

Our thriving Valley has it all, but where would we be without a few dedicated women? Here, we introduce 12 local ladies whose inspiring contributions we wouldn't want to go without.



An Ally for Awareness
Story by Stephanie Riel

For Alexandra Zavala, co-founder of the networking initiative, Hispanic Outreach Alliance, volunteering has been a lesson learned from her parents' generosity.

The 31-year-old moved to the United States from Mexico at the age of 10 with her family. Although life growing up wasn't always easy for her family of seven, Zavala's parents always expressed generosity in any way they could.

"My parents always found a way to help others," Zavala says. "So [giving] has always been a part of [my] life. It has been second nature to me."

It was from this upbringing and time spent in Washington, D.C. as a public policy fellow that Zavala decided to pursue a career with nonprofit organizations.

Once she returned to Phoenix, Zavala became the Hispanic Outreach Manager for Planned Parenthood, and then served as the executive director of Phoenix-based Girls For A Change until 2007.

It was from her role with Planned Parenthood that she was inspired to form a collaborative initiative for the Valley's Hispanic outreach professionals. And in April 2005, with the help of alliance co-founder Al Quihuis of AZ Hispanic Connection, the Hispanic Outreach Alliance was established.

For Zavala, offering a forum for Hispanic outreach coordinators in the Phoenix area to come together and exchange ideas has been a primary goal all along. The alliance, a network of nonprofit outreach managers and coordinators in the Phoenix area, meet monthly to share information and learn about new outreach approaches.

In addition to her post at the alliance, Zavala also serves as the director of community reinvestment and involvement for Magellan Health Services in Phoenix.

"I started thinking how great would it be to get all of these [community outreach] people into one room," Zavala says of her initial motivation to create the organization. "Al and I thought that getting the outreach professionals in our area together to bounce ideas off of each other would be a great resource."

In fact, Zavala feels that the professionals that comprise the alliance make all the difference.

"In 2005, we started with 10 members and now we have 160," she says. "It is really fulfilling and exciting that I have been a part of it...but the Hispanic Outreach Alliance is what it is because of the members," Zavala says.

As for the future, Zavala plans to continue learning, growing and helping the community through her position at Magellan Health Services. She also hopes for the Hispanic Outreach Alliance to gain not-for-profit status, so it can be eligible for grants and further the reach of its impact in the community.

In particular, Zavala cites her love for people and desire to help others as her driving force.

"I enjoy people; I guess it comes from having a large family," she says. "I enjoy those interactions with people and I get a lot of satisfaction being able to help others."

The Hispanic Outreach Alliance shares that goal by treating the Valley's outreach professionals and their respective organizations as family; offering advice and help in the challenging times and cheering each other on in times of triumph.

A Fashionable Inspiration
Story by Marlene Montanez

Stepping into the vault for the fashion collection at the Phoenix Art Museum is an experience akin to being a kid in candy store—to anyone obsessed with fashion that is. And for Dennita Sewell, curator for The Kelly Ellman Fashion Design Gallery at Phoenix Art Museum, the kid-in-a-candy-store feeling is one she gets to experience every day.

Clad in all black, Sewell chats animatedly about the collection of 5,000-plus objects in the fashion vault that houses women's, men's and children's garments and accessories dating from the late 18th century to the present. She radiates excitement that is impossible not to notice. "I

am very into that! I like this; we're pulling out some pieces!" she exclaims as a jaw-droppingly gorgeous 2002 Karl Lagerfeld-designed Chanel suit is unveiled from its khaki-color acid-free box. The suit is amazing—classic Chanel with black patent boots and a corset belt to match. "The thing about contemporary pieces and what is important to me, is that I am not a stylist," she explains. "I am not an editor; I am a fashion historian. I'm a curator, and my job here at this museum and my goal or my role is not to style the mannequins per se but to do the research to portray the designer's vision from head-to-toe as accurately as possible."

