Kartchner Caverns
The World’s MOST Accessible Cave?

Getting High
Meet AZ’s Adaptive Balloonist

7 Tips for Voc Rehab Success

Relationships
Couples Who Turn Heads

Kirk O’Hara
First Friday’s “Mouthy” Artist

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It often starts with a phone call from a community partner or perhaps a consumer request: “do you...?”. We do. We identify needs within our community and for 35 years, we’ve filled those needs with a simple, “We do.” We’ve built programs, forged partnerships, and advocated on issues that serve the disabled community.

I am often complimented on the great work that Ability360 provides to the disability community here in Phoenix and throughout the state. Sometimes, I’m even credited for Ability360’s many accomplishments as if I am solely responsible. In reality, that could not be further from the truth. Although I’ve remained steadfast over these past seventeen years, it is the many employees at Ability360 that really get the work done, that has led to our success. Without their passion, commitment and dedication, none of our achievements would have occurred.

From our reception staff to the senior management team, everybody plays a significant role at Ability360. It truly takes a village. We are made up of so many integral parts. We field thousands of information and referral calls each year. We do more than 150 home modifications per year.

Our payroll department cuts checks to more than 2,700 home care workers each week. Our home care supervisors manage caseloads of 60 to 70 consumers and drive hundreds of miles throughout four counties doing home visits. Our employment and work incentives programs empower and motivate hundreds of people with disabilities to achieve self-sufficiency through working and becoming tax payers. Our building maintenance crew keeps our facilities and technology in good working order. Our van drivers transport hundreds of consumers to our program activities.

Our Sports & Fitness Center staff brings high energy and enthusiasm to the 1,950 plus members we serve and supports them and many others through a myriad of programs on a daily basis. Our independent living staff provides peer support and counsel to hundreds of consumers and family members living with physical, mental and intellectual disabilities, and does so with amazing knowledge, understanding and patience. I could keep going, but I think you get the point.

Our Ability360 employees are truly amazing. Each day they fight for a community where dignity, equality, access, empowerment and choice exist for all persons with disabilities. Their commitment to these core values is why we’re so successful.

Their commitment to Independent Living philosophy and self-determination will never waiver. As an organization governed, managed and staffed by and for people with disabilities, we will always remain committed to delivering the highest quality programs to people with disabilities in our community. On behalf of our Board of Directors and myself, I’d like to appreciatively thank all of our employees for all they do for Ability360 and those we serve!
The people in these pages “do.” They travel and explore, they create, fly, work, raise families and go to school – they dare. They live lives worth living.

Our “Getting out” feature took us to southern Arizona to explore Kartchner Caverns. We’ve found no other caves in the world that offer real access for people with mobility impairments. Arizona State Parks made an extraordinary commitment while developing the caverns for public access and created pathways that are “wheelchair-friendly” while still protecting the caves for future generations. Their efforts to make nature as accessible as possible includes the newly-hired ADA coordinator and adding additional accessible cabins at state parks. Kartchner is the first in a series of parks we plan to visit for LivAbility.

Balloonist Michael Glen, a pilot who lives with paraplegia, took us up in his hot air balloon modified for wheelchair access. Jo Crawford covered the eagerly-anticipated 20th annual Day at the Lake which happens at Bartlett Lake north of Phoenix. After a distracted driver caused an accident that led to her disability, Marine Sgt. Gabby Graves-Wake found her new mission in competition.

We have stories that illustrate IL philosophy of self-determination and community integration. Through Ability360 Home Care Services, Glenn Long found friendship and purpose as he moved from squalor to a more positive future supported by professional caregivers.

Kasey, Angeline and Yvette are back this issue. Kasey profiles Chris DiVirgilio, who photographs adaptive sports for Sports N Spokes. Angeline covers Paco and Emily from Tucson in our new feature “Relationships.” Yvette kicked it into overdrive this edition with two great stories. First she profiled Kirk O’Hara, a talented painter who prefers the taste of watercolors to latex paint. Then she talked to Noah Abraham, a teacher who had polio as a kid. The hair-raising tale of his journey from Syria to Phoenix kept us on the edge of our seats.

Some of our favorite columnists are here too. Amina writes about the advocacy of showing up, Gary offers his perspective on dealing with people who don’t “get” disability, and Gus covers the pool renovations generously funded by the Arizona Diamondbacks Foundation. Winter is officially over, the pools are open!

As we grow from being “just a magazine” to truly becoming “LivAbility Media,” we’re also expanding our skills. We each wear many hats that define us as “multi-media.” We’re fortunate that Ability360 staffer, Clinton McDaniel, is also an award-winning videographer. He now lends his talent and expertise to our video storytelling. This edition brings a record of five video stories on our website. Clinton shot some of them and helped produce and edit others. Watch our website and YouTube channel for more new videos. Do we do video? We DO!
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Look for this icon! It indicates additional video content online.

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Paralympian, Josh Wheeler of Tucson explores Arizona State Park Kartchner Caverns

Photo by Loren Worthington
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**Photographer**

*Irma Nyrkkanen*

Irma Nyrkkanen is an industrial designer by trade from Mexico City. Her interest in photography started in high school. She’s been working to develop and improve her skills for about ten years. With more than ten years of experience as a professional designer, she has created a unique photography style.

**Writer**

*Jo Crawford MSL, CTRS*

Jo Crawford MSL, CTRS has worked at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center for more than 22 years in the rehabilitation services area. She has enjoyed developing inpatient, outpatient and community programs and services. Presently she is the Program Coordinator at the Barrow Connection an outreach program at Barrow Neurological Institute at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center.

**Writer/Photographer**

*Tim Binning*

Tim Binning is proud to be the wheelchair track coach for Arizona Disabled Sports, and is driven to provide the opportunity to participate in adaptive sports to any athlete who desires it. Tim is an advocate for the inclusion of adaptive track at the high school level and is also working to start an adaptive track club at ASU.

**Writer/Photographer**

*Aitana Yvette Mallari*

Aitana Yvette Mallari is an online media journalist who runs on caffeine and WiFi. She’s lived in the Middle East, Asia, and both coasts of the US and writes about health, tech, and amazing people doing amazing things. She is studying at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications and probably has a deadline to get to.

**Writer**

*Angeline Carbajal*

Angeline Carbajal is the Program Coordinator of Communications at the UA Disability Resource Center. She started as a student worker for the DRC her freshman year and graduated from the UA in May 2015 with her bachelor’s in journalism. She hopes to pursue a graduate degree in marketing starting August 2017.

**Photographer**

*Irma Nyrkkanen*

Irma Nyrkkanen is an industrial designer by trade from Mexico City. Her interest in photography started in high school. She’s been working to develop and improve her skills for about ten years. With more than ten years of experience as a professional designer, she has created a unique photography style.

**Writer**

*Jillian Seamans*

Jillian Seamans is a Public Information Officer for the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES)’s Division of Employment and Rehabilitation Services. Ms. Seamans began her career with DES in 2012 merging her passion for storytelling with helping others. Ms. Seamans previously worked as a reporter for College Times Newspaper and Item Magazine, and as an editor for SheKnows.com. She holds a Bachelor’s of Science in Communications and Psychology from Arizona State University.

**Writer/Photographer**

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Alexis Ramanjulu is a student at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. She is from a town where the mall is the focal point and makes traffic unbearable. She enjoys being with friends and Netflix after a long day.

**Writer/Photographer**

*Aitana Yvette Mallari*

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**Writer**

*Kasey Kaler*

Kasey Kaler is a graduate of Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications. Kasey has spent four years in public relations internships for various Arizona sports organizations while also remaining true to her passion for producing content, writing, and editing for a multitude of platforms. In 2015, Kasey began pursuing a Master of Arts in Sports Administration at Gonzaga University.

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**Writer**

*Savannah Haas*

Savannah Haas is a junior at Arizona State University studying journalism with an emphasis in public relations and political science. She is a military child and has lived in many places, including Germany and Pennsylvania, but most recently moved to Gilbert, Arizona. Savannah loves to take group classes at the Sun Devil Fitness Center and has found a passion in daily yoga practice. You can find Savannah at any local coffee shop that plays Mumford and Sons and sells pumpkin scones.

**Writer**

*Kasey Kaler*

Kasey Kaler is a graduate of Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications. Kasey has spent four years in public relations internships for various Arizona sports organizations while also remaining true to her passion for producing content, writing, and editing for a multitude of platforms. In 2015, Kasey began pursuing a Master of Arts in Sports Administration at Gonzaga University.
How Are We Doing?

LivAbility Magazine is interested in your thoughts, comments, gripes, concerns, suggestions and ideas for future stories. Send us an email and we will do our best to keep improving with each edition.

Published "letters to the editor" will include first name, last initial and city, if known.

calling all creatives! LivAbility has a space for you.

We’re on the lookout for talented contributors in every part of our great state to help keep our readers up to date on the people and events that impact our community. We’re always eager to meet writers, photographers, videographers and illustrators who tell the stories of people with disabilities. Contact us to discuss a submission.

360Perspectives publishes personal essays on YOUR disability experience. Tell us in less than 300 words. Make us laugh, make us cry, make us angry or curious. Start a conversation… YOU are the expert on your own disability experience. Let’s talk!

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This magazine is printed with vegetable-based inks.
Lily, 12, was born with Spina Bifida and uses a wheelchair. She began climbing the rock wall a few years ago at the Ability360 Sports & Fitness Center.

Lily is a part of the Breaking Barriers program. A program started in November 2016 and provides youth with the ability to take part in adaptive climbing experiences. The program originally used the indoor rock wall then transitioned to an outdoor setting in the new year, at Tom’s Thumb Trailhead in Scottsdale.

“I liked getting higher and higher each time. I wasn’t really scared when I first started climbing,” Lily said. “I’m excited to climb the rock here because I like getting higher and I like being outside. I like being with my friends and making new friends.”

Lily’s mother, Jena, brought her to Ability360 to get her involved in physical activities and to help her meet friends.

“When Lily first started climbing, someone always had to hold her foot on the rock so she didn’t slip off, and she faced the challenge of not being able to get up any higher than where someone could safely assist her. When she climbed the outdoor boulder, though, the positioning allowed her to climb independently.

“I think she just kept looking up at the wall and knowing she wanted to climb further and further and recently she made it all the way to the top. Then when she heard there was an opportunity to climb outside, and she loves the outdoors, she took to that, and that’s awesome,” Jena said. “She had a lot of challenges, kept falling down up there on the rock. When she was told she was going to climb possibly 108 feet, that’s almost three times as high as the rock wall at the gym, she kind of looked nervous but she was at the top of that rock and she was very proud of herself. I was very proud of her.”

The program will host another outdoor climbing session in April, followed by a paddling activity where participants will start with kayaking and paddle sports in our pool for safety orientation and then move to various lakes ranging from Tempe Town Lake to Watson Lake outside of Prescott.

“My name is Lily and I am climbing a rock mountain.”
“The Breaking Barriers program has had an incredible impact on the youth participants, with reported increase in strength, endurance and self-confidence,” Recreation Therapy Coordinator Kelsey Bocken said.

Jena said Lily has heard all her life from her parents that she can do a lot of things, but that it’s important for her to see that she can do it herself.

“Now that she’s getting older, mom and dad just telling her that is not really enough proof, so getting to climb out there, and seeing other people at 360 do things that are incredible for their challenges is really important at her age, knowing that it really is not just mom and dad saying ‘I can do this’. She can really do this,” Jena said.

