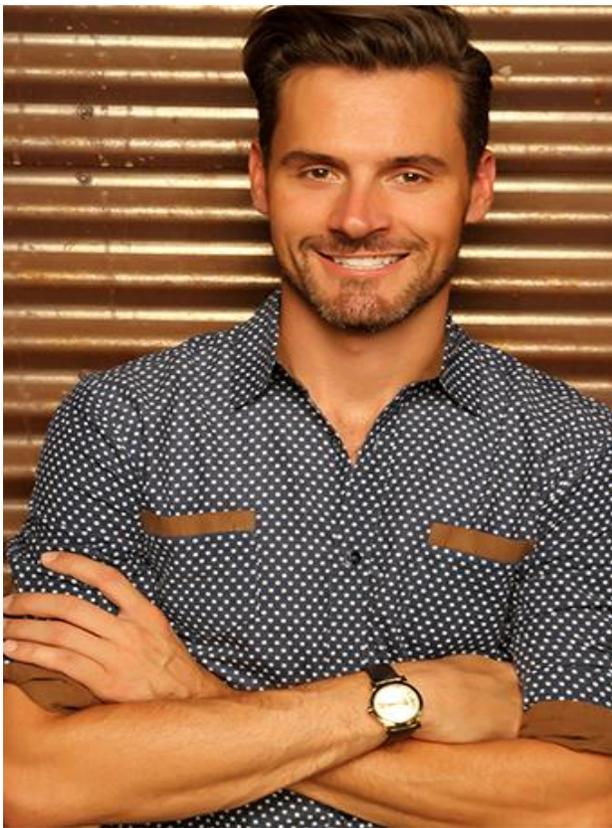


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By **Liz Massey**, September 2016 Issue.

In Phoenix, a city known for its population churn, it's often a badge of honor to assert one's status as a native. But laying claim to being a "desert rat" isn't the only way to prove that you really, really love this place.

Becoming involved with Valley Leadership (VL), a nonprofit dedicated to equipping community leaders with the tools to transform the greater Phoenix area, is another method, according to recent VL alumnus Travis Shumake.



Travis Shumake. Photo by Scotty Kirby.

"If someone wanted to offer an undergraduate degree in how Phoenix works, [VL] would be it," he said of his experience in Class 37 of Valley Leadership Institute, the organization's flagship program.

As a case in point, Shumake offered his experience at the first of nine classroom instructional sessions he attended. It was a class on infrastructure, and Shumake went in thinking he'd receive some general information about how the city

functioned. Instead, he said, he and his classmates learned about how the nine canals located within the city operate, even discovering the direction in which the water in each one flows.

Shumake is one of growing number of openly LGBTQ local citizens who have graduated from VL during its nearly 40-year history. What he and other attendees say they have gained through this experience is in-depth knowledge about the social, economic, cultural and government sectors of Phoenix and access to a deep network of civic-minded peers. Additionally, they have found that working together with a wide range of fellow leaders provided them with a opportunity to represent the LGBTQ community in a constructive, non-conflictual manner to others.

## **Creating “Change Agents”**

According to its President and CEO Christy Moore, Valley Leadership was created in the late 1970s through the efforts of members of civic groups such as the Phoenix 40 and Greater Phoenix Leadership.

“Phoenix needed change agents,” Moore explained. “We are the first and largest organization focused on creating change agents here.”

When Class 38 of VL got underway last month, its members joined a network of more than 3,000 program participants. The class members have been selected via a rigorous application process involving essays, letters of recommendations and an interview, which Shumake likened to “applying for college all over again.”

Out of the many applications submitted each year, alumni and community leaders select around 50 candidates to comprise the Institute class.

The organization aims for diversity on all levels, including cultural, social and economic, as well as diversity in gender identity and/or sexual orientation status. About one-third of those selected are from nonprofits, one-third are from corporate or business settings and one-third are employed by government agencies.

One commonality for all VL Institute class members is that they are established leaders, Moore said. Applicants must demonstrate their history of leadership in a workplace, social, community, church or other setting.

“Institute candidates are able to understand complex issues, and they are ready to step into solving these problems,” she said.

## Learning Inside, and Outside, the Classroom



Christy Moore, Valley Leadership president and CEO. Courtesy photo.

At the heart of the VL Institute are the nine instructional sessions, known as “program days,” which offer concentrated doses of information about various aspects of Valley life. Topics include healthcare, arts and culture, the city’s infrastructure, quality of life and much more.

According to Moore, the program days help participants gain “contextual intelligence” that is intended to make them better-informed decision makers. In-class experiences are supplemented with tours of prisons, schools, police ride-alongs, etc., to augment understanding of key issues.

