Women Who Move the Valley 2010

Written by Story by Caroline Austerman, Melissa Larsen, Amy Strand, Erin Van Der Lee and Christine Whitton / Photographed by Cassandra Tomei

2010 marks our third year of celebrating an influential group of women who help move this Valley in a positive direction. This year, AFM picked 10 fearless females who pave the way in business, sports, food, philanthropy, arts, culture and health. Read about why these leaders do what they do, and how the rest of us benefit from the good they bring to this town.

Susie Wesley
Community Volunteer
Donated 10,000-plus hours over the last 30 years to Valley charities in need of a helping hand.

Susan Wesley is a third-generation Los Angelino who lived in the Valley as a child, but relocated to Northern California as a young girl. At 18 years of age, she returned to attend Arizona State University, met her now husband Tim, and stayed, making the Valley a better place through countless hours of volunteer work.

After marrying in 1978, Wesley would volunteer her time while pursuing a full-time career as an aspiring actress and model. Growing up with parents in the entertainment industry, Wesley felt it was only natural to follow in her family's footsteps. While awaiting jobs, she joined the Junior League of Phoenix where she developed a knack for fundraising and helped in forming The Emily Center at Phoenix Children's Hospital. She went on to spend the following 30 years aiding several of the Valley's most deserving organizations, which include the American Heart Association, the Arizona Kidney Foundation, March of Dimes and the Phoenix Symphony.

In addition to her volunteerism, Wesley is a mother of one and works full-time as a real estate agent at Sandra Wilken Luxury Properties.

Looking back, Wesley credits her own 81-year-old mother, Sharon McCarey, for instilling in her the desire to volunteer. As a child, her mother would volunteer at school, sometimes bringing a lonely child home for dinner. She remembers her mother saying, "Just because someone doesn't have a dad [or a mom] or their clothes aren't as nice as yours, doesn't mean their heart doesn't want the same things yours does." To this day, Wesley's mother's words replay in her head, pushing her to do more for people in need. And she does. To date, Wesley estimates that she has donated 10's of thousands of hours - not because she had to, but because she wanted to.

Today, charities seek her out in hopes of fulfilling a need. Her selflessness makes her one of the most admired among her peers. Wesley will co-chair the 2010 Childhelp Drive the Dream Gala set for this month, as well as co-chair the 2010 O'Conner House Supreme Evening of Jazz planned for March. But, of everything she has done and grateful to be a part of, her proudest achievement was implementing the Have a Heart for Babies program - a DVD tutorial given to parents on how to properly perform infant CPR—for the American Heart Association when she was chair of the 2007 Phoenix Heart Ball. -C.W.

Andy Kramer
President and Chief Executive Officer, Banner Health Foundation
Has aided in upping the number of pediatric beds in the Valley with the recent opening of Cardon Children's Medical Center and has helped to change the face of local cancer care with the recent groundbreaking of the M. D. Anderson Banner Cancer Center.

Andy Kramer is no stranger to raising funds for causes she believes in. "When I was a kid, I remember holding carnivals in my backyard for UNICEF," says Kramer, who grew up in New Jersey. Today, after holding posts at the Valley of the Sun United Way and American Heart Association, Kramer is helping to make serious strides in Valley healthcare as the president and chief executive officer of the Banner Health Foundation.

When it comes to her four-year career with the nonprofit, Kramer calls herself a "matchmaker." "The human nature is to want to help people," says the Arizona State University grad. "I get to work with people who have the financial capacity to make a philanthropic investment in something they believe in. Dealing with an organization that has so many worthwhile causes, I get to match people who have the financial capacity with the causes that have great need." For some, Kramer says donating to the Banner Health Foundation is part of the healing process. "Whether it's a $100 or a $10 million donation, you get to see this great satisfaction that comes from that, particularly when it's part of something they've been through."

With Kramer's help and the generous dollars from those she works with, Banner Health was able to unveil the Cardon Children's Medical Center in late 2009, which has nearly 250 pediatric beds. "The fact that there were not enough pediatric beds [in the Valley] was unacceptable, whether you have small children or not," she says. In two years, the M. D. Anderson Banner Cancer Center will open. This project, which is

Written by Story by Caroline Austerman, Melissa Larsen, Amy Strand, Erin Van Der Lee and Christine Whitton / Photographed by Cassandra Tomei

Banner Health's partnership with the world-renowned Houston-based cancer center, is particularly close to Kramer's heart, as she's supported friends who've dealt with the disease. "This cancer care will allow someone from the moment they are diagnosed to get complete comprehensive services all in one place," Kramer explains. "For us to have a partnership with [M. D. Anderson] is really going to change the way cancer is dealt with locally."