R. Michael McQuaid, President of J.M. Management Company, board member of Thunderbirds Charities, the official sponsor of Breaking Barriers, said he has seen how the funds given to Ability360 have enabled youth to overcome the physical barriers that they face on a daily basis.

“The Breaking Barriers youth sports program provides activities that would not be available without the help of community partners, like Thunderbird Charities,” McQuaid said. “To have rock climbing, kayaking, and swimming activities available to the youth at Ability360 is fantastic, and watching them overcome physical barriers is incredible.”

Lily summed up the success of the program by saying, “I like being with my friends and making new friends.”
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Moving Your Life Forward
For as long as he can remember, Chris DiVirgilio grew up wanting to be two things: a police officer and a journalist. While those two careers don’t necessarily fit together, it was all part of his master plan. He always loved fiddling around with cameras, photography, piecing together video segments, and writing.

When he was 17, DiVirgilio enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. “I’d joined the military to help pave the way to becoming a police officer,” DiVirgilio said. “I never thought the military would have such an impact on my future.”

Facing budget cuts in 1990, DiVirgilio accepted a separation package. DiVirgilio was right, the military did pave the way for his police career. When he returned home to Chicago, he attended the police academy, achieving his goal of becoming a police officer. He stayed on the force for five years before deciding that he and law enforcement were not an ideal fit and made his way to Arizona.

Until then, DiVirgilio had never shared his writing with anyone. However, after relocating, he joined an online writing group. Seeing positive results, DiVirgilio began to think this dream was worth pursuing.

In 2002, he reenlisted in the Marine Forces Reserve in order to complete 20 years of military service. Shortly after, he enrolled at Phoenix Community College, where he ultimately received a degree in journalism.

He began writing for various publications, building his portfolio. Then, the dream job came calling. “It’s funny because this job actually found me,” DiVirgilio said with a laugh. “I had a neighbor who told me to put my résumé in [Paralyzed Veterans of America] and when I went in, they hired me as an intern.”

What started out as an assistantship to help with the development of the Sports ‘N Spokes website and write an occasional story, morphed into DiVirgilio’s ultimate dream job. He now works as a web-content manager for the website he helped develop and a staff writer for Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and Sports ‘N Spokes, located in downtown Phoenix.

Now, you’d be hard-pressed to miss him at any adaptive sporting event.

When asked what drew him into adaptive sports, DiVirgilio doesn’t miss a beat. “The passion that’s on display,” DiVirgilio said. “It’s not like professional sports, they’re there to be athletes. And they’re amazing athletes.

“They’re proof that you should be passionate about what you do. If you’re passionate then that’s what is going to shine and come through in your work.”

DiVirgilio should know, after all, passion radiates from him when discussing his time spent in the profession.

He has covered everything from a pick-up wheelchair basketball game to the prestigious and newly introduced Invictus Games.

The Invictus Games were introduced in 2014 and “use the power of sport to inspire recovery, support rehabilitation, and generate a wider understanding and respect for wounded, injured and sick servicemen and women.”

DiVirgilio recalls the entire event to be awe-inspiring but mentions a special interaction with two soldiers from the Jordanian army.

“My Arabic is just a little rusty so I did the entire interview using Google Translate,” DiVirgilio said. “So, they set up their phones to translate to English and I set up mine to translate to Arabic and it was just awesome.”

DiVirgilio ended his story with a smirk. “I got to write this pretty kick-ass story after,” he said.
It was still dark when Michael Glen, 42, drove his red pickup truck and trailer onto a dirt lot in Queen Creek. Following closely behind was his crew and a packed van with an excited birthday boy who was ready to fly.

Bryce Clayton was about to reach new heights for his tenth birthday.

“He loves hot air balloons. We sometimes see them from our house and he is fascinated by them,” Bryce’s mother, Tammy Clayton said.

At 17-months old Bryce began to lose skills that he once had. Doctors were unable to identify the cause of the regressions that led to Bryce being a full-time wheelchair user. They said that he would not make it to his second birthday, but the Claytons were going sky high for his tenth. After careful research, they had chosen to fly with Michael Glen because he was the only balloonist in Arizona to offer accessible rides.

As the sun began to rise, Glen and his crew prepared for the morning adventure, moving with practiced precision.

They started with the balloon canopy, removing the rainbow colored envelope from the trailer and slowly rolling it out on the dirt.

Next came the basket. Glen’s basket is not the typical four high-wall enclosed basket. His is a simple aluminum frame about the size of a love seat that is open to the air. The curvature and simplicity of the basket allows Glen, a wheelchair user, to sit while piloting the balloon. Glen uses a bungee cord to prevent his feet from dangling. This is the sole adaption Glen has for his balloon. The basket can hold one other person, and is accessible to passengers who have disabilities. Both Glen and his passenger are secured by a standard seat belt.

There were many intricate parts to the basket; pulleys and connections from the balloon to the aluminum frame. Glen personally rigged them all to ensure they were done right.

Glen inflated the balloon slightly to ensure there were no holes and rolled inside, inviting the Claytons into the envelope as well.
Up, up and away

After a test flight, it was time for the Claytons to soar.

The loud hisses and pops of propane filling the balloon startled Bryce, causing him to hesitate.

He balked the first time he was invited onto the gondola, shaking his head no—indicating he no longer wanted to go up in the balloon. Bryce was more relaxed and ready for his turn after watching his sister take her turn.

“As soon as he sat down on the seat to go up in the balloon, he had a big smile on his face,” Bryce’s mother, Tammy Clayton said.

While in the air, Bryce’s smile got bigger the higher they rose. His family likes to do fun and adventurous activities for his birthday.

“This is the most adventurous thing we have done,” Tammy chuckled. “I don’t know if we can top this.”

Pushing the Envelope

When he was two weeks old, Glen’s father, a pilot himself, took him for his first hot air balloon ride.

Glen put ballooning on hold to pursue other sports. It was after he was in a single car rollover in 1996 that he decided to get his pilot’s license.

“I wasn’t wearing a seatbelt and I was ejected from the car doing about 55 mph. I completely shattered T11 and T12, making me a complete paraplegic,” Glen said.

A year after his injury Glen applied for his pilot’s license. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) was skeptical of his ability because of his disability. But that did not stop Glen from following his father and getting his pilot’s license.

“Luckily, for me, I don’t like the words ‘you can’t’ so I went to prove that I could.”

He began training in Tucson; putting in hours of book training and hands-on work under the close watch of his instructor. Glen developed safe and appropriate work-arounds to accommodate his disability. Ultimately, he proved to his instructors and FAA inspectors that he had the skills and abilities to earn his pilot’s license.

Sky High

Like the FAA, many people wonder if Glen flies his balloon differently. The appealing aspect of flying a balloon is when all the balloons are in the sky, all the pilots are the same.

“Once we are up in air we are all equal in the balloon,” Glen said. “There’s no other feeling like going and flying.”

Glen and his family named his basket “Elevation” because of the idea of elevating out of my wheelchair.

Staying Grounded

Glen has a personal goal of flying in all 50 states; he’s more than halfway there. However, he’s more interested in shifting the hot air ballooning market into becoming more accessible.

“They [the market] are starting to build baskets with doors and accessible features,” Glen said. “However, in Phoenix, unfortunately we don’t have one, this [his basket] is all they have accessibility wise.”

The closest places with these accessible baskets are Las Vegas, Napa and Temecula, California.

While there is no other feeling like flying for Glen, he enjoys the universal reaction people seem to have for ballooning.

“You go to a balloon festival like in Albuquerque and where there’s a million people around the balloon you see the joy on their faces,” Glen said. “I get more joy seeing everybody else’s experience, living my life through their feelings and looks on their faces.”

Bryce Clayton and his father celebrate his 10th birthday with adaptive balloonist, Michael Glen.
COMMUNITY

NEW SUPPORT GROUPS FORM

Wheel Life Group at Dignity Health St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center

Real life conversations about wheel life for people with spinal cord injury, their families and caregivers. Everyone meets together for 15 minutes then breaks into two groups, survivors and family members. Survivors are welcome to come without family members and likewise. Facilitated by Barrow psychologists, social workers and peer mentors, they meet the first Wednesday of each month from 6-7:00 pm in Sontag Pavilion, 350 W. Thomas Rd., Phoenix AZ 85013. For more information, contact the Arizona Spinal Cord Injury Association at 602-507-4209.

Accessible Arizona

Accessible Arizona, a new grass-roots advocacy group, has a self-described mission: “A new wave of advocacy fighting for people with severe mobility disabilities. We don’t support the victim mentality, but instead self-responsibility.”

Accessible Arizona is currently focused on the misuse of accessible parking spots, etiquette for use of accessible restrooms and educating entertainment venues on the value of accessibility. Learn more at accessibleaz.org and on Facebook as Accessible Arizona.

Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing’s Day at the Capitol Connected Community and Legislators to 1.1 Million Arizona Adults that Experience Hearing Loss

On Tuesday, March 7, more than 300 Arizona State Legislators and community members joined The Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing (ACDHH) at the state capitol for a 40th Anniversary celebration.

In addition to being connected to local resources and free hearing screenings from ASU students, event attendees were able to experience “Deaf, Deaf World,” an interactive activity highlighting the opportunities and obstacles members of the Deaf, DeafBlind and hard of hearing community face. A complimentary lunch and brief program followed where Representative Heather Carter, Senator Debbie Lesko and the Arizona Department of Emergency and Military Affairs received Champions of ACDHH awards. Additionally Chris Desborough, Chair of the SSP Deaf Blind Statewide Services Task Force was an inspirational keynote speaker sharing both challenges the community faces, and how we can join to find solutions.

The event was an opportunity to help legislators better understand the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing community as well as connect community members and employers to resources.

To learn more about the ACDHH and its efforts to improve the quality of life for the Deaf and the hard of hearing for more than 40 years, please visit www.acdhh.org.
Seth Haynie Named PTR Wheelchair Professional of the Year

Congratulations to Ability360 wheelchair tennis coach, Seth Haynie, named the Professional Tennis Registry (PTR) Wheelchair Professional of the Year. Per PTR’s announcement, Haynie is working with the Billie Jean King Eye Coach group to develop training methods for wheelchair students, as well as the Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute program to develop an appropriate wheelchair variation for 16-second cure. In addition to teaching tennis, he is serving as the Chair of the USTA Southwest Wheelchair Tennis Committee in both his district and section. Haynie’s goal is to increase participation in wheelchair tennis worldwide by sharing his knowledge and expertise with physicians, facility directors, tournament directors, and most importantly, fellow teaching professionals.

Sports & Fitness Center Volunteer Recognized

Stuart Burns first came to the Ability360 Sports & Fitness Center as a volunteer for Bank of America. A retired Marine sergeant, Burns has 14 years of service with Bank of America where he works as a consumer risk analyst. He is a familiar face at 360 events, especially wheelchair rugby. Burns received Bank of America’s 2016 Global Service Award as an individual awardee for his work on military causes. Bank of America embraces volunteerism as an important component of its corporate culture. Burns leads the Arizona chapter of their military support and assistance network.

Recognition included flying Burns and his wife, Terista, to New York City in early December for the BofA Global Service event. Along with his award, Burns was able to direct a contribution in his name to the project of his choice. He chose the Ability360 Sports & Fitness Center. "We’re grateful to Stu for the time that he spends here and we’re also thankful for Bank of America’s generous donation in his name," said Gus LaZear, Vice President and General Manager of the Ability360 Sports & Fitness Center. "BofA’s commitment to community causes is impressive and we’re always appreciative for their time here."

