

**COMMUNITY NEWS**

# Paradise Valley Town Council looks ahead to September

**Members reflect on the summer break and priorities for the fall**

By Allison Kotzbauer  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

The Paradise Valley Town Council will return from its summer break Sept. 11 with council members focused on issues ranging from updating the Town Code and flood mitigation to short-term rentals, infrastructure and preserving the town's one-acre zoning.

The council, made up of volunteer members, held its final regular meeting before summer break June 11. While the council was on break, members continued meeting with staff and residents and evaluating issues ahead of their return, Mayor Mark Stanton said. Town Manager Andrew Ching also continued providing weekly briefings.

The town held its primary election

• See **Council** on page 12



## Paradise Valley Youth Council begins first full year with hands-on agenda

**Members prepare to take on local issues and community projects**

By Allison Kotzbauer  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

**T**he Paradise Valley Youth Advisory Council is entering its first full year of work after being officially recognized by the Town Council during a June 11 study session.

The group held its first meeting of the new year

Aug. 12, where members discussed their upcoming attendance at the League of Arizona Cities & Towns Conference, received official shirts from the Town Council and outlined priorities for the 2026–2027 school year.

Members will have several opportunities this year to work directly with town leaders and research issues affecting Paradise Valley's younger residents.

• See **Youth Council** on page 16

The Paradise Valley Youth Council at its Aug. 12 meeting. (Photo Submitted by Christine Labelle)



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# HOW TO MAKE LIFE FEEL LONGER

BY GREG HAGUE

When you were ten, summer seemed long enough to establish a small country. Now Thanksgiving arrives while you are still wondering what happened to Memorial Day.

We usually blame age. But perhaps age is not the thief. Perhaps repetition is.

A child encounters firsts constantly: the first school bus, first sleepover, first glimpse of the ocean, first broken heart. The days are filled with events the mind must notice, label, and store.

Adults become efficient. Same route. Same chair. Same restaurant. Same conversations. Efficiency is good for business and terrible for remembering Tuesday.

The brain is a lousy stopwatch and a pretty good scrapbook. It measures life in memorable pages. When the pages all look alike, they seem to collapse.

This may explain why a week on vacation can feel longer in memory than a month at home. On vacation, you turn left where you normally turn right. You eat something you cannot pronounce. You get lost.

At the time, inconvenience. Later, life.



The obvious conclusion is not that we need constant excitement. Nobody wants to bungee jump before breakfast. The conclusion is simpler:

***If you want life to feel longer, create more firsts.***

Take a different road. Call someone you have not spoken to in years. Learn something embarrassingly outside your competence. Sit in a different seat at dinner. Order the thing you always skip. Ask your spouse a question you have never asked.

Maybe once a week, do one thing your calendar could not have predicted.

***Most of us say we want more time. What we really want is more life inside our time.***

Those are not the same thing.

You can live ten years in one pattern, or one year full of ten years' worth of moments. That may be why some eighty-year-olds seem young and some forty-year-olds already sound like a committee meeting.

Routine keeps us safe. Novelty keeps us awake.

Of course, novelty carries risk. You may look foolish. You may not be good.

You may discover pickleball is not your calling. But a life without small embarrassment is often a life that has become too well rehearsed.

Here is the odd bargain: We spend years trying to make life easier, then wonder why it passes so quickly. We remove every surprise, then complain that nothing surprises us.

So perhaps the answer is not to manage time more carefully. Perhaps it is to interrupt it.

Do something new before this week disappears into all the other weeks that looked exactly like it.

*Greg Hague* CEO, 72SOLD

## ON YOURVALLEY.NET

### Metro Phoenix visitors spent record \$13.4B last year

Whether they were booking hotel rooms, dining at neighborhood restaurants, shopping at local stores or visiting attractions, millions of travelers pumped a record \$13.4 billion into the metro Phoenix economy last year.

**Read online:** <https://tinyurl.com/bcs8dn7e>

### Arizona Game and Fish offers grants for K-12 wildlife education projects

Arizona educators can apply for up to \$3,000 in funding through the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Heritage K-12 Small Grants program to bring wildlife education projects into classrooms across the state.