Whether it's sourcing pieces to add to the collection or researching current socially relevant pieces to acquire, Sewell strives to document what's important, what gets people talking. "What designers are significant? Which pieces in their body of work [are] significant? What is a significant style that represents a time period? All those things factor into what we particularly seek out and try to acquire," she says. "Clothing has so much to do with our history and the time period and the technologies of those time periods that we're able [to show] the drive of the society, what they find beautiful in different points in time. I find all those things fascinating and try to portray those in the exhibitions."

Sewell coordinates two to three exhibitions per year at the museum. "There are very few museums across the country that have a devoted space to fashion where they do consistent exhibitions and have the level of activity that we have here," she says. Thanks to donations from people in the community, designers and big-name fashion icons like Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus, Phoenix Art Museum's fashion collection has attained renown. Its pieces have been lent for national and international use in venues like the Chanel exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art and the Balenciaga exhibition at the Musée des Arts de la Mode et du Textile at the Louvre in Paris. "I could say and tell the public that this here is a great collection," she says, "but [the borrowing] speaks to its reputation internationally; that those people in these different institutions organizing these retrospectives wanted to borrow our pieces is really exciting."

But it's far more than just pretty dresses and vintage shoes for Sewell. "I really feel passionately about touching all parts of the community," she says. "We all wear clothes. Just to involve people and engage them in the museum, I think the more that we learn about ourselves and our history and what we wear is so much a part of ourselves and our world and the way our social structure is composed and thrives that it's really essential to understand clothing and its role in society."

Community Crime Consultant
Story by Ryan Lorenzo

Erin Spiers is not your everyday forensic psychologist. This Scottsdale expert has made a name for herself with her involvement nationally in the Columbine case, and locally in identifying the Baseline Killer.

"Columbine unequivocally changed my life," Spiers says. "You spend a lot of time in places and viewing things that the general public would try to avoid." Bill Kurtis documented her Columbine work on the A&E program "Investigative Reports," while Steven Pitt, founder of local forensic and general psychiatry practice Steven Pitt & Associates, awarded Spiers a team position to discover the cause of the tragedy. Her work entailed watching the school's security tape, reading more than 17,000 pages of material and interviewing anyone with a connection to the mass murderers at different phases of their lives. The two-year project, which additionally served as her graduate school dissertation, concluded with an open presentation to the community and a closed presentation to the governor. From there, the district attorney for the Kobe Bryant case in Colorado requested her firm's consulting services for the criminal trial, which was ultimately dropped by the defendant.

Locally, Spiers offered her expertise to Phoenix police to help identify the Baseline Killer. She attended task force meetings and analyzed data that helped to expand offender behavior instead of pinpointing the looks of a killer who was said to have murdered nine people and sexually assaulted others along the same street from 2004 to 2006. Recently, Spiers was hired to provide an independent psychological evaluation of Jennifer Mally, the Paradise Valley High School teacher who pleaded guilty in March to sexual conduct with a student. Spiers later testified at the sentencing hearing.

When Spiers is not sharing her know-how with the legal community, she seeks to give back. A friend of hers lived in an apartment under a bridge while her home was damaged and her business demolished by Hurricane Katrina. Spiers helped to collect money and create packages, which allowed her friend to eventually return to a normal life and open up a new business. Whether solving a national murder case or simply helping a friend in need, Spiers' willingness to step up and assist others makes her an ally to our community and beyond.

Environmental Advocate
Story by Ryan Lorenzo

Few days go by nowadays when we don't hear of someone "going green." Well, Jane Rau has been doing her part (and more) for the environment since she moved to the Pinnacle Peak area in 1967. Eighty-six-year-old Rau has done everything from cleaning up our roadsides to speaking at Scottsdale City Council meetings to ensure the continued existence of our natural landscape and its wildlife. But she made her biggest mark on the Valley when in 1990 she co-founded the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, a nonprofit group that has saved about 16,000 acres of land from commercial use through government preservation initiatives.

If you wake up early enough, you can find Rau biking through the desert that she has worked so hard to protect. In fact, we owe much of the fact we can still hike the trails on the McDowell Sonoran Preserve today to Rau and the Conservancy staff, who have implemented a plan to keep the terrain true to Arizona. Their first landmark victory came in 1998 when then governor Jane Hull signed a bill to conserve 2,800 acres. Since then, the group has accrued an additional 13,000 acres and opened an office that now has five staff members.

