

## Women Who Move the Valley 2013

Written by Written by Kirstina Bolton, Melissa Larsen, Elizabeth Liberatore and  
Dexter Presley Photographed by Cassandra Tomei

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From a chef transforming a Phoenix street one mural at a time to a realtor who is passionate about teaching children how to be charitable, the Valley is teeming with women who are making Arizona what it is today. Meet 10 of our favorites who are at the top of their fields and make it a priority to give back and inspire the community that we—and they—call home.



**Susan Lacke**, *Writer*

In 2010, former Arizona State University professor, Ahwatukee's Susan Lacke, was invited to blog for a friend's Web site. Soon after, a snowball effect of sorts plotted a new beginning. The now-writer Lacke, who embodies what happens when we choose to take risks, said to herself, "I'll give it one year to see what happens. And if nothing does, well, at least I know." Luckily, things worked out for the better, and she was offered to write a column for fitness-focused outlets like *Competitor Magazine*, in addition to *Triathlete* and *Women's Running* publications.

However, the career change only speaks to part of Lacke's incredible journey. In addition to facing prejudices that go along with being deaf, Lacke has used naysayers as a source for motivation. Once overweight and a smoker, she decided to make the conscious decision to become more active by setting her sights on a 5k—something so many people deemed impossible for her to do. But she did, and she also completed an Ironman Triathlon.

These are the type of actions that make her such an inspiration, noting that the most rewarding part of her job is when she receives notes from readers who she encouraged to become more active and health-conscious. "I'm not trying to convince people to run a 5k or marathon. I'm not here to tell people what I think they should be doing. If they want to go walking for 30 minutes every day, go for it. There's too much negativity and focus around what you can't do." Lacke has shattered ideas of the impossible through positive thinking and action, and she notes the first step as being the hardest.

—Dexter Presley



**Silvana Salcido Esparza**, *Owner and Chef of Barrio Café*

Though she calls herself a late-bloomer, Silvana Salcido Esparza started her first business at the age of 15—making and selling carnitas at her father's bakery in Merced, Central Valley, Calif. "I grew up as the daughter of a Mexican baker who was in turn the son of a Mexican baker," she says. "It goes back to the 1200's when my ancestors were the royal pastry chefs to the king of Spain." At the age of 35, the chef achieved her degree from the Scottsdale Culinary Institute—on scholarship, no less. She went on to be the corporate chef for Arizona State University. But it wasn't until 2002—the year she opened Barrio Café in Phoenix—when Esparza would make her true mark on the Valley's culinary landscape.

Barrio Café (and her subsequent restaurant, Barrio Queen, in Old Town) dishes up authentic Mexican cuisine that has garnered two James Beard Award nominations for the chef. (This year, Esparza hopes to add a large bar to the cafe as well as create a cookbook.) Though Esparza is quick to say that there are better chefs out there, her passion for producing and perpetuating true Mexican fare is what makes her a force to be reckoned with. "It starts with the love for my culture, and the angst that [I get when I] see misrepresentation," she says. "I guess the day I

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die and I know I was a vital part of changing that perception, that'll be my crowning achievement."

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Outside of her culinary craft, this art enthusiast also hopes to "accomplish, with the help of many, a cultural point of pride" via her nonprofit, Calle 16. "I created it for the beautification of 16th Street [where Barrio Café is located] and to create a cultural arts district." To raise funds, Esparza even teaches tamale classes. Head-turning murals line the Phoenix street and events like toy drives have been held to benefit nearby organizations—all thanks to Esparza's Calle 16.

—Melissa Larsen

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**Jessica Pierce**, *Executive Director of Career Connectors*

After 10 years spent at a company that Jessica Pierce loved, learned from and saw herself being a part of until retirement, she, along with 10,000 other employees, were unexpectedly laid off. During this time, she also noticed other family and friends experiencing the same type of hardship and felt compelled to do something.

"When we were figuring out what to do, [I] realized that [I] knew how to write résumés, interview, network and get back to work, but most of our friends had no clue; they had never been in that spot before. So I decided to go to my local church and ask them if I could start a small group to help people write résumés," Pierce says. And from the willingness to support her friends and others came the creation of Career Connectors, in July 2009, which is dedicated to providing tools and resources for professionals going through career transition. The events hosted by the service—which provides help from professional résumé writers, business portraits, interview coaches, social media coaches and more—gives a taste of hope for those needing the possibility and comfort of knowing that things can get better.

Pierce has a dynamic tie with the people who attend Career Connectors events because she has been through her own trials and tribulations—essentially, she had to start over herself. "I've gotten laid off, I was miserable and I didn't know what I was going to do. Because of that, my life has completely changed, and I'm doing what I'm actually supposed to be doing with my life."

—D.P.