A total of \$32,000 is available each year through the program. The first application deadline is Sept. 1, with a potential second funding round after Jan. 1 if money remains.

**Read online:** <https://tinyurl.com/4eeky5kh>

### Culture change has Saguaro feeling prepped for season

For months, questions have been swirling surrounding Saguaro football and what people can expect to see from them this upcoming season. With a mass exodus of players and the late hiring of Coach Butch Goncharoff, a number of people have seemingly written the Sabercats off.

**Read online:** <https://tinyurl.com/mpmw4mxk>

# Paradise Valley Police Department welcomes two new officers

The Paradise Valley Police Department welcomed its two newest officers following a swearing-in ceremony Wednesday, July 29, according to the Paradise Valley Town Manager's weekly update.

Officers Alex Lonien and Timothy Mitchell joined the department in June and recently passed the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board certification exam officially completing their training period.

Police Chief Freeman Carney administered the oath of office during a swearing-in ceremony attended by the officers' families, friends, fellow officers and department staff.

According to the Town manager's weekly update, Lonien and Mitchell bring experience in leadership, tactical operations, investigations, emergency response and community engagement as they begin serving the Paradise Valley community.



Paradise Valley Police Department Officer Alex Lonien, Paradise Valley Police Department Chief Freeman Carney and Paradise Valley Police Department Officer Timothy Mitchell. (Photo Courtesy of Duncan Miller)

## NEIGHBORS

# Area author's romance novel hits the screen

### Jenn McKinlay's novel adapted by Hallmark into limited series

By Allison Kotzbauer  
INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Scottsdale resident Jenn McKinlay has spent the past 25 years writing romance and mystery novels, publishing her first book more than two decades ago.

Now, one of those stories is getting a new life on the screen. McKinlay's novel, "Paris Is Always a Good Idea," has been adapted into a six-episode Hallmark+ miniseries, currently releasing new episodes each Thursday.

The book was different from McKinlay's other work from the beginning. She said the story came to her already fully formed and was

lightly inspired by a friend's experiences. She wrote it during the COVID-19 pandemic, expecting it would be a big hit, but the book never took off in the way she had hoped.

"Everybody was buying books about sourdough and self help," she said. "It wasn't the breakout book that I always hoped for, because I really felt like it was the big story they were looking for."

Now, years later, Paris Is Always a Good Idea is getting another chance to find an audience, this time on screen.

"I wrote the right book, and then, six years later, the right people at the right production company found it," she said.

The story takes readers through Paris, Spain and Ireland, with Lacey

• See **Author** on page 20



Lacey Chabert and Jenn McKinlay in Spain on the set of "Paris Is Always a Good Idea." (Photo Submitted by Jenn McKinlay)



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# 16 Handles now open in Paradise Valley area

## Husband and wife duo recently opened frozen yogurt shop

By Allison Kotzbauer  
 INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Paradise Valley area residents Dana and Evan Kern opened a 16 Handles frozen yogurt shop on Aug. 1.

16 Handles is a self-serve frozen yogurt shop offering unique flavors such as French Fry, Butter Beer and Keto Chocolate Brownie, along with vegan, gluten-free and dairy-free options. The brand originated in New York, where Evan Kern is originally from.

Evan moved to Arizona with his family when he was 13 and had always dreamed of opening a frozen yogurt shop like the ones he enjoyed growing up, he said.

He decided to franchise 16 Handles with his wife as even partners because of the shop's unique atmosphere.

The light pinks and blues of the store and the always friendly faces made him want to bring more of them to the Valley, with the only existing location currently in Chandler, he said.

Evan said his wife has been his greatest supporter and is essential to the operation. Whenever he was in doubt, she was there to reassure him.

"She's my biggest cheerleader, my biggest supporter, I couldn't do it without her," he said.

Now, as they are officially open, Evan said Dana will be crucial to not only the business, but the customers' experience.

"My wife is the hospitality queen," Evan said. "When she's at the store, she will be the friendly face of the store, greeting people and schmoozing with people... She's going to be the backbone."

Evan said he has wanted to share his passion for frozen treats for many years, and bringing that vision to life in his own community means a lot to him.