Shumake said that the tours and class sessions helped him see how numerous elements of Phoenix functioned together smoothly.

“You see the power that these sectors have and the role each has to play,” he said.

The final, and possibly most important, part of the VL experience is the group project in which each member participates. After their thinking styles and personalities are assessed through a testing process known as Emergenetics, VL class members are placed in groups of about seven or eight people, intentionally paired with other leaders who complement their strengths.

According to Moore, this approach ensures each group was operating with a “whole brain.” Groups are provided with training in the discipline of design thinking, a human-centered, collaborative protocol for creating solutions to a

specific challenge. After that, the group chooses their project, which typically identifies a need in the community and develops a method of addressing it.

In the case of Shumake's group, the members partnered with the Foundation for Senior Living (FSL) to develop an "Experience of a Lifetime" program to fulfill a wish for a low-income older adult who would not otherwise be able to achieve it.

Each of the eight group members was able to lead one of the experiences, which included activities such as playing golf at the Arizona Biltmore resort and taking a hike in the mountains after many years away from the sport. The group worked with FSL to set up "Experience of a Lifetime" as an ongoing program of FSL after their VL class had graduated.

Shumake said that the group work on the project was instrumental in helping the leaders in his class become more open to problem solving with people from diverse backgrounds.

"Those group conversations break down the stereotype that we can't work together, or that there will be a barrier to working together," he said. "When you put (that many) leaders in a room, you learn to communicate and not compete ... and actually get stuff done."



Valley Leadership Class 37. Photo courtesy of [facebook.com/valleyleadership](https://facebook.com/valleyleadership).

## **Becoming Part of a Greater Network**

Both Moore and Shumake identified the personal connections forged through VL – both within classes and small groups and between alumni from other classes – as one of the greatest assets for participants in the program.

VL has a staff member dedicated to alumni programming, and the organization hosts a monthly get-together for graduates. An alumni e-newsletter regularly shares additional requests for resources and networking connections.

Additionally, Moore said she's been known to connect alumni from various classes when one of them asks for help with raising awareness around an initiative, finding quality job candidates or getting a project off the ground.

"We consider Valley Leadership a lifetime commitment to our alumni," Moore said. "We're here to link them up with opportunities that align with their passions."

Prior to his involvement in VL, Shumake had been involved in a mix of community activities, including serving as the fundraising chair for the LGBTQ youth support organization one n ten, co-chairing the 2016 Dancing With The Bars competition and co-chairing Aunt Rita's 2016 RED Brunch.

After experiencing Valley Leadership, Shumake said he felt encouraged to reach for whatever leadership opportunity he felt passionate about, regardless of whether it was an LGBTQ organization or not. As such, he currently serves on the board of directors for Ronald McDonald House Charities, Phoenix Suns Charities and he also founded the Downtown Phoenix Neighborhood Alliance.

"Sometimes, we don't step outside of our own organizations – we're afraid of not being respected as leaders," he said. "Valley Leadership has given me renewed confidence to take leadership positions outside of LGBTQ organizations."

Involvement in the organization has also provided a boost to Shumake's career. He said his employer (CityScape Residences) paid for his Valley Leadership experience, knowing that it would distinguish him among his professional peers. He also said that he feels that his status as a VL graduate would bolster his reputation if he were to search for a new job.

"People know what Valley Leadership is and what it brings, and what you now have as a result of being involved with it," he said. "For example, I am not sure I would have made the Business Journal's list of 40 under 40 without VL on my resume."

Another advantage to being involved with VL's programs as a LGBTQ participant and alum is the opportunity to be viewed as an equal peer among community leaders, Shumake asserted.

"We end up representing the LGBTQ community," he noted. "I've had many of my classmates say to me, 'I've enjoyed getting to know you, and you've changed my view on x, y, and z issues.'"

## **Reshaping a Personal Vision of Leadership**

VL's approach to developing local leaders often sparked new insights and ideas in participants as they moved through the experience, Moore noted.

"Many people have 'aha moments' [in our program] and become more self-aware," she said. "People will tell me that VL has reshaped their thinking and given them new opportunities to serve."

According to Shumake, VL helped him refine his vision of himself as a leader. Prior to his participation in the program, he said, he would usually strategize how he might eventually become the top leader for any organization with which he became engaged.

"I realized as a result of VL that my strengths are in connecting people and resources to reach a common goal," he said. "It's helped me figure out what to do with my life. I had wanted since about fifth grade to end up becoming the mayor of Phoenix, but now I've found other ways to serve the community that better fit my strengths and personality."