Though Kramer firmly believes that she has "the best job that exists," it isn't strictly work and no play for this mother of two. The family's favorite pastimes: baseball and basketball games and Friday pizza-and-movie nights. In her line of work, Kramer says she is able to realize her priorities in life and keep a balance: One day, opening a new medical center for children. The next, sharing some pizza with her own. —M.L.

Nona M. Lee
Vice President and General Counsel of the Arizona Diamondbacks
Oversees all legal transactions for the Arizona Diamondbacks, which she has worked with for five seasons.

Though you haven't seen her tote a bat and ball, Nona M. Lee has been a big part of many Valley sports teams. Combining her love of sports with her profession as a litigator, she has worked for almost all of the Arizona sports teams, including the Phoenix Suns, the Phoenix Mercury, the Arizona Rattlers and, currently, the Arizona Diamondbacks. Originally from Los Angeles, Calif., Lee received her bachelor's degree from Pepperdine University where she played water polo, basketball and swam competitively. She went on to get her paralegal degree and began working for a law firm in Beverly Hills, but eventually left L.A. to attend Oklahoma City University School of Law. After graduation, Lee moved to Phoenix and worked as a litigation associate at Meyer Hendricks. Being active in sports when she was younger, Lee realized she wanted to return to that world.

She was not fully aware of the numerous and diverse opportunities available to women in the sports industry until the WNBA began playing in the mid-90's. "It just didn't even occur to me that it was a reality until that happened and the light bulb went on," Lee says. Though Lee didn't want to play out on the court, she did want to work behind the scenes. Today, as vice president and general counsel of the Diamondbacks, Lee oversees a wide variety of tasks. Her day- to-day activities include managing and reviewing contracts, working with facility-related issues, advising the senior staff on legal duties and managing outside counsel litigations.

Lee is often asked how she deals with working in such a male-dominated field. She believes her ability to work in the sports industry is a direct result of her playing sports when she was younger. "It's challenging, but one of the things that participating in sports my entire life did for me was, I think, prepare me well for this sort of opportunity because I have never seen gender as a barrier to anything," Lee says.

Her love of sports is also apparent through her community involvement: She's the founder and past president of the Phoenix Women's Sports Association, a local nonprofit organization that aims to empower girls and women through sports. Lee also serves as a vice president of the board of trustees of the Women's Sports Foundation in New York, a nonprofit founded by Billy Jean King that strives to advance the lives of girls and women through physical activity and sports. Plus, Lee won the YWCA of Maricopa County Sports Leader Award in 2006 and was an Athena Award honoree in 2008. -C.A.

Diana Yazzie-Devine
President and Chief Executive Officer of Native American Connections
Leads her nonprofit organization in helping more than 5,000 Native Americans each year become self-sufficient through a variety of service programs including supportive housing and behavioral health services.

Having celebrated her 30-year anniversary with Native American Connections this past June, Diana Yazzie-Devine has never thought twice about her lifelong career in tribal services. Immediately after college, she began participating in a tribal community economic development project in Northern Wisconsin, and she never looked back.

In the early 1970's, Native American Connections began as a small organization that offered substance abuse and alcohol recovery, and since joining the nonprofit in 1979, Yazzie-Devine has been at the forefront of its expansion. She now oversees a $7.5 million annual budget and the organization operates 15 service sites throughout Phoenix, offering a full-range of behavioral health services and affordable housing. "We're not a program of a hand-out but a hand up, really giving them the skills to help them in the beginning but then to create those foundations, those skills and those tools in which they can learn to help themselves in the long term," Yazzie-Devine says. "I really like that I've been able to build a full continuum of taking somebody from a desperate, homeless situation to becoming a homeowner." Another proud

moment for Yazzie-Devine was in 2005 when Native American Connections became the developer who brought the 85,000-sq.-ft. Native American Community Service Center to Phoenix—what Yazzie-Devine calls a “one-stop service center” for Native Americans in need of anything from dental work to financial assistance.

While Yazzie-Devine’s preservation of old native traditions combined with modern practices contributes mightily to her success, so does her business savvy. She recognizes that although she runs a nonprofit, it is also a business and it should be treated as such. While attending Arizona State University’s MBA program from 1997 to 1999, Yazzie-Devine was also running Native American Connections full-time and playing her role as a single mother of three. “I was the student who, when we learned a new tool, was already implementing it in our organization to try to have better business practices,” she says.