"This is my backyard, this is where I live, these are the people I know," Evan



The new 16 Handles frozen yogurt shop at 4575 E. Cactus Rd., Suite 135, celebrated its grand opening Aug. 1 in the Paradise Valley-Scottsdale area. (Photo submitted by Evan Kern)

said.

The large selection of unique flavors and the shop's atmosphere set 16 Handles apart from other frozen yogurt stores, but customer service is what will make the biggest difference, Evan said.

"We're going to offer a heck of a lot more to the customer than what's out there in any of the other stores," he said. "What's going to set us apart is going to be the customer service experience. It's coming in, and knowing that you're gonna have a smile on your face when you leave."

Before opening 16 Handles, Evan spent his career working in hospitality and customer service for companies including Cox and Apple and said he understands the importance of customer service for



16 Handles frozen yogurt shop franchisees Evan and Dana Kern with their two sons. (Photo submitted by Evan Kern)

any business.

He plans to bring that experience serving a wide variety of customers to 16 Handles.

"My favorite thing in the customer service world is, if somebody is unhappy, is turning that experience around and having them walk out the door being happy and excited to come back to the business," he said.

The shop is located at 4575 E. Cactus Rd., Suite 135. The store is open daily from noon to 10 p.m.

Allison Kotzbauer can be reached at akotzbauer@iniusa.org. Please submit comments at yourvalley.net/ letters or email them to AzoPinions@iniusa.org. We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines



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## Not Yet Listed... Already Sought After

Ahead of its public debut, PV Luxury Real Estate Group is quietly introducing a new private listing to Paradise Valley — a residence currently in its final stretch, awaiting certificate of occupancy. Every detail has been considered, every finish chosen with intention, delivering the kind of understated luxury Paradise Valley buyers have come to expect.

Jill Brenenstuhl and her team don't just market homes — they curate opportunities for the right buyer to move first. For those ready to act early, this is a preview worth paying attention to.



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# OPINION

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## Corrections

We will promptly correct all factual errors. We offer a "right of reply" to the people about whom we write. Readers who disagree with a news story are welcome to respond with a letter.

## Before Scottsdale closes another school

As students across SUSD prepare to begin the school year, hundreds will walk into unfamiliar buildings, meet new teachers, learn new routines and try to find their place in new schools. Many are still grieving the loss of schools that anchored their families and neighborhoods for decades.

Yet while these students are asked to adapt, adults continue debating the next round of school closures. Here's a toast to Echo Canyon School and Pima Elementary. May their names, their achievements and the communities they served forever remain part of Scottsdale's history.

A neighborhood school is more than a building. It is where teachers know younger siblings because they taught older ones. It is where families return for concerts, games and celebrations. It is where relationships are built, sustained and passed from one generation to the next.

Schools are easy to measure on paper. They're much harder to measure in people's lives. The relationships built over years among students, families, teachers and neighbors don't show up on spreadsheets, but they're often what people miss most when a school is gone. Trust doesn't move with the students. It must be rebuilt.

Many of us know what it's like to lose the person who quietly held a family together. When they pass away, the family does not disappear. Everyone is still there. But something fundamental changes. Many neighborhood schools quietly serve that same role within their communities. School boards are right to consider dollars and cents. Communities should ask them to consider common sense. Budgets and enrollment num-

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bers matter. But so do the long-standing relationships and institutions that quietly hold neighborhoods together.

As a new school year begins, let's welcome students, families and teachers with patience and kindness. We rarely know everything they have experienced or lost along the way.

**Stuart Rhoden**  
PHOENIX

## Stronger communities start with better conversations about social issues

Every community has difficult conversations it would rather avoid.

Whether it's homelessness, mental health, addiction or other complex social issues, these topics often come with strong opinions long before they come with understanding. We hear headlines, read social media posts and repeat things we've heard from others. Before long, assumptions begin to feel like facts.

Unfortunately, those assumptions don't just shape opinions, they shape outcomes. Communities can't solve problems they don't fully understand.

That's why education isn't just the responsibility of schools. It's the responsibility of leaders.

Whether you lead a business, non-profit, government agency or neighborhood organization, part of leadership is helping people understand, not simply telling them what to think.

That means being willing to an-

swer difficult questions. It means listening to concerns without becoming defensive. It means recognizing that transparency builds trust, even when conversations are uncomfortable.