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**Jennifer Kaplan**, *Founder of Evolve Public Relations and Marketing*

One might call Jennifer Kaplan a people person. As a kindergartener, Kaplan's teacher told her parents that their daughter was very active and eager to socialize. When she was a high school senior, she was voted Most Talkative. During her time at Arizona State University, Kaplan was the social chair of her sorority. And for the past eight years, Kaplan has led her own local public relations firms, most recently with Evolve Public Relations and Marketing, which she founded two years ago. "I always say I was born doing PR," she says. "I was always more interested in people and things people are doing than anything else."

Though the Arizona native has seen much success with her business as is (her team currently oversees 40-plus clients), she recently launched Evolve's Diversity Division to bring awareness in marketing to diverse demographics, including the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community. Kaplan and her agency are currently providing pro bono services to one n ten, a Phoenix not-for-profit organization whose mission it is to serve LGBT youth.

Next month, Kaplan is even performing during The National Kidney Foundation of Arizona's "Dancing with the Stars Arizona 2013" event Feb.

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22 at The Phoenixian. To take part, Kaplan has to fundraise and learn to dance, with the help of a pro partner. Thankfully, Kaplan is no stranger to working up a sweat. She lettered in four sports in high school and spends her free time training for half-marathons (shopping and frequenting great local restaurants also spare-time treats). "It's my outlet; it's my balance, my release," Kaplan says.

Though in the business of PR, Kaplan never knows what each day will hold ("I literally jump out of bed in the morning," she says), she looks forward to possibly growing her firm out of state and working to help more and more businesses increase their awareness.

—M.L.



**Joy Li**, *Fashion Designer and Partner at STUDIO Joy Li*

Almost every girl envied their most beloved doll, Barbie. How could you not? Her closet was stocked with clothes for almost every occasion: from a bikini for a day at the beach to a luxurious ball gown. While many girls go through a temporary Barbie phase, Scottsdale fashion designer, Joy Li's, passion for fashion emerged during her dress-up days. "When I was 8-years-old, [I would] draw outfits for paper doll Barbie against the windowsill," she says.

Li was born in Austin, Tex., and was raised in one of the fashion capitals of the world, New York. She went to college at Carnegie Mellon, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts, specializing in design. Li launched her first clothing line in 2007 and showcases her fashion-forward designs at her Scottsdale boutique, STUDIO Joy Li. She has been designing for 24 years.

Wearing one's confidence is key and, often time, clothing is an outward expression of just how confident an individual is with his or herself. This is the exact mentality that Li embraces when creating her collections. "[My clothing] incorporates quality, functionality for lifestyle and great design, utilizing the fundamentals of color, proportion, material. Styles that create the most flattering look [result in] a strong, confident attitude." Her promise to deliver fierce fashion—translating strength, beauty and confidence—is taking the Valley and country by storm one outfit at a time.

—Elizabeth Liberatore



**Mandi Ross**, *CEO of the Ross Group at Keller Williams Professional Partners and Founder of The Kids 4 Kids Foundation*

Some would advise to never mix business and pleasure. Mandi Ross is one exception. In the midst of building her own business in the real estate market, Ross, CEO of the Ross Group at Keller Williams Professional Partners, recently spearheaded a nonprofit, The Kids 4 Kids Foundation (K4K), dedicated to equipping kids with a desire to help others. "I had an idea to create a foundation to help teach kids how to give," Ross says. "It's pretty much how to get out there and impact the community and how to give and have a servant's heart and know when others are in need."

Initially built for her children and the children of her staff and clients, K4K is just getting started. "My hope is to have a K4K club in every school," Ross says. The inspiration behind the nonprofit is her son, Hayden. Seven years ago, Hayden was born premature and underwent several surgeries at Phoenix Children's Hospital. When Phoenix Children's asked the Ross family for a contribution to help fund the West Valley location of the hospital, which was close to her then-home in Surprise, she thought, "You know, there's something bigger here that the kids can do to help out and build that hospital."

K4K received its 501(c)3 designation in 2012. Its first pledge was to the West Valley Phoenix Children's Hospital. "We pledged \$25,000 and, in the first 90 days, the kids [there are about 20] raised \$10,000. They got to go in and give the check," Ross says.

—Kirstina Bolton

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**Marian Rhodes**, *Senior Vice President, Chief Human Resources & Diversity Officer, Arizona Diamondbacks*

Marian Rhodes' path to the big leagues is as unconventional as they come. After finishing her degree in accounting at Florida A&M University, she soon became an auditor that would open the door to working with the St. Louis Cardinals and, eventually, the Arizona Diamondbacks.

As an auditor with Anheuser-Busch, she had plenty of adventures, most notably, her experience at Busch Gardens, during which she had the opportunity to take an inventory of animals. But it wasn't until she got to the Cardinals that she discovered her passion for helping others achieve their own career goals and ambitions. Paying it forward and giving back is something that Rhodes feels a strong responsibility to do.