Today the Conservancy continues to attract volunteers and donations. Which seems appropriate, considering Rau raised the initial funds to start the group by asking strangers for donations. During the early days of the foundation, she ran into a friend on her morning bike ride. She explained to him the group's cause and asked him for \$3,000. Moved by her story, he came back with a check for \$2,864.20, just short of her request. Later that year, she received a Christmas card from him with a check for the remaining amount.

Rau's accomplishments for the environment have not gone unnoticed. The Hon Kachina Council honored her with the Hon Kachina Volunteer Award last September; during the same month, the Land Trust Alliance rewarded her with the 2008 National Conservation Volunteer of the Year Award. At the ceremony, she wore a yellow ensemble that stood out amid an array of black business attire. It's no coincidence that the color yellow invokes hope, a hope she had and still has to keep Arizona green. That hope has since turned into achievement, which traces back to her life's philosophy: "Do what you can. See the things and take care of them. Don't just sit there and complain." Clearly, Rau takes her own advice to heart; after all, she has no time to sit when there are such gorgeous mountains to climb.

Putting Locals First

Story by Ryan Lorenzo

Inside Stinkweeds music store in central Phoenix, a customer sparks a conversation with owner Kimber Lanning, who stands behind the cash register of the shop she has owned since 1987. He raves with appreciation about this rare, independent music store while Lanning, who knows a thing or two about local business, concurs. "The majority of people who walk in here, I'll start a conversation with and I know who they are, and I know their life story," says Lanning. "I mean, what do you have if you don't have relationships? That's the gut of what local business is."

Lanning has certainly created a name for herself as a local store owner, but her main impact on our city has been as founder of the nonprofit foundation Local First Arizona, which strives to bring local commerce to the forefront of Arizona's economy. Lanning says that she didn't feel Phoenixians were connecting to their hometown like natives of other American cities do. "I just wanted to raise my hand and say, 'Well, I know why you aren't connecting to the city. You don't know where all the cool places are, and you don't know where the homegrown places are— I can help you.'"

With Local First, Lanning educates people on the broader financial benefits of shopping at the stores in their neighborhoods and promotes awareness of such stores with "Small Wonders," a mini-booklet that maps Central Phoenix's local stores and restaurants. This advocacy allows citizens to reap the benefits of neighborhood spending as more money goes back into the community. When she founded the organization in 2003 under the name Arizona Chain Reaction, Lanning simply intended to create a database with listings of all things local. In 2006, though, she sold her Tempe Stinkweeds location to devote her efforts to Local First full time. The organization's name was changed in 2007 to reflect its mission, and the group now boasts more than 1,400 members and 13 representatives on its board of directors. "As Local First Arizona grows, it becomes more apparent that we have the chance now to shift the future of Phoenix," she says. "That's the thing that keeps me going." While entrenched within the local business community, Lanning also works with the Phoenix government as a member of its Development Advisory Board. Though she is quick to note that she is not a politician, she researches issues, attends countless city council meetings and drafts policy proposals to encourage officials to focus locally for economic enhancement.

One of Lanning's current projects with Local First is to explore ways that older buildings built before current code can be reused now for business purposes. This protects the environment, Lanning says, since "the greenest building of all is an existing building." It's this emphasis on preserving what's local that reinforces Lanning's success as a nonprofit director, business owner and advocate in our community.

Leader of Leaders

Story by Elizabeth Smith

It's difficult to fathom that Alison Rapping, the woman who now leads Valley Leadership as its executive director was initially not accepted into the elite organization that is known for developing some of the Valley's most prominent and inspiring leaders.