Too often, organizations assume that good work speaks for itself. Sometimes it does. But more often, silence allows misconceptions to fill the gaps.

I've learned that some of the most productive conversations happen when someone simply has the opportunity to ask a question they were previously afraid to ask. Those moments don't always change someone's opinion overnight, but they almost always increase understanding. And understanding creates the foundation for collaboration.

The same principle applies far beyond healthcare.

Business leaders regularly navigate misconceptions about their industries. Educators work to explain changes in classrooms. Community organizations help residents understand local challenges. None of these conversations are easy, but they're necessary.

Strong communities aren't built because everyone agrees. They're built because people are willing to engage with one another respectfully, seek reliable information and remain open to learning something new.

As leaders, we can't control every opinion. But we can help create environments where questions are welcomed, education is prioritized and conversations are rooted in facts instead of fear.

*Christine Stevens is CEO of a Valley substance abuse treatment organization. This opinion was edited for length and can be read in full online at <https://tinyurl.com/yczptuvw>.*

**Christine Stevens**  
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## FROM THE COVER

## Council

• From page 1

during the summer, with new council terms beginning in January.

Stanton said he is looking forward to preparing a legislative agenda to protect the town from state overreach and addressing issues including short-term rentals and capital improvement planning.

“Our most pressing priorities include ensuring the highest levels of public safety and managing responsible community development. We remain committed to continue delivering exceptional customer service to our residents in every area of town operations,” he said.

Vice Mayor Christine Labelle highlighted the momentum behind the Save the Spire project, along with work by the Youth Group, Public Works and Police Department.

Council Member Karen Liepmann also highlighted the importance of saving the spire as an important part of the town’s and architectural history.

“What could have been competing interests became a partnership among the developer, the town, neighbors and community volunteers,” to save the spire, Labelle said.

Labelle and Stanton said they are also looking forward to modernizing the town code this fall.

“Staff has spent the summer lay-



**Council Member Julie Pace, Vice Mayor Christine Labelle, Council Member Karen Liepmann, Mayor Mark Stanton, Council Member Anna Thomasson, Council Member Ellen Andeen-Keller, and Council Member Scott Moore at Paradise Valley Town Hall. (Photo Submitted by Duncan Miller)**

ing the groundwork, and council has already devoted considerable time to improving many sections,” Labelle said. “I’m optimistic this work will result in a more cohesive, user-friendly code that is easier to understand and apply.”

Flooding and infrastructure remain other areas of focus. Council Member Julie Pace pointed to storm-related flooding and damage as an ongoing concern, while Labelle said she is looking forward to implementing the town’s flood mitigation study alongside planned infrastructure improvements.

Pace also cited concerns over EP-COR’s proposed rate increase, squatters, unpermitted construction, short-term rentals and violations of the town’s dark-sky standards. She also pointed to issues involving Mummy Mountain, e-bikes and skateboarders.

“Never a dull moment to try and keep a high quality of life and preserve Paradise Valley,” Pace said.

Liepmann said she also wants to address quality-of-life concerns, including noise and health issues related to gas-powered leaf blowers. Town maintenance staff has been testing electric leaf blowers over the summer, and Liepmann said she is interested in seeing the results.

Council Member Anna Thomasson, who was reelected this summer, said campaigning gave her an opportunity to listen to residents and connect with them about town business and individual concerns.

She highlighted progress on the Mockingbird Lane improvement project and Doubletree Road entryway improvements and said she looks forward to the projects being completed to create safer roads.

Council Member Scott Moore, who has served on the Board of Adjustment, Planning Commission and Town Council for more than a decade, said he plans to continue focusing on promoting responsible resort development consistent with the town’s General Plan.

Moore said he enjoyed spending summer with his friends and family but remained engaged with town matters and the upcoming election.

“Being in an election cycle we cannot take our eye off the issue and must stay focused on local and state candidates that may negatively impact our quality of life,” he said.

He also plans to work with state legislators on regional and local issues affecting the community.

Thomasson and Moore both emphasized the importance of preserving Paradise Valley’s one-acre zoning.

“As always we need to stay vigilant with state legislative activities to make sure we retain our 1-acre zoning and quality of life,” Thomasson said.