Burns’ commitment is contagious. At the recent Rugby Rave, he and Terista were busy working the event. "It’s important to step across our comfort zone and volunteer. That’s how we put our thoughts into action." Burns said. Congratulations Stuart Burns and thank you!
Day on the Lake

Freedom Through Water Adaptive Recreation

by Jo Crawford

The Day on the Lake program is the largest integrated watersports program offered in Arizona thanks to Bryan Church, owner of Bartlett Lake Marina. I was a young recreation therapist when I visited the marina in 1996 and thought, "This would be the perfect lake to host adaptive watersports!" Church was open to the idea. The program started that summer with 18 participants.

Church, who sustained a spinal cord injury in 1980 in a construction accident, built the marina hoping more folks would realize how important it is to get out and play. After visiting Bartlett Lake in the late 1980s, Church wrote to Tonto National Forest officials inquiring about a special permit to use the land (To Whom It May Concern: I’d like to build a marina on Bartlett Lake...). "I don’t think anyone took me seriously," Church said. Now the all-service marina, 45 minutes from Scottsdale, has grown into one of Arizona’s best-kept secrets. A restaurant was added last year. This year, a cable park for wakeboarding will be added. The marina also has boat rentals.

Church said, "It just amazes me that for so many of these folks, without Day on the Lake, they might never come out and see all the stuff they can do."

During the event, you’ll see participants and family members waiting in line to talk with Church about what their experience meant to them. One gentleman, who
had sustained a spinal cord injury about 20 years ago from diving into a pool, said that for the first time since his injury his body was completely submerged in the water. For 10 seconds, he held his breath underwater for the water intake test. **When he came back to the surface, he was tearful and said, “I am finally free.”** With that, he went jet skiing for the first time in over 20 years.

The program offers adaptive watersports to anyone aged three and up with a physical or neurological disability. Church knows that for many participants it’s the first time they get to try adaptive waterskiing, jet skiing, kayaking, boating, fishing, tubing and wakeboarding. For many folks, it’s the first time they have played along with their families since their injury instead of spending their time in the waiting room at the doctor’s office or therapy.

Another Day on the Lake favorite is the Party Boat, which has a slide and two decks for a complete view of the beautiful lake. They also contract out the rental of jet skis and paddle boards.

Church also works with a youth at risk program from South Phoenix. They participate in an event similar to Day on the Lake and explore all the avenues that life has to offer. While Church is one of the most humble men I have ever met, his role as an entrepreneur and philanthropist impacts those around him. When they meet him, you often hear, “He owns his own business. I could do that, too!” “This is my ministry, I know God is in charge and I want people to see His beauty when they come here. I also want people to live an active life and an injury doesn’t need to hold you back,” stated Church. 🌸
She saw a young man running on his hands down the hall and knew she had to meet him.

“He was sitting in the waiting room area watching Ally McBeal,” Emily Eldredge said. “I just plopped down right next to him and said hi, but he didn’t even turn his head to look at me. He just kept his eyes glued to the TV and we had this whole conversation with him not looking at me at all.”

Pasqual “Paco” Torres confessed he didn’t look at Eldredge because he had just started dating his now ex-wife at the time and was nervous to be around another woman he didn’t know.

Torres was a patient awaiting prosthetic legs and Eldredge was a volunteer at Shriners Hospital in Los Angeles, Calif. Little did the two know...
this meeting would be the beginning of a lasting partnership.

Eldredge attended Torres’s first wedding in 2001 and remained in brief contact for the next eight years. They reconnected in 2009 through Facebook after their previous relationships ended.

“I have always been the person people could lean on when they are in pain, but there were very few people with whom I could do that,” Eldredge said. “One day I emailed Paco sharing all of the pain I was feeling around my previous relationship, not knowing if he could handle it. He replied with this compassionate response that as soon as I received it thought he could be for me what I have been for others.”

For the first time in their friendship, the pair connected on an emotional level. The relationship blossomed and the two were married on November 8, 2014.

“It was this instant ‘Wow’ where I felt we could support each other equally,” Eldredge said.

The couple credits disability as one of the main reasons they crossed paths. Torres was born without legs and only six fingers, four on his left hand and two on his right hand. Doctors labeled Torres a Congenital Amputee, meaning amputee at birth.

“When I was young my dad always said I was going to do everything just like a normal kid,” Torres said. “I went to a regular school my entire life and grew up doing whatever. I started doing my own laundry in third grade and learned how to cook by the fourth grade.”

Torres is less than four feet tall, but stands at about 5 feet 11 inches with prosthetic legs.

“I didn’t rely heavily on my prosthetics until I was about 16 when it was more about wanting to fit in a little better,” Torres said. “Years prior to that I used a wheelchair from 11 through 15 and prior to that I used a skateboard.”

Torres prefers to use his skateboard to help him get around rather than his prosthetic legs or a wheelchair, unless he is playing basketball or rugby. From outsiders looking in, many may view the couple as unproportioned in size when they see the 5-foot-9-inch blonde walk hand-in-hand with Torres while he is on his skateboard.

“I personally like it better when he’s not in his legs because when he is he subconsciously worries about falling, so he has an emotional stiffness about him. When he’s not in them, he is much more relaxed and himself,” Eldredge said.

Torres wears his prosthetic legs to work, but takes them off as soon as he arrives home. The couple’s home has little to no adaptations. There is a black computer chair near the kitchen that Torres uses when he cooks and washes the dishes. Two stools sit in their bedroom for Torres to use to get to the counter and on the bed.

“When he was married to his previous wife, I used to make assumptions that she probably did things for him and took care of him, but there is nothing I really do for him because of his disability,” Eldredge said. “In fact, I even tease him sometimes and ask him why he uses the disabled parking placard because he has a skateboard and goes faster than all of us.”

The only time the couple run into disability-related challenges is when they’re in a large department store.

“If they have lines of clothes, I can’t see him,” Eldredge said. “As I’m looking around for him, people always ask if I am looking for my child and I have to tell them no, I am looking for my husband.”

Torres also finds this challenging and has to look for her feet.

Individually, the two are very different. Eldredge refers to herself as the creative and more adventurous one and Torres is the more organized and dependable one.

Torres was a military baby and moved around constantly prior to the sixth grade. He has lived all over Arizona since. Torres graduated from Arizona State University and has worked for the federal government for 15 years in the Automated Litigation Support Services Department. He won Staff Employee of the Year in 2015 for his performance.

Eldredge could never grasp why Torres enjoyed so much structure in his work.

“It finally took him yelling at me saying, ‘I like my job Emily! I like that I know where I am going to be at 8:30 every morning and I know what I’m going to be doing!’” Eldredge said.

Originally from Dallas, Texas, Eldredge started her own business as a speaker and executive coach for people in leadership positions. She travels across the world to help leaders identify their weak points and transform them into better human beings. She has spoken at conferences for the United Nations and is currently writing a book about her techniques.
Torres calls the two of them the rock and the kite.

“The rock does what the rock does and the rock is always going to be there. The kite can do whatever it wants to do,” Torres said.

Outside of work and every-day life, the couple spends time with Torres’s two daughters making arts and crafts, going to rugby tournaments with the University of Arizona Wheelchair Rugby team, and traveling the world.

“Traveling with him is more fun and exciting because of his disability. For example, we went to Versailles, it’s all stairs,” Eldredge said. “They don’t have any elevators available to the public, but security guards would see him on his skateboard and would take us through these back corridors to get to secret elevators.”

Torres was always hesitant to travel before the pair started dating, but he has since been bitten by the travel bug.

From the outside, the couple might seem dysfunctional, but their differences balance each other.

“Our personalities are very different, but our values are the same,” said Eldredge. “Again, on the outside people think, ‘Oh she must take care of him,’ but if anything, he puts up with me,” said Eldredge.

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ABILITY360 SPORTS & FITNESS CENTER
After years of hardship, Glenn Long finally found himself in a place in his life last year to pay it forward. Just over a year and a half ago, Long, a wheelchair user due to rheumatoid arthritis, lived in Tempe. If you could call it living at all.

“I had a roommate who was supposed to be helping me. I was expecting him to take care of things, and he wasn’t;” Long said. “He died on a Sunday morning and I thought, ‘now what?’”

Alone and living in squalor, Long never expected Meta Goforth to knock on his door. Goforth, a friend of Long’s landlords, had been asked to check on him and was shocked at what she found.

“They asked me to take him a bag of groceries and I opened the door to some of the worst stuff I’ve ever seen. I could not walk away. I wouldn’t have left my dog like that, much less a human,” she said.

Long’s road to recovery
His landlords pressured him to go to a nursing home, but Goforth stepped up and helped him to enroll in supportive services instead.

“We got new clothes, new bedding, he just started right back over,” Goforth said. “I just had no intention of any of this, but I just couldn’t not do anything.”

Goforth and Long instantly bonded and now they are like family. Goforth purchased a mobile home for Long so he would have an accessible place to live near her and began to take care of him like a daughter would her father, all the while holding a full-time job as a NASA contractor.

After Glenn was approved for ALTHCS, he learned he could have in-home caregivers, so Goforth applied and trained at Ability360. Glenn was assigned a second Ability360 caregiver, a woman named Basilia Cuevas.

From the first day, Cuevas said she felt a connection to Long. They talked about their families, and Cuevas told Long about her and her husband’s aspirations to open a landscaping company.

As the trio journeyed through their new adventure they realized one major obstacle — transportation. Long owned a pickup truck but needed wheelchair access.

“It was really cumbersome for me to get his wheelchair in there and do the transfer to the point where it wasn’t really safe for him anymore, and we decided we would upgrade to a transport [van], just for his safety, my safety, and ease,” Goforth said.

She found a transport van around Christmastime, at which point she surprised Long with the best gift he’d ever been given.

“I never expected that. That was something I dreamt about, I never really thought I would achieve that goal. I couldn’t believe it,” he said.

Reveling in the gift of a lifetime, Long entertained the idea of selling...
his truck, but ultimately realized the greater need was in plain sight, with Cuevas and her husband.

"We started saving and saving but then something happens so we have to use the savings, so we decided to wait for some good times," Cuevas said. "And I talked to Glenn and he said, that's a good business. It was just talk."

But it wasn’t just talk. Cuevas had become like another daughter to him, and he knew that this was the boost she and her husband needed for their business, which they have now started.

"He told me about the truck and I said 'no, no, no!' and I started crying because I can't believe it, I have a pickup!" she said.

Cuevas said her relationship with Long has enriched her life in many ways, and that she likes helping and being of service to others.

"It benefits me because I learn from him, how he strives to live a happier and healthier lifestyle. It helps me have a more positive attitude," she said. "He made me feel good because he trusts me, and I appreciate that because that made me feel important. For me, that made me enrich my life."

Long said having people who are willing to walk beside him in his life and spend time with him has benefitted him to the point where he finally felt like he existed.

"It’s the best feeling ever, I feel safe. I can wake up every day and not worry about what’s going to happen that day. Because I know, they’re going to be here," Long said. "I’ve never had that in my whole life, I can’t say enough. I feel that I’ve been rewarded."
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Ability360’s role in advocacy, empowerment and fellowship has grown over the years, not just in the valley but around the world.

April Reed, Ability360 Volunteer Manager, and Sarah Olson, Ability360 Program Coordinator, are mentors for Mandela Washington Fellow Program, a leadership program for emerging leaders with disabilities in sub-Saharan Africa, sponsored by the U.S. State Department. Reed and Olson teach their mentees about Independent Living and disability programs here in the US during the mentee’s time at the Ability360 Center and then facilitate the creation of disability programs in Africa. In addition, the two women are also traveling to the home countries of their mentees to provide in-person counseling.