The prestigious program, founded in 1979, boasts as alumni dynamos including former Scottsdale mayor Sam Campana; three Phoenix city council members: Greg Stanton, Tom Simplot and Peggy Neely; and individuals like Rusty Foley, Grady Gammage, Jr. and Ken Chevront. Valley Leadership graduates have run for prominent elected offices; founded other local leadership organizations; assisted in the renovation of the Orpheum Theatre in Downtown Phoenix; chaired groups like the Phoenix Historic Preservation Commission, Mesa Family Way, the Goldwater Institute, Phoenix Arts Board, and Phoenix Planning and Zoning Commission; and served on the boards of hundreds of nonprofit organizations in our community.

For Rapping, who was accepted upon her second attempt into class XX ("The one you're in is the one you're supposed to be in," she jokes), the experience was "catalytic" to her desire—as well as her ability—to stay in Phoenix and make a difference within it.

Making a difference is something of a career signature for Rapping, who, prior to assuming her position at Valley Leadership, served as President and C.E.O. of Make a Difference (now Hands On Greater Phoenix), an organization devoted to spearheading volunteer activities and community programs throughout the Valley. Rapping attributes the call to serve her community to the advice of her father, a professor of economics, who often advised her, "Your role in this world is to leave society better than you found it."

With a master's degree in public administration from University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Rapping's own community involvement includes posts as vice chair of the City of Phoenix Commission on Housing and Neighborhoods, Member of the City of Phoenix Bond Committee, chair of the Effective Citizenry and Leadership Task Force and a board member for HandsOn Network, legislative fellow in the House of Representatives and member of Valley Leadership's Recruitment Committee.

For its part, Valley Leadership benefits and strengthens the community by developing and inspiring leaders. "It's a remarkable organization because it takes individuals who are already leaders and it enriches them," she says.

The 10-month program begins with a highly competitive application, interview and selection process. A two-day over- night retreat is followed by monthly leadership development sessions on topics like Valley history, government, education, nonprofits, health and wellness, neighborhoods, urban growth and the environment. Throughout the term, chosen candidates participate in intense team projects from which they develop community recommendations. Rapping sums up the mission, "It was really indoctrinated into us that you're here to make the Valley a better

place."

Through her own involvement in Valley Leadership, Rapping had the opportunity to meet the Gandhi family and see Gandhi's birthplace. Moved by that experience, she traveled to Africa, where she performed hands-on leadership training for Shape Zimbabwe and Nelson Mandela Bay Cares. To this day, she keeps and holds close to her heart a thanks from the Paul Terry, C.E.O. of the Park Nicollet Institute that she received complimenting her work there.

Today, Rapping finds fulfillment leading a key organization cultivating the Valley's up-and-coming leaders. "Leadership is a collective effort," Rapping says. "You will only succeed if everyone is leading in their own way."

The Weight of Success
Story by Christine Whitton

Though you might recognize her name now, Arizona native Ali Vincent hasn't always lived the glamorous life. Growing up in Mesa, this season five winner of NBC's "The Biggest Loser" has struggled with weight since her initial five-pound gain "I knew I was unhappy; I just didn't know if I was unhappy because I was fat or fat because I was unhappy," says Vincent. Now this former champion synchronized swimmer aspires to motivate others.

Looking back, Vincent's eating habits consisted of fast food; sugary iced, blended coffee drinks; and quick, calorie-packed snacks. Those extra calories tipped the scale. It wasn't until the last year and a half that Vincent attempted several diet and exercise plans, to no avail. "What I realized was that I had quit setting goals and quit having opportunities to have success and win. Without a win, I didn't have a reason to celebrate who I was," Vincent says. It wasn't until the season-three finale of "The Biggest Loser" that she realized the show's true potential and submitted an application.

On Aug. 11, Vincent got her chance. Partnering with her mom Bette-Sue, the spirited duo attended an open casting call at the Mesa Arts Center and were quickly awarded a spot on the following season's biggest loser campus. As the newest member of the pink team, Vincent's first weigh-in was 234 pounds. As for the glare of the cameras on her personal struggle, "It was the price I had to pay for this opportunity," Vincent says. After four grueling weeks of day-long workouts, Vincent was eliminated and sent packing.