Council Member Ellen Andeen-Keller did not respond to requests for comment.

For the full Q&A, read online at <https://tinyurl.com/44b43x7x>.

*Allison Kotzbauer can be reached at [akotzbauer@iniusa.org](mailto:akotzbauer@iniusa.org). Please submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters) or email them to [AzOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AzOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines*

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## FROM THE COVER

### Youth Council

• From page 1

The League of Arizona Cities & Towns Conference begins Aug. 19, and the Youth Council will participate alongside town leaders in the Youth Program and Parade of Flags.

“It’s really exciting to have that opportunity because we’ve been working towards something like this for a year, so I think we’re all really excited to go and represent Paradise Valley,” said Saniya Dwivedi, a senior at Xavier College Preparatory who founded the youth council roughly a year ago.

Another project will be a youth-led sustainability review of town operations, examining areas such as single-use plastics, refill stations and recycling, along with other opportunities to reduce waste while sup-



The Youth Council received shirts from the Paradise Valley Town Council at its Aug. 12 meeting in Paradise Valley. (Photo Submitted by Christine Labelle)

porting sustainability goals already included in the town’s General Plan.

In addition, the council will explore ways to strengthen its website, social media and communications presence to expand outreach, recruit new members and help share information about town programs, depart-

ments and events.

In early fall 2025, Dwivedi realized there wasn’t a way for youth to get involved or connect with their peers in Paradise Valley, so she decided to create one.

“I noticed that other towns and cities had an opportunity for youth

to express their opinions to the local officials, and I also realized that a lot of youth don’t even know each other. I don’t even know some of my neighbors,” she said. “I just wanted a way for youth and high schoolers to get together, meet each other, and learn more about their community.”

Over the past year, the Youth Council has met with the Town Council and Town Manager, toured the courts and the Paradise Valley Police Department and volunteered at community events such as the Veterans Car Show.

When residents see the Youth Council at events, members say they often hear positive feedback about youth involvement in civic life.

“People appreciate youth being involved, and that youth wants to be involved,” said Youth Council mem-

• See **Youth Council** on page 18



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## FROM THE COVER

### Youth Council

• From page 16

ber Mia Steinmetz. "It's nice to have younger people involved in the community, and want to make a change, and want to bring their perspectives and thoughts to the town's government issues, and just the town in general."

Youth Council member Madalyn Paltzik, a senior at Phoenix Country Day School, said the experience has helped her connect with her community in a meaningful way.

"I have always been incredibly interested in both community service and public policy and found that the youth council served as a great intersection between the two," she said. "The youth council has definitely strengthened my appreciation for the work that our local government does for the Paradise Valley community and

beyond—so much of which goes unnoticed or under-appreciated."

Vice Mayor Christine Labelle, the Youth Council's advisor, said the group gives students a chance to actively participate in local government.

"They're a great enthusiastic group of kids, our future leaders, who I have no doubt will add fresh ideas and energy to our town," she said. "We are lucky to have them, And I'm honored to have the opportunity to work with them."

Mayor Mark Stanton said the council's growth over the past year has been encouraging to see.

"It has been a wonderful evolution," he said. "They're really immersing themselves."

*Allison Kotzbauer can be reached at akotzbauer@iniusa.org. Please submit comments at yourvalley.net/letters or email them to AzOpinions@iniusa.org. We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines*

## 2027 Arizona Concours d'Elegance tickets on sale

The ninth edition of the Arizona Concours will feature automobiles from around the world, according to a press release.

The Concours committee has designated 16 classes for the 2027 event, ranging from the dawn of motoring through the Classic and Art Deco eras, post-war sports cars and the hypercars of modern times.

Awards are presented in each class, along with special awards and the two coveted Best of Show trophies — one for pre-World War II entries and one for post-war. The overall theme for the 2027 Concours is, "The Art of Elegance at Speed."

Discount pricing is available for



Ferrari will be the honored marque at the Arizona Concours d'Elegance on Jan. 24, 2027, at Scottsdale Civic Center. (Courtesy Patrick Darby)

early ticket buyers through Nov. 30.