While working within public affairs with the Cardinals, Rhodes oversaw the organization's employment and workforce diversity initiatives, along the way learning how to connect with people and motivate others to work for a common goal. Once she got to Arizona, a portion of her goal was to replicate what she had done in St. Louis, only on a larger scale. Through hard work and time, Rhodes implemented and created the foundation of building a culture within the workplace that's responsible for things such as training and employee development, an employee-of-the-month program and a President's Council. "We empower people. If you think it'll work and it's going to be successful, we give people the ability to try," says Rhodes, who was born in Rochester, NY.

Since 2007—when Rhodes joined the staff—the Diamondbacks have been voted as one of the "Best Places to Work" by Phoenix Business Journal, and Rhodes has played a huge part in that. She understands that in order to be a successful organization, it must invest and develop their employees.

—D.P.



**Mary Collum**, *Senior Vice President at National Bank of Arizona*

With 20 years of banking experience under her belt, Mary Collum has etched a partnership between local business entrepreneurs and the nonprofit sector in the Valley through her work with National Bank of Arizona (NB|AZ). Alongside her responsibilities as senior vice president at NB|AZ, Collum began a mentoring alliance with women business owners. "I was one of the founders of the Women's Financial Group several years ago," Collum says. "It's turned into a large network of professional women we've created a forum for, throughout the year, for them to get together."

Outside of her work with NB|AZ, Collum has been actively involved in an impressive list of groups and nonprofits: Hon Kachina Council, Homeward Bound, Gabriel's Angels, Central Phoenix Women, Arizona Foundation for Women and Fresh Start Women's Foundation, to name a few—and Collum doesn't see herself slowing down anytime soon. "I'm thinking of getting involved in one of the animal shelters. If I could find the time, I would love to be the puppy-holder," jokes Collum. "But in all honesty, I really enjoy taking my skills to help nonprofits grow their business."

Collum's free time is equally as volunteer-driven. She recently returned from a two-week excursion in Africa on a part-educational, all-adventure trip through Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda. "I call it a trip of a lifetime," Collum says. "We visited a Maasai village outside of Nairobi and learned about the slums and microlending; went on a safari to a Rwanda memorial; and then we crossed the border into Uganda and trekked 11 hours through the jungle in the Congo to see the silver-back gorillas."

—K.B.

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**Sharon Knuston-Felix**, *Executive Director of the 100 Club of Arizona*

"I was raised in a Christian home. My dad was in the military when I was born and later went into the ministry. I was taught from a very early age to give back and to give to those who are less fortunate." And that is exactly what Sharon Knuston-Felix is doing.

Knuston-Felix is the executive director of a local nonprofit, 100 Club of Arizona. Its mission is to provide financial assistance to families of seriously injured and fallen public safety officers and firefighters statewide and provide resources to enhance their safety and welfare. Her passion for this mission was ignited when her husband, Doug, was killed in the line of duty on Jan. 2, 1998. "After learning about the 100 Club and being a beneficiary of their support, I joined the organization. As a survivor of an officer killed in the line of duty, I knew firsthand what support was available and what support was lacking, especially to those who die off-duty or catastrophically injured in the line of duty."

The support Knuston-Felix received from the 100 Club of Arizona after her husband died was an unparalleled experience that helped her piece her life back together. She vowed to return the love and support she received to other victims, even publishing a book to help them in healing. "I've learned that Arizona has some of the most generous people in the world. About myself, I've learned I can only be responsible for myself and the best way I can lead is by example," she says. It is through her consoling words and big heart that Knuston-Felix has helped many, once like herself, put their feet firmly back on the ground and survive.

—E.L.



**Dr. Angela DeRosa**, *Expert in the Field of Internal Medicine and Women's Health*

A Doctor's office can often be a scary place to visit. Sitting on an examination table surrounded by stark white walls and the smell of metal in the air is not an idyllic situation. However, there are some doctors, like Dr. Angela DeRosa, who believe a warm and compassionate environment is beneficial for a patient's progression. "[My team and I] try to give [our patients] a safe place to share their stories without judgment," DeRosa says of her Scottsdale office.

From the tender age of eight, DeRosa knew her vocation was to be a doctor. During her residency at medical school, DeRosa discovered her gift of relating to patients, particularly to women. She grew her ability to help women by studying Internal Medicine and Women's Health at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, Ill.

Today, DeRosa is following her passion one "Hormonal Happy Hour" at a time. DeRosa and her team created these monthly open forums for women to eat, drink and talk openly about love, libido, their bodies and life. "In my private practice, I have the opportunity every day to help women and men to feel better by balancing their hormones. It is a privilege," she says.

DeRosa is changing the direction of traditional medicine, changing what often gets categorized as a cold and impersonal field into a realm of love, laughter, health and happiness. The doctor's skills even carry into her free time; in 2011, she opened a medical facility in Africa to serve the Mwereni Integrated School for the Blind. "I have very strong bonds with my patients, and I get to meet all kinds of great people who inspire me," she says.

—E.L.