In addition to her position at Native American Connections and her role on many local and national committees like the Federal Home Loan Bank’s advisory board and the City of Mesa Housing Advisory Board, Yazzie-Devine is also a grandmother of four and an avid triathlete. Although her hobbies outside of work are a significant part of her life, her work is clearly a deep passion as well. “I see that we literally do save peoples’ lives and reunite families,” Yazzie-Devine says. “I think I was born to organize the community around social justice.” -A.S.

Julia Baker
Founder, Head Chef and Chief Executive Officer of Julia Baker Confections
Founded one of the Valley’s most talked-about treat companies, which produces from-scratch luxury chocolates and custom cakes.

A company car and travel opportunities are nothing compared to Julia Baker’s favorite career perk. “I love being allowed to eat chocolate every day—it’s part of my job description,” she says. “If I want dessert at 10 in the morning, nobody gives me a second look.” You see, Baker is the founder, head chef and CEO of Julia Baker Confections. She fashions some of the Valley’s most memorable custom wedding cakes and is known for her to-die-for caramel truffles.

Though she’s always enjoyed baking and has had a sweet tooth since birth—her last name is Baker—her talent for mathematics led her to a career as a statistician, a job that allowed plenty of travel and plenty of dining out. After sampling such high-end fare (“I really continued to love the cooking aspect,” she says), Baker decided to pursue her passion for desserts and ended up graduating first in her class from Le Cordon Bleu Paris in 2002. Two years later, Julia Baker Confections was born in Scottsdale.

As a business owner, Baker’s number-crunching capabilities still come in handy. “I love being able to be the serious spreadsheet studier that I was before,” she says. “And I love being able to escape in the kitchen and create memorable works of art.” Works of art that have, in fact, been sampled by many famous faces including Bono, Britney Spears, Alicia Keys and Jennifer Aniston. One of her biggest successes, Baker says, is “to have people outside out of Arizona know who I am.”

With truffles and ganache being part of her daily dietary intake, Baker definitely makes time in her busy schedule for her other passion: triathlons. She says she bikes, swims or runs every single day. Baker isn’t only ambitious when it comes to her athletic endeavors. “I would love to become the next Godiva,” says Baker, whose chocolates are available in high-end boutiques and via her Web site, www.juliabakerconfections.com. “I would love for Julia Baker Confections to be a household name. I don’t want to be too mass where the quality is affected. I want people throughout the United States to know what fresh, good chocolate tastes like. [People] stick with what their childhood favorite was and don’t branch out and experience what Europeans created chocolate to be.” —M.L.

Pam Gaber
Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Gabriel’s Angels
Helps more than 12,000 abused and neglected children each year learn compassion, love and kindness via her healing pet therapy program.

Pam Gaber, a self-proclaimed “corporate refugee,” has always loved animals, especially dogs. In 2000, her sincere adoration of animals and passion for helping others grew into Gabriel’s Angels, a local program that delivers pet therapy to abused, at-risk children.

Written by Story by Caroline Austerman, Melissa Larsen, Amy Strand, Erin Van Der Lee and Christine Whitton / Photographed by Cassandra Tomei

Gaber, who was volunteering at Crisis Nursery Center in Phoenix in 1999, asked if she could bring Gabriel, her Weimaraner puppy, dressed as Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer to the annual Christmas party. Gaber had told a variety of exciting stories to the kids at the center about her lovable puppy and thought they would enjoy finally meeting him. The impact that her festively dressed dog had on the children and their behavior was something she could have never imagined.

"We all were just shocked and the only difference was really the presence of this gentle gray dog," Gaber says. "The kids would hug him and love him." Gaber realized the significance of Gabriel's influence on the kids that day and decided to do something productive and beneficial for the at-risk children in the community. Gabriel's Angels, named after her beloved Gabriel, was formed by Gaber in May 2000 and officially began pet therapy sessions in August of that same year, and was granted nonprofit status in January of 2001. Gaber left her full-time job working for Sandoz Pharmaceutical, in the Animal Health Division, to begin Gabriel's Angels.

The most worthwhile experience for Gaber is allowing children the opportunity to experience the free and unconditional love that animals have for humans. "The animals are teaching compassion, empathy, trust and other behaviors that intervene in the cycle of abuse," Gaber says. "The children who have empathy, children who have compassion, children who know trust is faith…Once they have these behaviors, they're not going to repeat the cycle of violence."

Due to the support Gaber receives from members of the community, Gabriel's Angels has been able to expand to 120 agencies throughout Maricopa County as well as Tucson. The organization currently has 132 dogs and 132 human volunteers. The therapy dogs visit children at a variety of locations across the Valley, including Sojourner Center, Crisis Nursery, Sunshine Group Homes and Homeward Bound, to name a few. "I believe that Gabriel has inspired many hundreds of people to volunteer in an arena called child welfare that they would've never volunteered in if they couldn't with their dog," Gaber says. "So, I'm most proud of offering an entirely different volunteer experience for people and their dogs."