For tickets and more information, visit [ArizonaConcours.org/tickets](http://ArizonaConcours.org/tickets) or [ScottsdaleArts.org/Whats-On](http://ScottsdaleArts.org/Whats-On).

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## Elite Garages Scottsdale open for business

Elite Garages Scottsdale, 16990 N. 91st St., is open for business.

The facility features 32 privately owned, customizable garage suites designed for collectors, automotive enthusiasts and hobbyists, according to a press release.

Unlike traditional storage facilities, each suite is individually deeded, allowing owners to build equity while creating a personalized space for vehicle collections, workshops, entertainment and more.

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Elite Garages Scottsdale offers 32 privately owned, customizable garage suites near the near Loop 101 and Bell Road. (Courtesy Elite Garages Scottsdale)

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- For more information, visit [elitegaragescottsdale.com](http://elitegaragescottsdale.com).



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### Author

- From page 4

Chabert playing the lead role.

When McKinlay learned Chabert was attached to the project, she said she could hardly believe that “the queen of Hallmark” would be bringing her character to life.

Books have always been a part of McKinlay’s life, and her family can’t imagine a time when she doesn’t have another story idea taking shape, she said.

“Books were always my escape hatch,” she said.

McKinlay traveled to Spain during filming, where she met the cast and got to watch the story she had written come to life. Now that she has seen the finished series, she said she is thrilled with the adaptation; a feeling not every author gets to have when

their work moves to the screen.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard any other authors say, ‘Man, I wish I had written that,’ and it’s their own source material, but I genuinely felt that,” she said.

While in Spain, McKinlay also heard from cast and crew members about the parts of the story they connected with personally.

Readers appear to be finding those same connections, too, with sales of the novel increasing after the first two episodes of Hallmark’s mini-series being released, she said.

“When people find that book they connect to, they value it,” McKinlay said.

Allison Kotzbauer can be reached at [akotzbauer@iniusa.org](mailto:akotzbauer@iniusa.org). Please submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters) or email them to [AzOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AzOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines

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## EDUCATION

# Scottsdale Unified celebrates its 130th school year

By J. Graber

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Scottsdale Unified School District welcomed students to the first day of class for the 130th time Aug. 10.

"Founded in 1896 by Chaplain Winfield Scott and his wife Helen, we have been part of the fabric of this community long before the city was officially incorporated 75 years ago," Superintendent Scott Menzel said in an email to the Daily Independent. "One hundred thirty years reflects 'a legacy of learning' that has generational impact. We plan to celebrate that legacy of success while working to build on it for future generations."

A few schools within the district are also marking their own anniversaries, too.

Anasazi Elementary school is cele-

brating 40 years of educating the community's kids; Saguaro High School is celebrating 60 years; and Yavapai Elementary is celebrating 65 years.

"The district is excited to welcome our students back for another year of learning and growth," Menzel said. "We remain focused on helping each student achieve their full potential by creating learning environments that reflect high expectations and high support."

"We will continue to focus on the two wildly important goals established by the governing board related to improving math achievement, as well as increasing enrollment to ensure full and thriving schools. There will be other key performance indicators as well, but these two are foundational for long-term success."

The district's theme, "Because kids ..." revolves around 130 years of serving community, anchored by the tagline, "A legacy of learning."

Each individual school has its own theme, too. For example, Redfield Elementary School's is "Next level learning."

"We're going off of a gaming theme so everything is leveling up," Redfield Principal Dr. Amanda Rand said. "Leveling up means extending that rigor, making sure students are being met academically ... Our goal is to welcome kids back, have that positive vibe going on, making sure they feel at home and comfortable. Not only that, but that we know where they are in data and that we are moving them and making sure they're getting their needs met academically."

While students are returning on the Aug. 10, the teachers were hard at work for a week prior to that, doing things like making sure they have enough desks and decorating to ensure the rooms are comfortable for students.

The idea is to build off of last year's accomplishments, such as having 11 National Merit Scholarship recipients and six students with perfect ACT scores and a Congressional Award Gold Medal recipient.

The district's high schools also fielded state championship teams in boys basketball, Arcadia; girls volleyball, pom, cheer and girls golf, Chaparral; girls swim and dive, football, girls tennis and track and field, Desert Mountain; and boys baseball, Saguaro.