To learn more about Valley Leadership, including its Community Dialog Series events that are open to the public, visit [valleyleadership.org](http://valleyleadership.org).

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## **Valley Leadership alumni reflect on program's impact**

LGBTQ residents of Phoenix have been participating in Valley Leadership programs for most of its nearly 40 years of existence. *Echo* asked several of them, plus one ally, to comment on what the program had meant to them.



**Andre St. Pierre**

Valley Leadership Class 36

Director of professional services, Toshiba America Business Solutions and Lead15/Arizona 2030 Campaign co-founder

I first learned of Valley Leadership about five years ago through a friend who was going through the program at the time.

Valley Leadership prides itself on connecting proven community leaders from all walks of life and every demographic. The program exposed me to the rich history of Arizona, our expansive environmental and logistical infrastructure, our unique political landscape, the hurdles facing our educational and healthcare systems, our economic opportunities and challenges, the vital role our first responders serve within our community, the importance and impact of arts and culture, and so much more.

LGBTQ community members can get the exact same experience out of Valley Leadership that their straight peers do. That includes an understanding of diverse individuals, organizations, communities, and cultures. I believe that is the crux of what Valley Leadership fosters – understanding, connections, and bridge building within our community.

I appreciate that Valley Leadership emphasizes diversity ... I believe that allows people from all walks of life to overcome fears and misconceptions about people they might not otherwise interact or engage with.



**Dr. Bobbi Lancaster**

Valley Leadership Class 37

Family physician and former professional golfer

Just over a year ago, an alumna of Valley Leadership, a personal mentor of mine, encouraged me to apply for admission to this elite program. We both felt that the program would improve my leadership skills, especially in the area of small group dynamics.

I convinced my VL small group to choose a community service project that focused on at risk and homeless LGBTQ youth. We partnered with 1n10, the local LGBTQ youth support organization, and completed an amazing project. I would have never done this on my own without VL's assistance and the help of my classmates.

Valley Leadership allowed me to speak to my class and the Hispanic Leadership Institute for one hour during one of our monthly program days. I educated my classmates about transgender issues and the discrimination we face. I spoke to them about the biology of gender. My wife was available to answer questions along with me. I feel the needle of acceptance and equality for the LGBTQ community was moved significantly on that day.

Because of Valley Leadership, I have made many friends and I have established very special contacts. I will be enlisting my VL alums in the future to help me with my mission. And I will be there to help them with their causes. The Valley will be a better place in the future because of my VL class. I can't wait.



**Ben Cilek**

Valley Leadership Class 37

Senior director of financial planning and analysis at Apollo Education Group, Inc.

I was on a project team during my Valley Leadership experience with Dr. Bobbi Lancaster, and we partnered with one n ten to create a promotional fundraising video, as well as create a six-week photography class for the youth, which culminated in an art exhibit at one of our project member's local art studios.

Dr. Bobbi shared her story with our class, as well as in a one-on-one discussion with me. As a heterosexual white male with a fairly conservative Midwestern background, I had limited exposure or knowledge about transgender people and their issues. Her remarks taught me about the physiology behind being transgender and the spectrum of gender identity that exists. She also shared very personal stories about the depths to which she reached during her worst of times.

I now take a step forward when encountering a trans person and "lean in," because I understand the issues better and know that they need society to support them and walk with them in their journeys. This helped me not only with trans people but the entire LGBTQ community and made my time spent with the youth and administrators at one n ten during our group project so much more rewarding. I leaned into the community and have become friends with both youth and administrators there.



**Eileen Rogers**

Valley Leadership Class 20

Principal, One Creative View/Allegra Marketing & Print

In our first Valley Leadership class gathering and retreat, there was an exercise in which I and a few other members came out together in front of the group. While I had believed that I'd been living my life openly as a gay person – I realized at this event that I had NOT been completely open. Throughout the course of the year with my classmates, I learned the fact that true leadership goes hand in hand with risk and integrity to one's values. I could not separate being an authentic community leader, a successful businesswoman, and a genuine human being from living openly as a gay woman.

On the final day of our class, one of my classmates shared with me something I will never forget. He was a member of law enforcement ... As we were saying our goodbyes he hugged me and whispered in my ear, "I will raise my children differently because of knowing you." I was stunned at the impact of our simple connection. I still smile thinking about it today ... and know the important and meaningful role I get to play each day when I share myself as a leader, who also happens to be a gay woman.

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Liz Massey has been involved in LGBTQ community-building activities in Kansas City and the Valley of the Sun, and is a former managing editor of *Echo Magazine*. She can be reached at [lizmassey68@gmail.com](mailto:lizmassey68@gmail.com).



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