Gabriel, who was recently diagnosed with a sarcoma tumor on his front leg, is still working at Crisis Nursery Center every other week. The 11-year-old Weimaraner is undergoing chemotherapy. Gaber says that he still enjoys visiting the kids: "He's worked all of his life; I don't think he would know what it's like to not work." Besides Gabriel's Angels, Gaber enjoys hiking with her husband and doing Pilates. —C.A.

Tammy McLeod
Vice President and Chief Customer Officer of Arizona Public Service Company (APS)
Incorporated her unique marketing background to become one of APS's communication experts, all while forging her own energy to fight breast cancer.

As vice president and chief customer officer of Arizona Public Service, Tammy McLeod advances the many ways Valley residents utilize electricity—a job fairly uncommon for a woman in the utility industry. More importantly, though, she is a wife, a mother and a breast cancer survivor.

McLeod relocated to Arizona in 1991 to work for the Education Management Group, which was sold to Viacom in 1994, leaving McLeod to explore other areas of business that would utilize her bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado in Boulder and her master's degree from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Soon after, she was interviewing with APS, one of Arizona's largest employers, and hired on as general marketing manager of customer service and Southern Arizona operations in 1995.

Over the years, McLeod climbed the corporate ladder learning more about the company's delivery of electricity (the electric grid is largest in the United States) and its commitment to customer service. So much so, that in 2007, she was promoted to vice president and chief customer officer. Over the next two years, McLeod would oversee the statewide customer service operations, customer marketing, call center, credit and collections and customer offices. Though she racked up responsibilities, she says her biggest challenge was the position's learning curve. "It [APS] is one of the most complex businesses that exist in the world. There is no other industry that we can think of where people are producing and consuming at the same time," McLeod says. But, nothing could've been as challenging as what McLeod and her family conquered shortly before her promotion.

In March 2006, McLeod was diagnosed with breast cancer. As the mother of three young boys, she knew she had to devote all her energy to defeating the disease. "I think a cancer diagnosis causes you to realize that you don't have an unlimited amount of time," McLeod says. "And therefore you focus on your highest-impact activities and events. I am first and foremost a mom." She has been cancer-free since July 2006. Today, McLeod balances work and play, running between corporate meetings, her kid's sporting events and the eight community boards she is a member of. -C.W.

Dee Alschuler

Written by Story by Caroline Austerman, Melissa Larsen, Amy Strand, Erin Van Der Lee and Christine Whitton / Photographed by Cassandra Tomei

Director of Lucky Dog Rescue
Has placed more than 1,500 abandoned and distressed dogs into safe new homes, while raising more than $50,000 in donations for the nonprofit organization.

"I wish I could make everyone see dogs the way I see them," says Dee Alschuler. Early this year, Alschuler took over Lucky Dog Rescue, which was founded by Lisa Maturo in 2004. The nonprofit organization, which functions solely on donations and volunteers, focuses on saving stray and impounded dogs and placing them in safe and nurturing homes. An animal advocate and vegetarian since birth, Alsculer says she's always been dog-obsessed. When she realized the Valley had an overwhelming number of stray and mistreated dogs, she decided she would be the one to do something about it.

Alschuler's life revolves around canines from the moment she wakes up. The phone starts ringing at 6 a.m. with calls from people who have located stray dogs and from foster families with questions or concerns. She juggles her time between visits to boarding facilities, trips to the pound, orientating volunteers and taking care of her own seven large rescue dogs. For Alschuler, it's the visits to the pound that can be particularly emotional. "I'm happy for the five [animals] that I save, but for the hundreds that I can't, it's so hard," she says. At home, her husband of nearly 20 years is her support system. "I could not do what I do without him".

Lucky Dog Rescue's program (which runs off a donated budget of $8,000 per month) is designed to work with the dogs from start to finish. "That's what makes us different," Alschuler says. "It's not good enough to pull the dogs [off the street or from the pound]. We save them, rehabilitate them and work with them." After a dog has been placed in a home, Alschuler stays in touch with the owners to monitor the dog's progress. Seeing a positive change in the animal's health and demeanor is the most rewarding part of the job for Alschuler.

On top of her around-the-clock commitment to Lucky Dog, Alschuler has a "real full-time job." She works as a booking agent and touring manager for two Valley bands, as well as a band based in Germany. But, juggling two full-time careers doesn't faze her. "Everyday I think, 'I am so lucky, I do what I love to do.' I pretty much have dedicated my life to saving dogs now. This is not something you can just do as a side project. This is a full-time job and a lifelong commitment." -E.V.