Sarah & Nyasha’s passion for sports

Olson is gearing up to head to Zimbabwe for two weeks in late April. Her mentee, Nyasha Mharakurwa, is a full-time wheelchair user who was on the Zimbabwean National Wheelchair Tennis Team. Mharakurwa hopes to implement sports programs in Zimbabwe, specifically for youth.

“Having a mentor is a positive influence overall. Reconnecting with Nyasha in person again will be great, him and I formed a really strong friendship,” Olson said. “To go and see how he’s going to change his community and city, to see this bright young gentleman that I think is going to do great things, will be amazing.”

April and Holi’s commitment to Peer Mentoring

Reed will be leaving for Madagascar in May, to meet her mentee Holiniaina “Holi” Rakotoarisoa. Holi, a blind woman, advocates for women’s issues and the blind community through the non-profit organization she works for, MERCI.

“I’ll be there for two weeks, and I’ll be training their staff on how to run and set up a peer mentor program,” Reed said. “The goal is that, by the time I leave, they’ll have the very first peer mentor program for people with disabilities in Madagascar.”

To Reed, the relationship between mentors and their partners is important because they may hear advice from friends and family or doctors, but not from someone who has been in a similar situation and truly understands.

“A mentor is so important because they’re the cheerleader, the support. It’s a community, you don’t have to be isolated, you don’t have to be alone,” Reed said. “What we’ve learned in the U.S. through the disability rights movement, we must spread that and support other countries in making changes. I do feel like it’s really an obligation,” Reed said. “I get to see someone else succeed and I get to be a part of that journey.”

360 Mentors Visit Mentees in Africa

by Savannah Haas

Photo by Clinton McDaniel

Pictured Sarah Olson (left) and April Reed (right)

by Savannah Haas

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Photo by Clinton McDaniel

Pictured Sarah Olson (left) and April Reed (right)
Vocational rehabilitation is a process which enables persons with functional, psychological, developmental, cognitive and emotional impairments or health disabilities to overcome barriers to accessing, maintaining or returning to employment or other useful occupation.

The Arizona Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program within the Department of Economic Security’s (DES) Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), dedicates itself to helping Arizonans with disabilities achieve self-sufficiency through sustainable and fulfilling employment.

To ensure that clients get the most out of the VR program, RSA professionals offer the following tips:

1. Research VR services. Make sure the program is right for you. Attend an information session at a VR office near you. Sessions are typically offered on a monthly basis in a group setting, although one-on-one meetings can be requested. Watch the "Vocational Rehabilitation Informational Videos" on YouTube. Read about the VR program on the DES website. Ask questions! VR staff are available to answer your program-related questions so don’t be shy. You can reach someone from the VR team by calling toll-free 1-800-563-1221 or TTY 1-855-475-8194 during normal business hours.

2. Your VR counselor will need documentation of your disability before he/she can begin services. Bring any medical records, such as an assessment or evaluation, to verify your disability. If you have a Benefits Award Letter, bring that, too. A State I.D. or Driver’s License and Social Security card are also needed.

3. As a VR client, you will be an equal partner on your case. Your counselor will want to get you working as soon as possible, so be sure you are ready to take the steps needed to reach your career goals. You may be required to bring in additional paperwork, come in for assessments, go to training, etc. These tasks can take time, so be patient and stay in touch with your counselor to keep him/her abreast of your progress.

Getting the Most out of Your VR Services

VR counselors are trained to serve persons who are blind, visually impaired, deaf/hard of hearing, transition youth (specific contracted high school programs), persons with brain and spinal cord injuries, and individuals with behavioral health disabilities.

VR counselors offer a unique and flexible approach to serving clients by offering specialized equipment, education, and training opportunities, as needed, to prepare each client to enter the workforce.
5. It’s important that you have regular contact with your VR counselor. Reach out at least once a month to check in. Do not ignore phone calls, e-mails, voicemails or letters from RSA/VR. A lack of response can delay services or result in your case getting closed.

If you change your mind about participating in the VR program, please inform your counselor right away – he/she won’t take it personally.

4. Try your best to be on time to appointments so you can spend as much time as possible with your counselor. If you are running late or need to cancel an appointment, please inform your counselor as soon as possible.

6. Before coming in for services, begin thinking of what you might like to do as a career. Consider your interests and passions. Having a career goal in mind can expedite your services.

Not sure what you want to do? No problem. VR counselors are trained to help you identify a fulfilling career that would be best for you.

7. Some of the training and assessments might push you outside of your comfort zone, but they are designed to get you on the most fulfilling path possible. Don’t expect to receive the same services as someone else. Plans are individualized to the person based on his/her employment goals and disability-related needs.

Meet Kristen Mackey, the Administrator for Rehabilitation Services Administration since September 2016. Mackey joined VR ten years ago as a counselor for youth in transition. She’s also worked in the policy unit. She believes this previous experience is beneficial to her decision-making throughout the organization. “I think it helps inform the choices we make and the considerations we make when we are trying to make decisions that impact field level staff and clients.”

In addition to her years of work in this sector, Mackey is a person with a disability. She wears hearing aids bilaterally and personally experienced the benefits of gaining job skills in her teen years.

She has introduced innovative new efforts to serve youth including a successful job fair specific to autistic youth where more than 600 people participated.

The big task before her is tackling the wait list without receiving additional funds. More than 2,300 people are believed to be waiting on the priority level two list to access VR services. Mackey, it seems, is up to the challenge. 1,476 VR clients obtained employment last year because of services provided by VR. “We’ve made some really steady improvements and gains – and there’s more to do. We recognize that.”

For more information about the DES VR program, please visit des.az.gov/services click on rehabilitation services.
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The Arizona Diamondbacks Foundation Ken Kendrick Grand Slam Award made the renovation, that exceeded $100,000, possible.

The Ability360 Sports & Fitness Center’s Vice President & General Manager, Gus LaZear, applied for the Diamondbacks grant hoping to update the pools. In his proposal to the Diamondbacks LaZear said the grant would be used to re-plaster the pools. He later asked if he could rewrite his proposal because getting new chair lifts was more important than the pool being re-plastered. Ability360 was one of 25 organizations invited back to do a presentation.

When the Arizona Diamondbacks Foundation learned the entire plan to renovate the pools they asked LaZear what the total amount for the project would be.

Last March, all 12 finalists were told they were recipients of the grant. Customarily, three organizations are chosen. When LaZear walked off the stage, Tara Trzinski, Senior Manager, Community & Foundation Operations, said the Diamondbacks will give Ability360 $100,000 so they could fund the entire pool renovation.

“They were instrumental in telling us what needed to be fixed,” LaZear said. “Now they are excited to work here because we have the best of the best.”

Ability Center installed the Aqua Creek Pool Pro chairs/lifts. These chairs are “user friendly” and will last a longer than the previous lift chairs.

To LaZear the biggest and most important change was making the therapy pool one foot shallower in the deep end. At that depth, more people can use the pool for various programs and therapy.

Our Partners

Shasta Pools rebuilt the pools and were able to get them ready by February. They are the gold standard of commercial pools and did an amazing job.

Aquatic Environmental Systems (AES) put in the computer control systems, heaters and redid the pool yard. AES also performs the routine maintenance on the Ability360 pools.

“Now they are excited to work here because we have the best of the best.”

The Grand Reopening

Baxter the Bobcat cut the ribbon to officially reopen the pools. Trzinski, Debbie Castaldo, Secretary for the Diamondbacks Foundation, and former Diamondback, Willie Bloomquist were also in attendance.

Come make a splash in our pools as we hope you love them as much as we do.
There was always something in his mouth. If it wasn’t a paint brush, it was a wooden pipe. If it wasn’t a wooden pipe, it was a punchline.

Under the right conditions, you could witness all three in the span of mere minutes.

Kirk O’Hara and First Friday go together like Roosevelt Row and hipsters. He set up for the evening in front of The Lost Leaf bar and gallery, a staple on Fifth Street, and began to paint.

Soon, people stopped. Stared. Some even whipped out their phones to take a picture.

Kirk O’Hara wasn’t Kirk O’Hara anymore.

He was Paintmouth.

O’Hara has arthrogryposis, a non-hereditary birth defect that has affected his joints since birth. Although he could use his hands to make art when he was younger, he said he found that he was comfortable painting with a brush between his lips. He began to paint while growing up in north Mesa, and soon found a mentor that helped him perfect his craft.

“She had an education from Chicago Art Institute and she began training me when I was about 10,” O’Hara said. “I started doing shows five years later when I was 15.”

Since then, he’s exhibited in studios and art shows.
"I've done the high-end shows at Caesars Palace and all those things, but my bread and butter is commission work," he said.

Paintmouth is as much about the artist and his distinct method as it is about the art.

He said that because of his disability, being creative is just a part of life.

"I've invented an extension for Playstation, different hooks, different clothing contraptions so I can get dressed and undressed," he said. "You got to be inventive."

When asked about the obstacles he's faced as an artist, O'Hara chuckled.

"There's always hurdles—I eat a lot of paint," he said. "Some of it's poisonous, like cadmium. These are heavy metals. And I didn't think about it until recently, like, I wonder how much cadmium I've eaten over 30 years painting."

There was a time, he admitted, when anger and alcohol kept him from painting. He said he owes it to art and reggae music for making him the way he is today.

"I was upset and frustrated with things. And some people came along and they inspired me. And if I could give that to another human being, if I can share that inspiration, if I can make others feel the way those people made me feel...wow, that's the best thing there is, you know? That's the most wonderful gift that we could give each other."

As he fell back into the rhythm of creating, dreads bobbing, his shirt became a secondary canvas; swatches of gold and ochre streamed from his shoulders like he had just carried the sun on his back before it disappeared over the horizon.

O'Hara has no plans to stop what he's doing. He continues to show love through his music, through his words, and through his art long after the paint has dried.
Nick Pryor was four when he lost his leg in a shotgun accident over two decades ago, but that never stopped him from playing sports or being active.

“Sports were just every day for me and my friends. I had no head starts from my peers, and I played varsity basketball, football, and baseball, and went on to play club baseball at Indiana University,” Pryor said.

When he moved to Arizona to earn his master’s degree in parks and recreational management from Arizona State University, Pryor discovered Ability360 and amputee basketball, a sport he was quickly drawn to.

“I never played against any other amputees, that was pretty cool. It was something I’d never seen before,” he said.

Pryor went on to join AMP1, the only organized team of amputees playing stand-up basketball. He is now the director for their upcoming tournament.

“When they wanted to put on the tournament, I was really excited to see what everyone else was capable of doing,” Pryor said. “And having AMP1 guys come and for me to compete with them and to know there were amputees that could play, and them asking me to play with them and travel the county, it’s pretty exciting.”

Pryor said the challenge and quality of life you get from sports is what keeps him going and that it’s important for kids and new amputees to see that they can live normal lives and be confident.

“We’ve all been through so much, we’re such a diverse group from all over the country and to bring those kinds of people together and to show them anything is possible really,” Pryor said. “Our mission is to motivate, educate, and inspire.”

AMP1, the only organized team of amputees playing stand-up basketball, is hosting their third annual stand-up amputee basketball tournament, the Cactus Classic on June 9 and 10, 2017.