Back in Phoenix, Vincent was determined to be a winner and had one final chance to commit. (The rules state that two eliminated contestants who had lost the most off-campus weight could return in the final weeks to compete for \$250,000.) Hitting the 24 Hour Fitness gym, Vincent found new confidence and determination of "why not me."

"It doesn't matter the course you take as long as you get there," she says. Working around the clock between her job and the gym, Vincent was tired and exhausted but never lost hope. In the end, Vincent secured her spot on "The Biggest Loser" campus for the remaining six episodes. Vincent's live finale weigh-in was 122 pounds—112 pounds less than when she started. She became the first female to win "The Biggest Loser."

Today, Vincent eats what she likes in moderation and attends the gym in her free time. After all, "you can't eat the whole chocolate cake at once; you have to go one bite at a time," she says. Going forward, Vincent, now a spokesperson for 24 Hour Fitness, aims to jump start others to believe in themselves and not allow their outer image to out shadow their inner beauty.

Educator for Empowerment
Story by Christine Whitton

Though only three years out of college, Courtney Klein has accomplished more in the last few years than many do in a lifetime. A 2005 graduate of Arizona State University's Barrett Honors College, Klein is the chief executive officer of Valley nonprofit New Global Citizens and the newest Athena Award winner in the Phoenix Young Professional Division.

During the summer between her freshman and sophomore years, Klein and a passionate group of 12 traveled to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula to provide much-needed relief to its residents. While there, Klein built schools, repaired homes and acted as a liaison translating pertinent information to area medical clinics. It was not until Klein's trip home that she realized the unbelievable difference young people can have on ravaged communities if given the opportunity. The one facet holding Generation Y back, she realized, was the overall lack of awareness of the world's crisis.

Klein assembled a strategic business plan that would tackle the growing epidemic of uneducated youth and hopefully ignite a flame from within. Finalized and in black and white, Klein submitted her plans to ASU's Edson Student Entrepreneur Initiative and received a \$1,000 seed grant. During Klein's senior year at ASU, she launched the grass-roots nonprofit Youth Re:Action Corps, of which she served as the founder and executive director. In February 2008, Youth Re:Action Corps fused with Youth Philanthropy Worldwide to form New Global Citizens (NGC).

As acting C.E.O. of NGC, Klein realized that the current generation will inherit many of the world's current troubles. "The problems facing the next generation are really the problems facing the world [today]," Klein says. "The good thing is that our generation is the most technologically diverse, technologically connected and ethnically diverse generation the world's ever seen." In turn, education is the key. New Global Citizens educates its students in 10 viable areas ranging from extreme poverty to natural disasters. Students choose an area of interest, which they then apply to partnering projects. "Partnering projects are driven out of the idea that local communities know best what local communities need," Klein says. Currently, NGC has reached 80 high schools (with teams averaging 15 to 25 students) coast to coast and is quickly advancing partnerships in foreign countries. To counterbalance, NGC is shifting its focus to an online platform.

It should be no surprise that Klein was recently credited with the Athena Award honoring her professional accomplishments. This award was "a testimony to the village [Phoenix] that raised me and inspired me to dream," says Klein. As for her next step, Klein's going to let loose and live a

little. She is currently training to run 18.5 miles of a 180-mile relay-style run from Wickenburg to Mesa—another testament to Klein's persistent prerogative that it takes a team to reach a goal.

Promoting Women's Health on the Web

Story by Christine Whitton

After enduring a health scare, Phoenix philanthropist Michelle Robson became an advocate for women's health, vowing not to let another woman experience what she finally overcame. Michelle King Robson was a vibrant 30-something when she began experiencing perimenopausal symptoms and her body starting to react in new ways. By her early 40's, a diagnosis led Robson to a controversial hysterectomy.

Due to her lack of understanding prior to her surgery as well as her subsequent struggle for health, Robson now feels compelled to share her story with other women.

"Today I have to take hormone replacement therapy in order to function, and [the therapy] is in need of constant tweaking because of my body changes and my age," Robson says. "I had to learn these things by default." She believes if women have access to complete information on which to base their medical decisions, future health heartache can be alleviated.