Valerie Vadala Homer
Director of Scottsdale Public Art
Manages the municipal art collection and public artworks that make up Scottsdale Public Art, which was selected by Public Art Network as one of the nation's finest public art programs.

Valerie Vadala Homer, responsible for helping to bring art to the Scottsdale public, describes a typical day in her life as "general chaos," as she oversees everything from local and international art events and exhibits to new visual displays throughout the city. Every visual artwork, from the art on the walls of the Pima freeway to the pieces within Scottsdale Public Art Collection, falls under her realm. Vadala Homer handles it all gracefully, relying on her wide range of experiences and education, coupled with an authentic passion for the arts.

Vadala Homer has successfully transformed Scottsdale Public Art into one of the most comprehensive and broadest-based community programs in the country. Scottsdale's rich public art collection can be seen everywhere you look: a giant gecko on the side of the highway; the bronze horse fountain, and the sculpture of Mayor Herbert Drinkwater and his dog in the Scottsdale Civic Center; the "Love" sculpture by Robert Indiana at the Civic Center Plaza; a beautiful pedestrian bridge over the Crosscut Canal and much more. Since 1985, Scottsdale Public Art has commissioned more than 250 permanent and temporary artworks. Vadala Homer's job is to monitor and maintain about 90 permanent public artworks, 120 Art in Private Development artworks and 880 artworks in the municipal collection, all while also seeking new and interesting ways to promote art in the city.

Vadala Homer's varied background begins with a bachelor's degree in political science and law from Carroll College and a master's in English literature from Arizona State University. She has worked for the Cultural Council since 1989, then served as the interim director of Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (SMoCA) in 2001, which lead to her current post soon after. A devoted art lover, Vadala Homer didn't think twice about accepting the position. "I've always had a passion, and I've always believed that the arts were important to having a rich cultural life and a rich cultural landscape, which are essential to a vital city," she says. "Public art makes a community a better place to be, to

work, and to visit." Vadala Homer has also authored several catalogs and essays including The Story of Love: The Life and Work of Robert Indiana and A Path to the Innocent Eye: The Skyspaces of James Turrell. In May, she completed a Master of Fine Arts degree in poetry at ASU.

A self-proclaimed bibliophile, Vadala Homer is also an avid cook and film buff. Much like she enjoys the culinary or cinematic arts, she believes that public art allows people to experience culture and art in everyday life. For Vadala Homer, that is what makes the job so worthwhile: Making Scottsdale a more beautiful and unique place for locals and tourists alike. -E.V.

Lynn Paige
Owner and Chief Executive Officer of Perfect Power
Became the first female CEO—at one of just a few woman-owned certified solar businesses worldwide—to run an Arizona-based solar company, create jobs and boast more than $5 million in annual sales, all while getting to know the industry.

As winner of the 2009 National Association of Women Business Owners' most prestigious award, Lynn Paige is the first woman to put her imprint on Arizona's fastest-growing solar electric company, Perfect Power. Graduating from Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Design in her home state of Virginia and achieving her master's degree in accounting from Almeda College at University of Pennsylvania, Paige is humble in saying her current position fell into her lap.

While working as a business consultant in 2001, Paige was referred to John Balfour, founder and owner of Perfect Power, to present a proposal on how he could boost the company's earnings. After observing the company for a period of 18 months, Paige felt that Perfect Power had great potential and that much more could be done to bring in money. After presenting her results, she recalls Balfour saying, "You think you're so smart, you grow the business," Paige says. With that, a deal was struck for Paige to overhaul Perfect Power's business plan and spearhead the company into the 21st century. At that time, she would also purchase a majority percentage of Perfect Power and become co-owner. "I took the vision and improved upon it and grew it into what we have today," Paige says. Six years later, Paige has developed the company from just one part-time employee to 30 full-time employees and $5 million in yearly sales.

Besides turning Perfect Power into a profitable company, what also makes Paige passionate about her role is how solar power offers a green solution to an energy need. Designing and installing commercial and residential solar electric systems, Perfect Power is creating a renewable resource. "It's an empowering position," Paige says. It is environmentally friendly, as well as economically friendly. "And as an accountant, I always look at the bottom line," she says.

And while she truly loves her line of work, Paige recently made a rule preventing office work from going home. "But in making that rule, I wind up not spending very much time at home," she says with a laugh. Paige always makes it a priority to allow for time with her friends and family and discovering the rewards of grandparenting three very young grandchildren. -C.W.