Nick Pryor, AMP1 team member and tournament director, said the goal is to grow the community and to put it out there that amputees are playing basketball and this is the place to do it.

AMP1 member David Banks said the organization hopes to motivate amputees to get up and play.

“AMP1 is such an amazing organization,” Banks said. “It’s more than just about amputees, it’s about people.”

This event will include an introductory amputee sports clinic and a double elimination bracket tournament schedule. Players can choose to participate in either a recreational or a competitive bracket in teams of three or four.

JUNE 9-10

Ability360 | Sports
There are many great parks in Arizona. There's only one under it.

It was the thick ocotillo and a miner's tip that the area might contain a sinkhole that drew Randy Tufts and Gary Tenen to that ridge. Tufts and Tenen, roommates at the University of Arizona in the 1970s, were avid cavers looking for a virgin cave to explore. In their wildest dreams, they did not expect to find a national treasure.
Caves like Kartchner are created when water erodes large limestone deposits over time. Ocotillo thrives on soil rich with limestone. So, as Tufts and Tenen scanned the range in front of them, the dense growth of ocotillo seemed the most likely place to look.

They found a small hole, about the size of a grapefruit, and caught a draft of warm, moist cave air rich with the scent of bat guano as they began to dig. After some time, they were able to belly-crawl over 85,000 years of bat guano through a slim opening no wider than a stretched-out wire coat hanger into a still-living cave.

In a state that boasts the Grand Canyon, Meteor Crater, the Petrified Forest and ancient ruins, the bar is set quite high to be considered a natural wonder. And there it was, 2.5 miles of some of the most mineralogically-diverse, well-decorated caverns in the world.

Tufts and Tenen kept their find secret for years in order to protect the cave from damage. Eventually, they approached James and Lois Kartchner, the ranchers who owned the land. Together, they dedicated themselves to protecting and preserving the fragile caves. Thus, began a clandestine adventure of codenames (the cavern was referred to as ‘Xanadu’), secrecy oaths, surreptitious routes and blindfolded tours to keep the location and scale of Kartchner Caverns secret until the land was designated an Arizona state park and could be protected for the future.

In November of 1999, 25 years after its discovery, Kartchner Caverns State Park opened to the public. While nature is rarely ADA–compliant, much of the development of public access at Kartchner was done post-ADA. An effort has been made to make the park as accessible as possible without damaging the natural formations. This is the only cave in the world that is wheelchair accessible.

We were given rare access to the trails and cavern so that we could share our adventure with you. So, if you go, here’s what you need to know...

**Getting there**

Located near Benson, Arizona, adjacent to the Coronado National Forest, Kartchner is an easy 3-hour drive from the Phoenix Valley (only an hour from Tucson) straight down I-10 to the well-marked turnoff for the final 10 miles on AZ-90. You can make a day trip but with so much to see and do in the region, take advantage of an overnight stay and visit Tombstone, Bisbee or Tubac, explore the Kitt Observatory or the missions at Tumacalcori National Park.

Hotel rooms in the area are a quick Google search away. Kartchner does offer RV space, campsites and rustic cabins, some of which are accessible to people with mobility issues. Check the website for availability and reservations.
Choose a tour
Currently there are three tours offered.

The Big Room tour (which we took) is the longest tour available at an hour and 45 minutes, an hour is spent underground. Children under seven are not allowed on this tour. The Big Room is closed to visitors from April to October when it becomes a bat maternity ward.

The Rotunda/ Throne Room tour is steeper and shorter. The tour lasts 90 minutes with 50 minutes underground. This tour is available year round and there is no age restriction. On the Rotunda/Throne Room tour, you’ll see the largest column formation in Arizona, the renowned Kubla Khan.

The Headlight and Helmet tour is currently offered on Saturdays only. As the name suggests, you’ll see the caves solely from the light of your headlamp. From October to April, you’ll tour the Big Room, the rest of the year, you’ll tour the Rotunda and Throne Room. Children under 10 are not permitted on the Headlight and Helmet Tour.

Do make a reservation for cave tours as they book up months in advance. AZStateParks.com/Kartchner

Keep in mind:
The parking lot at the Discovery Center has 13 accessible spots. The two closest to the Discovery Center are marked for van access and share a wide access aisle. The remaining 11 spots are very wide and have no access aisles. We found that if we hugged the driver’s side of the space we had enough room to drop our ramp and exit the van.

Safety for visitors and staff and preservation of the caves is job one for the rangers. With that in mind, there are some restrictions.

- Pets are NOT allowed in the Discovery Center or on the cave tours. The Arizona heat can be deadly even in the spring and fall. It is not safe or appropriate to leave your pets in your vehicle during your visit to the caverns. Your service dog can accompany you but some find the subterranean environment challenging.

- NO food or drinks – including water bottles, are allowed in the Discovery Center or carried into the caves. Make sure you’re well-fueled and hydrated before you get on the tram for your tour. There are drinking fountains inside the Discovery Center and the Bat Cave Café serves a menu with something for everyone. Make sure you try the Prickly Pear Lemonade. It’s delish!

- Check in at the Discovery Center at least an hour before your tour. This will allow you time to see the exhibits and watch a short film on the formation and discovery of Kartchner Caverns. We found it informative and entertaining. Be advised that early in the movie, there is a simulated thunder storm with strobing effect in the theater. It’s short but intense.

- No packs, purses, cell phones or cameras are allowed on tour. Photography is not permitted in the caves (we had special permission) and anything that could potentially fall into the cave or be lost or left along the trail is not allowed, to prevent contamination and potential damage. Lockers are available for rental.

- The tram offers a gentle, 5-minute ride through raw desert from the Discovery Center to the cave entrance. Enjoy the sights along the way. Each tram can hold two riders in wheelchairs. The ride is smooth enough that tie downs are not needed.

- To protect the fragile ecosphere inside the caves, visitors pass through two airlocks that keep the dry desert air from damaging the caves. These passages can trigger claustrophobia for some people. This is the smallest space you will experience on the tour. You will also pass through a misting system to keep lint and skin flakes to a minimum inside the caves.

- The environment inside the caves is constant at 70° and 99% humidity. Your glasses may fog at first. Some
two in our tour group use manual wheelchairs and had some challenges with the grade, nothing that stopped us from enjoying our time there. We quickly learned on the first slope that our hand rims were damp and slick from the humid air making downhill braking tricky. I highly suggest that you go with companions that can help with braking on grade and power on the inclines.

Good gloves help as does a human holding on to the back of the chair. In most places, there is an installed handrail that helped with governing speed downhill and allowed better leverage to pull up the inclines. If you use a powerchair, the slopes can be less challenging. Make sure you have a good charge and use a seatbelt if trunk stability is an issue.

Folks with breathing or heart conditions may find the temperature and humidity challenging. Dress in layers to ensure comfort above ground outside and in the warm, moist underground caves.

• Inside the cavern, there are narrow passages, sharp turns, and steep grades which create size restrictions for scooters and wheelchairs as not every chair will fit on the trail. Walkers without front brakes and some canes and crutches are not permitted due to the steep grade; as much as 12% in some areas. Details are available on the park’s website.

For the first time in memory, Arizona State Parks and Trails (ASPT) has a dedicated ADA coordinator. Sean Hammond was hired for the role in January. Hammond started his career with ASPT first as a volunteer and then as a Ranger at Kartchner Caverns.

As ADA coordinator, Hammond works to catalog and improve accessibility at all of Arizona’s 35 state parks. As part of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), parks’ staff are mapping trails using a High Efficiency Trail Assessment Process (HETAP) machine to get a precise measure of grade, width, slope, length, terrain, etc., along every inch of state trails. This information will ultimately be posted on ASPT’s accessibility page and on each park’s page so each person can personally determine the level of access available to them.

ASPT has big plans for improving access throughout the park system. Along with mapping all trails and assessing overall park access, Hammond will oversee a trial of accessibility mats on the beach at Lake Havasu State Park this spring. Hammond is exploring innovative partnerships to increase opportunities for people with disabilities to get closer to the natural beauty of Arizona State Parks and Trails.

He lists his favorite accessible parks as Kartchner, the only accessible cave in the world; Lake Havasu beach with the installation of accessibility mats; Boyce Thompson Arboretum as close to the Phoenix Valley (few wheelchair users can access the entire trail), and Dead Horse Ranch with an accessible fishing dock and cabins.
Enjoying the tour
Each tour is staffed by a park ranger or trained volunteers and paced to allow time for questions and wonder. There are some places where one can sit. There are handrails throughout and flat resting spots at regular resting spots on the trail. Due to the high humidity, some people may find it harder to breathe. We found the hand rims on our manual wheelchairs became damp, which made braking a bit more thoughtful. Gloves with a good grip surface may help.

The otherworldly shapes grow at a rate that cannot be measured in a single human lifetime. Throughout the caves, the rangers will point out the layers of time – fossils, sedimentary strata, crystal formations and of course, the cave growing one drop of water at a time. The sparkle you see is water still moving through the limestone layers, still growing stalactites, stalagmites and helictites.

Cavers it seems are obsessed with food. Many formations have food-related names from cave bacon, undulating variegated ribbons that do resemble bacon, to fried eggs, the flattened tops of some stalagmites with yellowish centers reminiscent of sunny-side up egg yolks, popcorn and strawberries. The only known occurrences of “turnip” stalactites in the world are at Kartchner. Delicate hollow stalactite tubes called soda straws hang from the roof. These may grow at a rate of one inch per several hundred years. The largest known soda straw formation in the world can be found in the Big Room at Kartchner.

Final thoughts
If you’re looking for a day trip with your winter visitors, Kartchner should be on your list of must-see Arizona locations. If you can take a few days to enjoy the area, the richness of southern Arizona is a treasure trove of history and majestic vistas.

Don’t miss out on Kartchner at night. Time your visit to join a star party and explore the solar system with rangers and guest speakers with views of the brilliant night sky without light pollution from cities. Thousands of bats hibernate in the area. During their active months, you can see them leaving the caves en masse at dusk to feed on insects.

Kartchner is open 360 days a year. Fewer people visit in the summer, even though temperatures in Benson tend to run cooler than Phoenix and Tucson.

Raw natural beauty and universal access rarely seem to go together but Kartchner has worked to thread the needle that balances untouched wonder with thoughtful planning to include as many people with disabilities as possible. This isn’t a mall, so access is imperfect. There were places along the trail that this big chicken balked. But, heart-in-my-throat, I continued and was rewarded for the effort. Go and see for yourself. With a little planning, a couple of friends to push uphill or act as a second set of brakes going down, and a sense of adventure, Kartchner Caverns is a journey worth taking.
CABINS

As planned, ASPT is adding 100 new cabins to the inventory of rental cabins currently available at selected state parks in the coming years. According to Sean Hammond, AZ State Parks ADA Coordinator, twenty-five percent of the rental cabins at each site will be “wheelchair friendly” upon completion of the project. Kartchner Caverns is the first park to get new, accessible cabins.

The cabins, which can sleep 4 – 6 people, consist of two rooms with bed frames, electricity, heat and AC. Picnic tables, grills, accessible restrooms and showers are typically located nearby.

The cabins are rustic but provide a middle ground for people who may want to enjoy an outdoor experience and yet sleep indoors. The bed frames can hold appropriate-sized air mattresses and allow individuals whose disabilities would not be compatible with sleeping on the ground an alternative so they can still enjoy the outdoors. 🌞
I got into advocacy just by showing up.

