children's grief support center in Glendale) in 2005 when our lives were forever changed after the death of my late husband Mike, Billy’s dad.”

Dignity House in Metro Phoenix, started by **Catherine Ochoa** in 2016, is where nurturing females obtain vital assistance in their employment and healthcare. She assures: “I will be celebrating 15 years out of the life of sex trafficking and being sober on May 10, 2021. I am a survivor of both and felt the need to provide safe housing for other women.”

Laura Bulluck has a shared objective at **Hope’s Crossing** in Metro Phoenix: “I was prompted to create Hope’s Crossing because I saw a need in my community for women who had experienced so many variations of trauma but was unable to find the right mix of services and support.”

Getting children involved in reading all kinds of topics at an early age surely pays off later in their adulthood. To **Dr. Mary Bancroft**, founder of **Make Way for Books**, quality literacy for young pupils with limited resources was a must. “In 1997 I volunteered to read to 4-year-olds at a low-resource area preschool in Tucson. I immediately discovered that the center had very few age-appropriate picture books.”

For **Marilyn Horne** it is also a priority to help children and adults progress by learning a second language: “**Rim Country Literacy Program** was founded in 1999 to teach English to Non-English speakers in the Payson area.” Programs include tutoring for proficiency in reading at grade level.

At **Kids in Focus** in Metro Phoenix, **Karen Shell** highlights: “After an abusive childhood, I was driven by the desire to empower at-risk youth to make the shift from surviving to thriving. In the early 90s, I began a lifelong pursuit to help kids in need, and later founded Kids in Focus in 2012.”

Kris Jacober at **Arizona Association for Foster & Adoptive Parents** expressed: “I was inspired to start the AZAFAP as a foster parent, when I began to understand that there were few opportunities for foster families to meet and support each other in our work, no way for us to have a unified voice at the child welfare table, and little support from the community for the children in our care.”

Ruth Langford, founder of Helping At Risk Teens in Peoria - **HART Pantry**, identified the necessity to support less fortunate high school students to fulfill their education. “The need far outweighed my perspective at the time and soon I became aware that we needed a larger independent organization which led to incorporation in 2016. Seeing the pressures on our young people requires participation in the solutions,” Ruth stated.

Mary Lou O’Connell details: “Prior to **H.A.V.E.N. Family Resource Center** in Lake Havasu, victims of crimes were retraumatized by the consequences of those crimes. Now we have become a caring, safe haven for abused children, and those in crisis.”

Dwayne Baker, founder of **Laptops 4 Learning** in Metro Phoenix, reflects: “While I was mentoring children without fathers present, I discovered the digital divide that is prevalent in minority communities. Children struggle in school without access to computers. I refurbished a thrift store laptop for one boy, and it grew from there into a successful charity.”

Clare Hoffman notes why she advocates for Native American voices through the **Native American Composer Apprentice Project** serving Navajo, Hopi, Salt River-Pima youth. “In high school I discovered that a 35¢ subway token (in NYC) could take me to Lincoln Center, another world... NACAP is like that 35¢ token: Both an outlet and an entryway...both for our students to express themselves, and for everyone else to hear them,” continues Clare.

Rich Hamill at **Will2Walk** in Chandler proves the unmeasurable power of perseverance and willingness: “Growing up in a small town in rural Michigan, my childhood was full of activity...Until February 17, 1992—the day I went on a skiing trip with friends, hit a patch of black ice on the road, and was ejected from the vehicle...During physical therapy, I continually pushed myself and was able to regain strength in my upper body and some use of my hands.” Rich’s results are extraordinary but the desire to help others with similar situations remained, hence this non-profit.

These **VISIONARIES** are current and past grantees of the **Arizona Women’s Partnership** founded by **Paula Cullison** who remarks: “Realizing that the smaller non-profits, which provide many needed social services, are the ones who receive the least amount of funding, I created the Arizona Women's Partnership in 2002, as an all-volunteer philanthropic non-profit to provide grants to this sector.” To date, AZWP has awarded over \$500,000 in grants to over 80 non-profits many are multi-year grant recipients. For more information, visit www.azwp.org or call 602-863-9744