Meanwhile the district was named an outstanding community for music education and Arcadia's marching band was the state division 4 champion. Likewise, both Desert Mountain and Chaparral earned Gammage Outstanding Musical awards and 22 district students were named to Arizona's all-state band, choir and orchestra.

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Scottsdale Unified School District's 28 schools welcomed students back from summer break Aug. 10. (Independent Newsmedia/Arianna Grainey)

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# Puzzle Rides celebrates a decade of having fun

By J. Graber

INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA

Gregg and Katie Dufort, co-owners of Puzzle Rides Scottsdale, have loved their jobs for last 10 years.

"I had a 30-plus year career in the construction industry and I quit my job to do this," Gregg said. "No more hard hat and work boots, (now) I get to ride around in a golf cart and show people a good time."

He's also been known to dress up in a pirate costume, too, and who wouldn't love that?

Puzzle Rides Scottsdale is an escape room-styled adventure that takes golf cart riders on a quest through Old Town (the couple also has an operation in Prescott) to solve puzzles and gather clues along the way to complete quests with various themes like Copper Canyon Capper, Hijacked by Science and Ghost Riders.

One of the quests is themed, Pirates Treasure Adventure, hence the pirate suit.

Groups of two to 25 are driven around in golf carts by puzzle masters to various spots

throughout Old Town. The stops could be anywhere from public art sites, like Scottsdale's 26-foot tall rabbit named One-eyed Jack, to local businesses like the Fry Bread Lounge.

Puzzles at each stop provide clues to the next location until the larger mystery is solved.

The company started in 2016 as a simple taxi service in Old Town in the winter and in downtown Prescott in the summer but Katie said she knew early on there was more to the business.

The shift in the business model was to sell "sleigh rides" taking people around to see Christmas lights in Prescott and Old Town and they sold out.

It was hard work and the two had to learn about things like having a cancellation policy so people don't just not show up.

It's said that it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert, and Katie figures when the two logged their time during those taxi and sleigh ride days.

Then, in January 2020, they took a road trip

• See **Puzzles** on page 25



Puzzle Rides Scottsdale coowners Katie and Gregg Dufort show off some of the props patrons will have to utilize to complete an escape room style, golf cart adventure in Old Town (J. Graber/Independent Newsmedia)



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| Surprise • January 19, 2027 • The Colonnade                                     |
| Litchfield/Goodyear • February 17, 2027 • Tuscany Falls Clubhouse(Pebble Creek) |
| Chandler • February 23, 2027 • Sun Lakes Country Club                           |
| Peoria • March 25, 2027 • Westbrook Village                                     |
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## Puzzles

• From page 24

to California, and the idea just struck her.

"The whole trip there, I'm like, what if we put an escape room on a golf cart?" Katie said

She looked around and found plenty of tours in Old Town but she wanted to do something that satisfied her natural love of art and history, as the two are proud of the historical nature of the artifacts used in the tours.

But it wasn't until the couple took their daughter to an escape room that Katie knew the idea would work.

"I clearly remember working on a lock, I was on the floor trying to get a lock off of a treasure chest, and (Gregg) looked at me and said, 'Can you do it?'" Katie said. "I remember looking at him and saying, 'I can put this on a golf cart.'"

The two had to work backwards to figure out how an escape room works, and planned to open March 13, 2020, but it was the start of the COVID era and everything started closing down ... like the day before.

One thing the Duforts had going for them though, was those first adventures were all outside and it was safer during COVID to be outside than in and the business did finally open the next January.

The company has turned out to be a success, with \$2 million in revenue over the last six years, but things weren't always so comfortable.

"At one point we were down to \$150 in our bank account, and she sold some collectible Barbies and other things to pay the bills," Gregg said. "We paid the bills, but we weren't sure we were going to make it."

And to make things worse, Katie's mom had just died and the couple didn't know how they were going to get her father, with Parkinson's, out to Arizona to be with them.

But Katie has two quotes she lives

by. The first is from Winston Churchill: "Never, never, never give up." The second, "I don't believe in the no-win scenario," comes from Captain James T. Kirk.

That mentality paid off though because things turned around pretty quickly from there.