In light of her experience, Robson set out to establish Empowher - a Web-based medium that allows other women to ask health questions, share their stories and connect with other women who share their condition or disease. Robson initially geared the recently launched site to six areas (menopause, osteoporosis, heart disease, postpartum depression, premenstrual dysphoric disorder and thyroid disorders) and hoped interactive threads would further the exchange of information. She was correct in those estimations. Currently one of the site's most discussed ailments is ankle fusion, an often overlooked condition. "It is the mission and vision [of Empowher] to touch the lives of every single woman around the world and get them communicating about their health, sharing resources and information with each other," Robson says. After all, you only have so much time with a doctor.

In many cases, women are the chief medical officers of the home, assisting children, husbands and aging parents first and caring for themselves last, if at all. "We need to put ourselves first so we can take care of everyone else," Robson says. Going forward, Robson strives to translate Empowher into both Spanish and French, in hopes of reaching women who are currently underserved.

Currently, more than 162 countries have visited the Empowher site. As her creation reaches more people around the globe, Robson's vision is realized through positive feedback by colleagues and contributors, who find Empowher sheds light on those overcoming the same rare health hurdles she once did.

Hoping to Help

Story by Amy Strand

Like most 24-year-olds, Kristen Senseman is waist-deep in her second post-college job; but instead of starting at the bottom, she's already co-creator and owner of her own company, Hope Wine. Although Senseman admits she thought that family trips to Napa Valley were sometimes unexciting as a child, there's no doubt that they catapulted her into the world of wine today. As vice president of public relations for Hope Wine, Senseman is the only Arizona representative for the California-based company.

Senseman, a graduate of Chaparral High School and the University of Arizona, is one of eight young entrepreneurs—all under 30—who started this virtuous vino business in 2007. "Hope Wine is called a charitable wine label because we donate 50 percent of our profits to our partner charities," she says.

Each wine varietal is linked to a particular cause. For instance, half of the proceeds from the chardonnay are donated to the Susan B. Komen Foundation; the cabernet profits go toward autism awareness; and sales from the merlot benefit AIDS research.

"More than just donating money, we really want it to be on a wine shelf and generate awareness so people know and learn more about it," she says.

Once distribution was established in Arizona in early 2008, Senseman moved from Southern California back to her Scottsdale hometown to expand the label statewide. This enthusiastic entrepreneur has certainly carried the success of the company with her; Hope Wine is now available at more than 15 venues in Arizona and has been featured at numerous charity events.

Senseman's do-good demeanor has been a part of her life since childhood. From crafting Valentine's Day cards for the elderly in elementary school to her involvement with the Make-a-Wish Foundation during college, Senseman says the altruistic activities required of her throughout school built the foundation for her charitable perspective.

She recalls meeting a three-time breast cancer survivor at a recent Hope Wine event; the gratitude the woman expressed toward the company's causes left a lasting impression on Senseman. "[I love] all the charity events that we do; just being able to get out and be face-to-face with our consumers and tell them our story [is my favorite part]," she says. "I feel so blessed that I can combine my love for wine and my love for giving back all in the same job."

Although Senseman is tremendously upbeat, her quest to make the world a better place has not always been an easy one. "One of the biggest obstacles is our age; when you walk into a place, some people don't take you seriously," she says. However, by the end of 2009, Hope Wine projects that it will donate over \$900,000 to charities nationwide. With serious numbers like that, we can't wait to see how Senseman's wine changes lives next.

Inspiring Kids' Futures
Story by Stephanie Riel

Rachel Oesterle, executive director of Phoenix's therapeutic-arts nonprofit Free Arts of Arizona, has always had a desire to help.

"From a very young age, I have always had a heart for people in need," says the 55-year-old mother of two. "I think every person is born with a mission that is in them, and I have just been fortunate enough that I realized that when I was a little kid—allowing me to live that mission."

It wasn't long after graduating from the University of Arizona that Oesterle found her passion of family services and child welfare while working at Catholic Social Services in Southern Arizona. From there, Oesterle took the initiative to broaden the reach of child welfare for the facility in the western part of the state.