I had recently been hired by Ability360 (ABIL at that time) to help coordinate the home modification and peer mentor programs. My supervisor sent me down to a Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) hearing to testify about the need for and value of peer mentoring for people with disabilities. I did not consider myself an advocate and I had little trust in government at the time. After growing up very patriotic in the San Francisco Bay area, in the 60s I became disillusioned after the riots at San Francisco State and the assassination of Martin Luther King, President John Kennedy and his brother, Bobby. I had moved to Washington state without electricity and running water to “live off the land.” I was not that good at doing so. After my daughter was born, I moved back to mainstream society, completed a couple of college degrees, worked my way off Social Security disability benefits and landed at Ability360.

I testified at that MAG hearing and as a result, they changed the Social Service budget and allocated funds to support our peer mentor program. That was 27 years ago! I have been advocating ever since.

There are many ways to advocate, and advocates come with a variety of personalities and styles.

I was always the person that spoke up if I heard others saying they wanted to do something but wouldn’t ask. One of the best advocates I ever knew was the soft-spoken Pam Allen. She often sounded unsure or confused, but would always do her homework on an advocacy issue and would work on legislative candidate campaigns. As a result, she had the ear of several legislators who knew her by name. Back in 2001 when we were trying to pass the bill to create the AHCCCS Freedom to Work healthcare program for working Arizonans with disabilities, Pam had the ear of the Speaker of the House at the legislature and was able to help him understand the benefits to our economy. He was key in helping us pass that bill.

I get calls from people wanting to be advocates. Where do they start?

My answer: “Start by taking action on what matters to you.” Get linked in to social media like Facebook or Ability360’s Empower Advocacy Email Alerts to find out about current issues and advocacy opportunities. Get involved with an interest group that matters to you. Join the Arizona Disability Coalition, for instance.

advocacy
noun
ad·vo·ca·cy
ˈad-vo-ka-sē
1 : the profession or work of an advocate
2 : the action of advocating, pleading for, or supporting a cause or proposal
One thing about me is that I am a show-up girl.

You would be surprised at the amazing things that happen if you just show up! I woke up at four this morning and turned on the radio and heard myself being quoted on KJZZ about a bad accessible parking bill. I wasn’t interviewed for the piece. They had used part of my recent public testimony at the legislature.

I love advocates and people who take action, who show up whether they are soft-spoken, scared or self-confident and articulate. I love you all! Want to join us? Presence is everything.

There are some traits that are important for effective advocacy:
- Honesty and the ability to acknowledge what you know and don’t know
- Willingness to do research
- Good listening skills
- Willingness to ask questions
- Ability to stay focused – keeping to the message
- Persistence and practice
- Willingness to take action - to show up at town halls or hearings to testify; show up by making a phone call or an email or by using the Request to Speak system at the Arizona Legislature.

YOU WOULD BE SURPRISED at the amazing things that happen if you just show up!
In 2013 a small group of Syrians prepared to illegally cross the Turkish border in broad daylight.

They had attempted to cross the night before, but gunfire forced them to retreat.

Now, they were going to try again in hopes that the guards, upon seeing the weaponless ensemble, would realize that they posed no threat and hold their fire.

That was the best-case scenario.

It seemed illogical, but what else could be done? They had already paid the smuggler and couldn’t possibly return to Syria and the war zone they were fleeing.

It was cross or die trying.

Among the migrants was Noah Abraham, a teacher who had lived in Syria for almost 40 years. He was paralyzed due to polio in childhood. Because of this, he was hoisted onto the smuggler’s back and carried through the wires.

Abraham was arrested.

The smuggler was not. Turkish border patrol recognized the smuggler and fired several times, but he eventually managed to cross the border back to Syria.

The six Syrians that remained were detained at a military checkpoint. They knew that what they had done was illegal. The Turkish border was closed for fear that members of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), a terrorist organization, might enter.

The soldiers yelled and waved their guns. Abraham was certain that he was going to be beaten, if not killed.

But then he did something that changed their attitudes immediately.

Abraham spoke in English.

"It might seem funny, but it works like magic," Abraham said.

The soldiers cooled down. He explained to them that he left Syria to find work as a translator in Istanbul.

Afterward, an officer approached him.

“He told me, and I remember this vividly, ‘Stay here, and I will pay you. Just teach me English,’” Abraham said.

He declined the offer. It hasn’t been the last.

“It happened in so many places,” Abraham said. “People will ask me to teach them English. Even when you go to the bank, for example, when they check your passport and see that it’s Syrian, they are not so comfortable. When you speak in English, it’s a miracle. It was so noticeable in so many different situations.”

It’s this same magic that not only helps him in the US, but allowed him to become a voice for other Syrian refugees in the Valley today.
The Man Named ‘Nuh’

Nuh Ibrahim sits in his wheelchair, legs crossed so that his right ankle rests upon his left knee.

Correction: Noah Abraham.

That was the name his mother gave him—the same ‘Noah’ found in the Bible. But not even names are safe from geopolitical conflict.

“I am Kurdish and it was forbidden for the Kurdish to name their kids with Kurdish names,” he said.

‘Nuh’ is the Arabic version of the same name, forced upon him by Syrian law; one that he would rather leave behind. “I do not want people to call me it because it was forced on me,” he said.

Noah it is.

Abraham was born in Amuda, a town in northeastern Syria that sits near the border of Turkey.

He had polio when he was 18 months old and says that it didn’t change the way people treated him. Throughout his life, people were friendly and helpful.

He said that with the passage of time, it became customary to treat those with a disability in a specific way, like offering someone transportation from place to place.

If accommodation for Americans was rooted in social change, Middle Eastern accommodation was rooted in the doctrines of Islam.

“People who are even a little bit committed to the religious teachings will treat people with disabilities in a very kind way because these are the teachings of the religion,” he said.

He felt the same respect from Muslims and Christians alike—voluntary acts of kindness he described as beautiful.

But although people were more than willing to accommodate, the government was not.

“The very noticeable difference is that the government will never do anything related to helping people with disabilities,” Abraham said. “I mean, you can very hardly find a ramp, even in the capital of Damascus. Pavements are not structured in a way that could help people with disabilities and so on.”

Abraham was around 27 when he saw accessible bathrooms for the first time at an opera house in the city.

“I was shocked…we usually don’t have that,” he said. “It was something very new to me.”

Lack of accommodation was just a part of life. When he was in college majoring in English, Abraham was late to an exam that took place beyond a huge set of stairs. Usually, he asked passersby for help, but the morning was empty.

He waited. No one came.

After half an hour, he realized that he had already missed the exam and took a taxi home.

“I just couldn’t,” he said. “It is not easy to be a disabled person in Syria.”

While the US is much more accommodating, he emphasizes that if not for the war, he wouldn’t have left his beloved Syria, infrastructural imperfections and all. He never believed in perfection anyways.

“Before the war, I would never make a decision like this. Never.”

“I just packed my bags and said goodbye.”

He was released from the military checkpoint and was free to go wherever he wanted. Back and forth he traveled from his sister’s place in Izmir to Istanbul, a swollen New York-esque metropolis, and made money through freelancing.

One day, news spread that refugee applications were open.

Abraham applied on a whim.

“It was half a joke,” he said. “They told me they were applying in the UN. ‘Why don’t you apply your name as a refugee here?’ I mean, I am a refugee, so putting my name on a list wouldn’t change anything. I applied. Months later, they called me and told me there is an opening opportunity to go to the US. I told them, ‘Yeah why not?’”

It took more than two years of interviews and bureaucratic lethargy. He tried to keep his hopes down in case he became jaded and gave up.

Then he got an email.
“I realized I was coming to the US five days before I arrived,” he said. “It was a very short time. I just packed my bags and said goodbye to my sister and I didn’t have the chance to say goodbye to many friends in Turkey.”

Until now, he sometimes doesn’t believe he’s here.

Sparks
He’s not a fan of the heat, which makes him as much a native as any other Phoenician, but other than that the move wasn’t strange.

Today, he uses his translating skills to help Syrians wire money or fill out prescriptions—daily tasks that would have been impossible to accomplish without his assistance. In the evenings, he teaches English to other refugees in central Phoenix. Their families, like his own, were scattered like sand during the war. Because they live in the same complex, they became a community stitched together by circumstance.

Tim Hedger, an American who volunteered with Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement since 2000, also became a part of this community. Although he and Abraham met recently, one would assume they had known each other since childhood. It is truly a sophisticated bromance—the two share the same love for classical music and sprinkle interjections and smirks during each other’s interviews. He teaches Abraham the nuances of culture and the two find and nurture the sparks they see in students, allowing them to cultivate their own interests.

“Part of the challenge is to help people and give them the opportunity to see that their story is important,” Hedger said.

A week after our interview, I tried to reach them for a follow-up. Hedger answered the phone. Why wasn’t Abraham picking up I asked?

“He’s in the hospital,” Hedger said. A machine beeped softly in the background.

Abraham had undergone surgery and was in a lot of pain. Hedger was by his side. So were the students, who watched over Abraham in shifts. These were Syrians who were previously strangers to each other coming together to show their support.

“He’s more than just an English teacher,” Hedger said. “He’s their representative. He’s their voice.”

That is the magic of Noah Abraham.
Adaptive Sports
BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN YOUTH
by Tim Binning

In the fall of 2015, I wrote an article for the second issue of LivAbility magazine focused on the importance of getting children with disabilities off the couch and involved in sports. Here are the stories of two local teenage athletes and what involvement in sports has meant to them. What might it mean to your child?

KEVIN MESSNER

Kevin Messner began participating in adaptive sports 10 years ago. Adopted from a Chinese orphanage at the age of four, Kevin was brought home to Phoenix by his mom Kyle in 2004. Kevin had a badly deformed right leg amputated shortly after his adoption. Kevin was very shy and reserved. Kyle knew she had to try to get him involved in something, so she found out about Arizona Disabled Sports (AzDS) and signed him up for track.

Kevin did not like sports at first, but one day while sitting in his room he realized that track actually fed a competitive streak in him that he was unaware had existed previously. That awakening led him to want to try other sports, and since then he has taken up snowboarding, triathlons and basketball. “Sports gave me confidence and brought me out of my shell,” he says. You won’t find any trace of the shy, reserved Kevin anymore, he has been replaced by the Kevin that has the goal of making the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic team for track and long jump. He is a member of the Pinnacle High School track team and is an advocate for kids with disabilities getting involved in sports and being active.

MADISON SANCHEZ-FORMAN

Madison Sanchez-Forman has only recently started participating in wheelchair track. Born with a stage IV neuroblastoma in 2001, Maddie underwent surgeries and eight rounds of chemotherapy to rid her body of the tumor at her T11 vertebrae, causing paralysis in both legs. As she got older, Maddie began to hope that she could be part of a team. Her schoolmate, Evan Williams, suggested she try out the AzDS track team that he was already a part of. She really took to it, and progressed quickly through hard work. She was recently invited to a US Paralympic track camp in Los Angeles. Her father Jeremy shared how much Maddie’s confidence has grown over the past year: “I see a focus and determination that wasn’t there before she started wheelchair track.” Maddie has set a goal to compete in the Paralympics.
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**UnitedHealthcare Community Plan is a proud sponsor of the 6th Annual African American Conference on Disabilities.**
It was a distracted driver who changed Gabby Grave-Wake’s trajectory.

A Marine Corporal on track for the Naval Academy to study rocket science, Grave-Wake was seriously injured when she was rear-ended by a minivan. She flew into his windshield before being launched across the intersection, sustaining head and spinal injuries.

