

Written by Melissa Larsen

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In the spring, AZFoothills.com kicked off its first-annual Nonprofit of the Year competition in which more than 300 Valley organizations vied for the winning title and a sponsorship package from *Arizona Foothills Magazine*. After weeks of voting, PANDA, which was founded in Phoenix in the 80's, came out on top. Here, get to know the noble nonprofit that has a mission of improving treatments and aiding in the discovery of cures for devastating childhood diseases.

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Though it was founded more than three decades ago in Phoenix, the Phoenix Women's Board of the Steele Children's Research Center, known as PANDA (People Acting Now Discover Answers), is still one of the most highly regarded nonprofits in the Valley. The all-women volunteer board has raised more than \$9 million for Steele Children's Research Center and has helped fund treatment for more than 100,000 children suffering from devastating diseases. "The most rewarding aspect of being involved with PANDA is knowing that every dollar we raise goes directly to helping children all over the world," says Jacquie Linaman, 2017 president of PANDA (pictured). "As a mother, seeing the families that are battling childhood disease every day is humbling and heartbreaking. PANDA has allowed me the opportunity to meet some very brave families and some very brave scientists. Sharing their hopes and dreams for their kids, just as I do for my own, I feel an obligation to try to help in the best way that I can."

The PANDA story began in the 1980's in Tucson after the death of 5-year-old Michael Thomas following a brave battle with lymphoma. His mother Louise, who was a neighbor and friend of PANDA co-founder Robyn DeBell, vowed to help other families by starting a facility that can treat and cure horrible diseases like the one that took the life of her son. Thus, the renowned Steele Children's Research Center at the University of Arizona, the only academic pediatric medical research center in the state of Arizona, came to be. Once DeBell moved to Phoenix, she met PANDA co-founder Penny Gunning; together, the women devised a way to bring Steele Children's Research Center to the Valley and founded a board—PANDA—that was able to chair an event to fund the center and its noble mission. Today, PANDA's annual fashion show is one of the highlights of the Valley event lineup.

Each spring, PANDA hosts its popular children's fashion show with a cocktail hour, lunch and a silent auction that benefits a project within Steele Children's Research Center. "[For the 2018 event], PANDA will focus its fundraising efforts on the Children's Epilepsy Project," says Linaman. "Dr. Faye Ghishan, director of the Steele Children's Research Center, meets with his team of doctors and proposes several potential projects for funding. PANDA works collaboratively with Dr. Ghishan to determine where the greatest need lies and where money raised can make the greatest impact." The 2017 event focused on the PANDA Children's Autoimmunity and Allergies Project, and gross fundraising reached \$2 million. (In previous years, the Personalized Pediatric Medicine Project, the Children's Anti-Tumor Immunity Program and the Healthy Babies Project, among others, have been benefited.)

Though PANDA was founded out of tragedy, it now is a symbol of hope within the Valley and for families with children who are facing illness. "We hope that through continued awareness and fundraising we can envision a world where one day a child will not have to live with a devastating disease," says Linaman. "That through research, there will be answers and through answers there will be cures. The hope that drives PANDA is that no family should ever have to endure the uncertainty, pain and suffering that many children and families face today. We will continue to fundraise and support the scientists and doctors who can unlock these mysteries and provide hope to the children of today and of generations to come."

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**Save the Date**

On April 14, 2018, the “Children Helping Children” Fashion Show will serve as PANDA’s 19th-annual fundraiser at JW Marriott Scottsdale Camelback Inn Resort & Spa, benefiting the Children’s Epilepsy Project. Kyle Christensen, Allison Irwin, Gretchen Schubert and Lindsey Williams (pictured) will chair the event. Visit [azpanda.org](http://azpanda.org) for more event details.

**Nominate Now!**

Would you like your favorite nonprofit to be considered for the 2018 Nonprofit of the Year competition? Send the organization name, description/mission statement and contact info (including organization, agency or PR representative name, address, URL, phone number, e-mail address and social media accounts) to [nonprofit@azfoothills.com](mailto:nonprofit@azfoothills.com).