Prior to her current post at Free Arts, the Arizona native's résumé boasts work with Arizona nonprofit organizations like Aid to Adoption of Special Kids and the Sojourner Center that have led to record dollar-raising amounts and the expansion of innovative family welfare programming statewide. She even started her own nonprofit consulting firm in 2002.

Although new to the job at Free Arts - she's only been on the payroll since September 2008 - Oesterle has plenty of passion and experience to direct toward her goal of making Free Arts the source of therapeutic arts treatment in the state.

As executive director, Oesterle serves as a mentor for Free Arts staff by providing insight, sparking creativity and promoting the opportunities Free Arts creates for Valley children.

"I truly love being an advocate, shouting from the mountaintops and helping families and children to realize their potential to soar," she says.

Free Arts of Arizona brings the healing power of art and creativity to thousands of abused, neglected and homeless children each year through a variety of programs and activities including a multicultural arts camp, the professional artist series, Free Arts days and an especially unique 20-week mentoring program for children under the age of 17.

"That transformation when you see a child come alive" is what is most worth the work to Oesterle, who feels that Free Arts proves that power of art and expression, and that art heals.

"We enhance their lives and give them possibility. What we provide them allows them to think and dream beyond their circumstance," she says.

And to Oesterle, that makes even the toughest days on the job worth every minute.

Accelerating Cancer Research
Story by Nichole Brophy

It was during her final year at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, that Dr. Heather Cunliffe, head of the Breast and Ovarian Cancer Research Unit at TGen, discovered the worlds of molecular biology and biochemistry. Cunliffe's dedication to academics stemmed from an homage to her father, who passed away prior to her freshman year of college.

"He had always wanted me to go to university, and I pushed myself knowing that's what he would have wanted," Cunliffe, 39, says. As the only member of her immediate family to pursue a higher education, Cunliffe didn't stop at a bachelor's degree. Before long, she had enrolled at the prestigious University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, in pursuit of a Ph.D.

While studying for her Ph.D., Cunliffe attended a conference held by Jeffrey Trent, the current president and founder of TGen. Trent's presentation on genomic technologies and their impact on disease management for cancer patients motivated Cunliffe. She applied and was accepted as a postdoctorate fellow at his laboratory at the National Institute of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, M.D.

In 2004, Cunliffe was invited to join TGen to focus on diseases associated with women's health. "Both of my grandmothers passed away from breast cancer, and my husband's mother passed away from ovarian cancer," Cunliffe says. "So that was my driving force as to which cancer types I wanted to study. I launched the Breast and Ovarian Cancer Research Unit because those were the two major cancer types that have a lot of similarities because of the hormonal component."

Aside from scheduling her 12-hour days to accommodate collaborating with her staff, writing grants to the federal government and preparing manuscripts, Cunliffe also spends a generous amount of time aiding women's interest and women's networking groups. The Young Women's Christian Association, Salt River-Pima women's interest network, Charter 100, Women's Junior League, Susan G. Koman Breast Cancer Foundation and the American Cancer Society are just a few organizations for which Cunliffe advocates.

Possessing a firm belief in harnessing the scientific ability thriving within our state's master's and Ph.D. students, Cunliffe also serves as adjunct faculty for ASU's School of Life Sciences. "That is a huge passion of mine because that is where the talent is; that is the pivot point of many cutting-edge research laboratories."

Currently, Cunliffe's focus is leading her team of researchers to discover more accurate diagnostic and prognostic tests for breast and ovarian cancer patients. Enhancing the precision of such tests will help doctors determine the most impactful course of cancer treatment on a patient-by-patient basis. Her findings are aided by TGen's revolutionary implementation of what are known as "research accelerators." These accelerators take her unit's research and develop therapeutic biomarkers that can be used clinically, as fast as humanly possible.

"What we are trying to do is take those discoveries and hand them off to our accelerator partners with the knowledge and confidence that they are actually going to turn it into something that will help a large number of [cancer patients,]" Cunliffe says. "That is a dream come true for someone in my situation."