Graves-Wake, now a retired Marine Sgt., has traveled the world representing the US Marine Corps as a member of the Wounded Warrior battalion. In January, she came home to the Valley to start the next chapter.

Within the able community, there is often a feeling that “I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t live with a disability.” Yet, somehow we do. When it happens in our adult life, how do we redefine ourselves? We caught up with Graves-Wake, to learn more about her transition as a veteran and an athlete. Following is our discussion edited for brevity and clarity.

**JL:** What were you doing in the Marine Corps at the time of your injury? What was your plan pre-injury?

**GW:** I was an intel analyst working with intel-battalion in the Marine Intelligence Center (MIC). I was part of the General’s briefing team for the second Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF). While doing that I decided I wanted to apply for the Naval Academy and I was prepping for that program.

When I got hurt, that all went out the window because I was no longer medically qualified for the Naval Academy. I was transferred from second intel battalion to wounded warrior battalion.

**JL:** And what does that mean?

**GW:** I went from being a part of the fighting force, to where my mission was to focus on myself and my recovery. I worked super hard to go back to full duty to go back to the fleet marine force, it just did not happen for me.

But I learned a lot, I met people from different walks of life (illness, wounds from deployments, injuries, other motorcycle accidents) and we kinda all grew together, recovered together.

We got into adapted sports together because in the service, they never want you to sit on your butt and feel sorry for yourself, so the minute I got there they wanted me involved in three activities and from there they’re like “hey you’re really good at these, have you thought about competing?”

I went to trials, I went to the warrior games, and it kind of took off from there. The games are an armed forces adaptive sports competition between the different service branches. I’m biased and I say the Marine Corps is better.

Before my injury I was a martial artist full time and I earned my fourth degree black belt. I traveled...
all over the country for martial arts competitions. I was ranked top ten in the world several times and mentored kids in their martial art career and path.

The Marine Corps has me compete in cycling, swimming, track and field. I've tried wheelchair basketball and seated volleyball. I enjoy track and field and sledge hockey the most. I have recently picked up cross country skiing and biathlons, and I'm a goalie for the San Diego sledge hockey team, the Ducks.

**JL:** You're training with Team USA as the goalie. How did that happen?

**GW:** In August, I went to Buffalo for the women's sledge hockey development camp. I went to learn some new things, meet some other females in the sport, and I ended up making the roster. Once a month, we all travel to practice together and we'll play a local team. In October, we had the awesome privilege of going to compete in Norway. We spent a week there. We trained on the ice and played the European and Canadian women’s teams.

**GW:** So the way that I continue to train and practice on the ice is to train with the Arizona Coyote sledge team. They've been very gracious about letting me get on the ice and work out with them.

**JL:** You participated in the 2016 Invictus games in Florida. What events did you do?

**GW:** I cycled in the time trial and the criterium, and did track and field. I brought back a silver medal and two bronze medals.

**JL:** Immediately after your injury, you were using a wheelchair full time. Then, over the course of these 3 years, you've progressed to a walker, then a cane. What helped you make that transition?

**GW:** The Marine Corps and the warrior athlete re-conditioning program (WARP). Basically they're like "hey you cannot do this, but can you do this, and if you can do this you can do everything else. One way or another we'll find a way to adapt it." So when I was not able to walk with a neutral or normal gait, then the focus became "can we get you to walk independently without any pain." And when I was able to do that it was a big deal because I was able to walk again and do all the things I wanted to do without a cane or walker or wheelchair.

**JL:** And now, these new braces, Tell us about those.

**GW:** These are IDEOs, a brace provided by the military based on the cheetah running blade technology. It works by loading the bars at the back of it through the toes. It allows me to go from heel to toe and it allows that energy return to help kick my knee forward so when I need to do something dynamic like changing directions, I can do that with less effort. It also keeps my ankles and feet in one position because due to the spasticity in my muscles my feet started to rotate up. My biggest struggle is running and jumping again. But I hope to soon though the Return To Run program,
JL: What's the Return To Run program?

GW: The Return To Run program is an 8-16 week program that allows new IDEO users to learn how their brace works and how it can help to improve their quality of life and the ideal is that someone is limb salvaged and pending amputation but one last effort to try and save their limb would be an IDEO.

JL: What comes next?

GW: I like to think I have a plan, but right now I'm just readjusting to life outside the Marine Corps, I'm trying to figure out where I fit in, and what my purpose is now that it's not a set mission.

I'm hoping to do something in the aerospace engineering world. The ideal job would be something with NASA, or working for a program like Space-X to further human space travel and maybe get humans to other parts of the world and universe. I am an Aerospace Engineering major and I start school in May at Embry Riddle full-time.

I'm going to continue to train in track and field. We're working right now to see if the coach out there will allow me to go out to track practices and push around and we're getting my dorm set up so that I can have the roller in the room, and I'll go out to the ice rink for stick time and open hockey to get some pucks on net.

I figure I just got out of the Marine Corps, I'm 23 years old. The only other thing after school is to work the rest of your life so might as well spend time learning for a while. 😊
NAMI Valley of the Sun is the Maricopa County affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness – an organization with many affiliates throughout the nation. We are a not-for-profit organization with a purpose of providing education and support to people living with mental illness and their family members. At the present time, we share an office with NAMI Arizona and PLAN of Arizona. NAMI Arizona is the state office that oversees and supports the many affiliates throughout Arizona. PLAN of Arizona is a special needs trust organization. They are near and dear to the hearts of NAMI because Frances Peterson, a founder of our Maricopa County affiliate, was also on the founding team of PLAN.

As an affiliate of the organization created in 1979, we receive resources from NAMI to assist people in Maricopa County with their signature programs, which are identical around the United States. NAMI also keeps us informed about important matters arising at the legislature so that we are able to contact our legislative representatives.

NAMI Valley of the Sun dedicates itself to programs such as family support groups, peer support groups for those living with mental illness, and our classes for the community – at no cost to anyone. We attend health fairs and health forums throughout the county in order to provide free brochures and education information to the community.

The NAMI In Our Own Voice program is highly requested by schools that train nurses, social workers, case managers, and other health providers. The program is a presentation by two trained people who are in recovery from mental illness with the aid of a DVD provided by NAMI. The presentation takes the attendees through the various parts of their lives with mental illness, followed by a question and answer period. At the end, there is an evaluation that allows us to maintain the fidelity and quality of our program. This is at no cost to any agency who requests a presentation. In the past year, Terry McDermott and his team have been able to provide several of these presentations to churches and high schools.

The NAMI Family to Family program is a 12-week course for family members and friends of adults living with mental illness. Two people with lived experience as a family member teach it. They have been trained according to the guidelines outlined by NAMI.

The NAMI Basics program is a 6-week course for family members and caregivers of children and adolescents dealing with behavioral and mental health issues. Trained, experienced individuals teach it at no cost to those who attend.

NAMI Parents & Teachers as Allies is a presentation given by 3-4 trained presenters for high school staff and parents which allows us to provide them with educational materials that they normally would not have access to – all at no cost to schools.

All of this is possible because of the fundraising we do with our Annual Spring Breakfast and our Fall Walk – www.namivalleywalk.org.

For information on classes, please contact Education Coordinator Debbie Martinez at 602-244-8166. or visit: namiaz.com
Most people we meet don’t get disability.

It can be frustrating, this unavoidable pattern of our lives with a disability; people responding to us in ways that are so disconnected from who we are as real people. Clearly unclear on what our disabilities mean to us.

We want to never feel patronized, viewed as some amazing hero just for getting up and putting in a normal day. And we get tired of hearing people say that they don’t think they could do what we do.

You get a strong impulse to set them straight, right? I certainly do. But how do we give a well-meaning person cause to take a fresh look at what they believe about disability? How do we prompt them toward exploring their deepest thoughts and feelings, and then be willing to make a major shift?

For starters, they need to not feel blamed. An in-your-face approach definitely doesn’t work. Would you open yourself to the influence of someone who essentially treats you like an idiot? Of course you wouldn’t. You might even be having this effect and not realize it.

Where do their perspectives come from anyway? The media and the arts have a very powerful impact, and they generally portray disability in the extremes. It’s either a tragic experience we should avoid at all costs, or it’s a heroic matter of “overcoming.”

Or they get it from imagining what it would be like if it were them: paralyzed, blind, deaf, missing limbs, living with an intellectual disability. The only thing they can imagine is that it would be highly undesirable — if not a living hell. So they naturally project all of that onto us. What else can they do?

Maybe someone was rude to them when they offered help. Maybe they spent a month using a chair with a broken ankle, and it was anything but fun.

The thing is that none of this is their fault. Really.

They are also not to be blamed for not being current with what we know is true: disability is a vastly different experience today than ever before. The experience of living with a disability has utterly changed in a short stretch of recent history. They need our help to catch up with what is actually an incredibly exciting process of exploding human potential. We need to communicate that the modern disability story is cool.

So be gracious about it. Win their respect. No one wants to be lectured, but I think most appreciate a chance to gain some clear insight.

I try to help people understand that my disability is simply a part of who I am, that I don’t spend time wishing it weren’t the case. That it’s normal for me. I try to help them understand that I don’t think about limitation, but possibility. I try to help them understand that adapting to and accepting disability is not a rare thing but a very common thing. I try to help them understand that investing in independence is what we need to continue doing. I try to help them understand that not having a life is not an option, so I do what it takes.

Some will never get it. Or maybe it will take a while. Just try to keep in mind that the only way in is with kindness. Start there, find your own voice, tell your own story, make a human connection. That’s the best shot you’ll get at making progress bringing hearts and minds in line with the reality of this incredible new world of disability.

Gary Karp has used a wheelchair since falling out of a tree and injuring his spinal cord at T12 in 1973. He was 18 years old. Learn more at ModernDisability.com.
Welcome to the newest edition of LivAbility

LivAbility is an Arizona-based quarterly lifestyle magazine for people with disabilities. Each edition contains articles that promote an active, fulfilling lifestyle for every ability.

Schedule an Advertisement
Advertising@ability360.org
EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT
Vera S. Whitted

Ability360 Home Care Services “Employer Pride”. Vera is an excellent caregiver and a steward to her community. She has a sound Independent Living Philosophy and empowers people wherever she goes.

She’s respected by all my staff. They often say that they wish they could clone her. We are so fortunate to have her.

- Gwen Dean

How long have you been with Ability360?
I started working as a volunteer in 1996, but officially joined the payroll two and a half years ago.

What’s your current job title?
Personal Care Attendant.

For people outside of the organization, what do you do?
Well, I do a couple of things. I’m a translator and interpreter in Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian, helping refugees from my country, Serbia (formerly Yugoslavia), to gain employment. Many come to Ability360 as caregivers.
As a paid provider, I'm a personal care attendant to 5-year old twins, helping with their activities of daily living, teaching them so when they grow up they can become independent.

What do you like most about your work?
Seeing children happy and smiling, seeing them learn new skills and embrace new and continuous challenges.

Will you share a little something about your family?
I have four adult children, two sons and two daughters, and five grand-children, three grandsons and two grand-daughters.

Will you tell us about your best day ever?
My best day ever was the day I came to America, 52 years ago.

What are people most surprised to know about you?
I was an airline stewardess back in my home country. At that time, being a stewardess in a small country was very glamorous, like being a movie star.

Is there a movie or TV show you drop everything to watch?
Yes, the movie is called “Sully”, and the reason is that I identify with the situation that unfolds during the movie since it relates to my first job back home as a stewardess. I like comedy too, like Jimmy Fallon.

If a mega-fortune fell into your lap, what would you do?
First of all, I would help my family, then, I would donate money to my church. Also, I would donate money to a cancer research organization, and lastly, I would help American veterans.

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• Hardware and Software
• Learn more: maricopa.edu/drc

maricopa.edu/register-2017

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opportunity employer of protected veterans, and individuals with disabilities. All qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to race,
dents.
**DISABILITY CONFERENCE RECAPS**

Ability360 has long recognized the important intersection of disability with other minority identities to ensure that authentic voices are fully heard. Each winter we’ve hosted the American Indian Disability Summit and the African American Conference on Disabilities for 13 years and six years respectively. In September, we will host our second Latino Disability Summit.

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**AFRICAN AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON DISABILITIES**

**Conference Enlightens, Engages**

*By Floyd Alvin Galloway*

The sixth-annual African-American Conference on Disabilities, presented by United Healthcare and hosted by Ability360 and the Arizona Center for Disability Law, has steadily grown in size and relevancy. The conference brought subject-matter experts together with individuals seeking to improve their lives and communities.

“This year’s conference comes at a crucial time in the history of the disability rights movement,” JJ Rico, executive director of the Arizona Center for Disability Law, said. “We must take a stand against any proposed restrictions or limitations of those rights.”


Co-founders of the conference Renaldo Fowler, senior staff advocate for ACDL and David Carey, Ability360 advocacy specialist, noted that with knowledge there is power, and that they wanted to empower the Black community.

Scholarships were available due to the support of partners such as the Jean E. Fairfax and Betty H. Fairfax Memorial Fund, Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, and the Phoenix Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc.

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**Inspiring Youth**

*By Alexis Ramanjulu*

The 13th-Annual American Indian Disabilities Summit was held at the Desert Willow Conference Center on March 23. The annual summit facilitates training, outreach and technical assistance for American Indians with disabilities in urban and rural areas. The summit also aims to spread awareness that support services are available and can improve lifestyles and provide empowerment to eliminate barriers.

The conference provided participants with an array of workshops that included: Youth Self Advocacy, Job Opportunities Build Success, Youth Prosthetics, Stick it to Stigma Panel, Bullying and Suicide Prevention in Native American Communities, Inappropriate Discipline's Impact on Native American Children with Special Needs, and more.

Greggory Ohannessian was the summit’s keynote speaker. He spoke about his experience living with autism, how he pursued his goals and independence and why it is important to advocate for yourself and others.

The Marcus Harrison Jr. Leadership Award acknowledges one who advocates for American Indians with disabilities through leadership opportunities. This year’s recipient, Mateo TreeTop, is a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in Ft. Yates, North Dakota. TreeTop graduated from Westwood High School in Mesa, Ariz. and volunteers for the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. In 2016, TreeTop was a staff member for the Arizona Youth Leadership Forum and is currently on the Executive Committee.

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**LATINO DISABILITY SUMMIT & RESOURCE FAIR**

COMING, SEPTEMBER 16TH
Focuses on Independent Living

by Gus LaZear

Path to Empowerment, a new program developed by Ability360 and supported by the Nielsen Foundation and the National Council on Independent Living, will focus on helping youth and adults living with spinal cord injury transition into employment and independent living.

Any person with a spinal cord injury that has received services in a rehabilitation setting or clinic within the last 24 months and is in need of transitional services is eligible to apply for the Path to Empowerment Program.

The program is comprised of three major services: Youth Transition, Reintegration from Nursing Home and Transition from Rehabilitation to Community Services. The Transition from Rehabilitation to Community service offers both general resources and fitness and health-related resources.

The program was created to help anyone struggling through a transition, as many with disabilities do at one point or another. The program is also directed toward those with a newer injury who are adjusting to a different lifestyle.

The Youth Transition service will focus on promoting employment for up to 30 youth who are currently receiving Social Security Disability benefits. Ten of these will be provided funds to help them with transportation or clothing costs that would assist them in finding employment.

The Reintegration from Nursing Home service will provide funds to consumers looking to transition into independent living or transitional homes from nursing homes. Monetary support would cover household goods and any other costs related to furnishing a residence. Ability360 offers its own transitional home, Mast House, which is also included in the transitional home options.

The final transition service, Transition from Rehabilitation to Community, provides peer counseling, survival guides, and other resources to newly-injured consumers transitioning from rehabilitation back into the community. A subset of this service will focus on teaching consumers how to stay active safely while reducing the chances of secondary conditions and re-entry into rehabilitation. Scholarships, transportation vouchers, fitness orientations and two personal training sessions are all included in the service.

We want people to be as independent as possible. This program will look at the barriers that anyone with an SCI going through a transition is facing, and will address those.

To apply for this services, contact:

**Youth Transition Services (Benefits 2 Work)**
Nicholas Love
(602) 443-0705
nicholasl@ability360.org

**Reintegration from Nursing Home Services**
Stacey Zimmerman
(602) 296-0534
staceyz@ability360.org

**Mast House/Transition from Rehabilitation to Community (Early Intervention Program)**
Don Price
(602) 443-0726
donp@ability360.org

**Transition from Rehabilitation to Community (Sports & Fitness Center)**
Brielle Carter
602-626-7250
briellec@ability360.org

Gus LaZear
VP & General Manager
Ability360 Sports & Fitness Center
### Community Events

#### April

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event Details</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 14th  | 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. | Woman Against MS Luncheon  
2400 E Missouri Ave  
Phoenix, AZ 85016  
+ info: davidc@ability360.org |
| 15th  | 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. | Health & Wellness Fair  
Ability360 Center  
+ info: davidc@ability360.org |
| 14th  | 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. | Art Classes  
Ability360 Center  
+ info: azspinal.org |
| 14th  | 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. | Pets on Wheels  
Petting event  
Ability360 S&F Center  
every Thursday  
4:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m |
| 17th  | 5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m. | Men's Group  
Ability360 Center |
| 18th  | 10 a.m. - 12 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Odysea Aquarium  
Cost: $15.50  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 20th  | 5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m. | Men's Group  
Ability360 Center |

#### May

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event Details</th>
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| 4th   | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Odysea Aquarium  
Cost: $15.50  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 16th  | 10 a.m. - 12 p.m. | Independent Living Classes  
Budgeting & Benefits  
Work  
12:30 p.m. - 2:30 p.m  
Nutrition |
| 17th  | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Self-Defense  
9027 E Via Linda, Scottsdale  
Cost: $5.50 / 2 hours  
bring money for lunch  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 18th  | 5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Odysea Aquarium  
Cost: $15.50  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 2nd-4th | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Detour Company Theatre  
Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts  
FREE event  
+ info: detourcompanytheatre.org |
| 15th  | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Bowling  
9027 E Via Linda, Scottsdale  
Cost: $5.50 / 2 hours  
bring money for lunch  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 16th  | 10 a.m. - 12 p.m. | Independent Living Class  
ADA History  
12:30 p.m. - 2:30 p.m  
Social Event Planning |
| 19th  | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Bowling  
9027 E Via Linda, Scottsdale  
Cost: $5.50 / 2 hours  
bring money for lunch  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 22nd  | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Game Day  
Ability360 Center |

#### June

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1st   | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Social Recreation  
AZ Capitol Museum  
Cost: $2  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 2nd   | 10 a.m. - 12 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Bowling  
9027 E Via Linda, Scottsdale  
Cost: $5.50 / 2 hours  
bring money for lunch  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 15th  | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Bowling  
9027 E Via Linda, Scottsdale  
Cost: $5.50 / 2 hours  
bring money for lunch  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
| 22nd  | 10:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m. | Social Recreation  
Bowling  
9027 E Via Linda, Scottsdale  
Cost: $5.50 / 2 hours  
bring money for lunch  
+ info: leannem@ability360.org |
**April**

1st
- Climbing at Tom’s Thumb
  Breaking Barriers
  [Info: ability360.org]

15th
- 8 am - 4 pm
  Kayaking at Lake Pleasant
  Breaking Barriers
  [Info: ability360.org]

1st
- Membership Appreciation Day
  Ability360 S&F Center

18th
- Kayaking at Lynx Lake
  Breaking Barriers
  [Info: www.ability360sports.org]

7th - 8th
- Four Peaks Area Track & Field Competition
  Mesquite High School
  [Info: ability360.org]

9th
- Kayaking at Lake Pleasant
  Breaking Barriers
  [Info: ability360.org]

11th - 14th
- Desert Challenge Games
  Avon Track & Field
  Tempe, AZ

**May**

4th - 6th
- 7:30 am - 4 pm
  SOAR State Track Competition
  Raymond S. Keefe High School
  [Info: ability360.org]

9th
- 5 pm - 7 pm
  Kayaking at Lake Pleasant
  Breaking Barriers
  [Info: ability360.org]

1st - 3rd
- Barrow Connection’s - Day on the Lake
  Bartlett Lake, Arizona
  [Info: www.ability360sports.org]

8th
- Rugby Nationals
  Ability360 S&F Center
  [Info: www.ability360sports.org]

1st - 3rd
- Barrow Connection’s - Day on the Lake
  Bartlett Lake, Arizona
  [Info: www.ability360sports.org]

11th - 14th
- Desert Challenge Games
  Avon Track & Field
  Tempe, AZ

**June**

1st
- Membership Appreciation Day
  Ability360 S&F Center

13th
- 6:30 pm - 7:30 pm
  Miracle League
  Ability360 S&F Center
  [Info: ability360.org]

17th
- 10:00 am - 11:00 am
  Miracle League
  Ability360 S&F Center
  [Info: ability360.org]

18th
- Kayaking at Lynx Lake
  Breaking Barriers
  [Info: www.ability360sports.org]

19th - 21st
- Discover Adapted Scuba
  Ability360 S&F Center
  [Info: www.ability360sports.org]

24th
- 10 am - 2 pm
  Discover Adapted Scuba
  Ability360 S&F Center
  [Info: www.ability360sports.org]
There's no better way to protect our communities—both now and long after your grandchildren's grandchildren are grown—than through an endowment with the Arizona Community Foundation. Endowments are created and supported by people just like you, who want to make a permanent, sustainable impact on causes close to their heart. Endowed gifts allow you to preserve organizations and programs that are important to you. And best of all, endowments continue to grow forever.

We're here to help you be a powerful force for good. Call or click: 602.381.1400 or www.azfoundation.org
Phillip Brown was the 2016 Employment Achievement Award recipient because of his dedication to his job and the Ticket to Work program. Brown sold all of the farmland and cattle he owned in Oklahoma in 2012 to move to Arizona so that he could work for Hyde Electric. He built his own house this year and recently graduated from the Ticket to Work program.

Spirit of Ability, given to one who exemplifies the Spirit of Independent Living Philosophy and perhaps the most prestigious award of the night, was presented to long-time advocate and recently retired Banner Wheelchair Suns basketball program coach, Gary Venjohn. Throughout his 27 years with the Wheelchair Suns, Venjohn has been the driving force behind helping hundreds of athletes become physically active again. Venjohn taught wheelchair skills clinics so that newly-injured individuals could learn to maneuver their chairs. Venjohn helped to coordinate Drive Safe Campaign exhibitions, which aim to teach students about the dangers of drunk and distracted driving by hearing from athletes who were injured in automobile accidents. Gary’s determination, encouragement of others, advocacy and leadership illustrate why he was chosen as the 2016 recipient of the Spirit of Ability award.

“*We appreciate everyone who goes above and beyond to make a difference in the lives of others here,*” Pangrazio said.
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