"About a week later there was a person who had ridden with us from New York and he was a kosher chef," Katie said. "He wrote about us in his blog and the next two weeks, all we did was people from New York who had read about it on that blog. That turned things around because they told people about it and other people told about it and our reviews started going up."

Before they knew it, the Dufort's were buying more golf carts.

Today they are planning to open a puzzle shop in Old Town to match the one they have in Prescott.

And while private parties are welcome, the group has also tapped into the corporate team building world, even putting on puzzling events at local hotels for up to 350 people at a time.

The golf cart adventures take either 75 minutes or 90 minutes to finish (though they can be done quicker if you're a cracker jack), depending on the difficulty level of each quest, but Katie acknowledges the company has a dirty secret: they're not going to let you lose.

"The first ride Katie did in Scottsdale, the group lost, and I thought, 'I don't ever want this to happen again,'" Katie said. "It's not fun to lose, and it's not fun to be frustrated," Katie said.

And the entire business is about having fun.

For more information about what the company does, visit puzzlerides.com or call (602) 601-2261

*Please submit comments at [yourvalley.net/letters](http://yourvalley.net/letters) or email them to [AzOpinions@iniusa.org](mailto:AzOpinions@iniusa.org). We are committed to publishing a wide variety of reader opinions, as long as they meet our Civility Guidelines.*

# Be a Civility Advocate!



## Civility Checklist

*How to engage in respectful, honest & civil dialogue about public issues*

- ☐ **Take the high road.** Respond to the topic — not the person. Refrain from demonizing others for their opinions. Assume those you disagree with are, like you, genuinely interested in improving the community.
- ☐ **Be respectful.** Bullying, public humiliation, insults, name-calling, harassment, and threats directed at another person — or that person's race, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc. — have no place in civil discussions. Find ways to respectfully disagree without questioning someone's character or motives.
- ☐ **Be truthful.** Base your opinions/arguments on facts. Value honesty. Make only accurate statements when making your point and avoid exaggeration and stereotypes. When appropriate, cite your sources of information that others may question.
- ☐ **Don't misrepresent.** Always identify your opinions as opinions (not stating opinions as facts). Never misrepresent the views of others or falsely claim your opinions represent someone else. If quoting the words of others, identify and credit the source.
- ☐ **Listen & learn.** It's both polite and respectful to listen to those we disagree with (as well as those we support) and be genuine in our attempts to understand their point of view. Expand your mind by thoughtfully seeking out views that don't agree with your own.
- ☐ **Look for common ground.** When disagreeing with others, look for even small areas of agreement — which can be the gateway to working together for the greater good.
- ☐ **Respect privacy.** Keep private things private — whether it involves your own information or those with whom you disagree. Revealing private information about someone else is rude, unethical, potentially harmful and, in many cases, illegal.
- ☐ **Set a good example.** Practice civil behavior online as well as in public and in your interaction with others. Encourage others to practice these civil behaviors. And it's OK to challenge disrespectful behavior — but be courteous, respectful and helpful in your approach.



*Now that you've read the checklist, take the Civility Pledge at [yourvalley.net/civility-pledge](http://yourvalley.net/civility-pledge).*



# Saguaro Sabercats

6250 N 82nd St, Scottsdale

2025 Record: 3-7

Playoffs: Did not qualify

Region: 6A Central

Coach: Butch Goncharoff (1st year)

## Culture change has Saguaro feeling prepped for season

By Brittany Bowyer  
REPORT FOR AMERICA

For months, questions have been swirling surrounding Saguaro football and what people can expect to see from them this upcoming season. With a mass exodus of players and the late hiring of Coach Butch Goncharoff, a number of people have seemingly written the Sabercats off. While everyone is busy doubting them, the Sabercats have been busy working hard to embrace a new culture within the program; A culture of hard work, dedication and determination.

“When I got the job, you’re not wrong, Saguaro was a mess,” Coach Goncharoff said. “When you inherit a program that’s broken or down, you know the first think that has to change is the culture that surrounds that program and we’ve done a great job of that.”

The players expressed their dissatisfaction with the culture surrounding the program last year, and say Coach Goncharoff has brought a welcomed change to Saguaro.

“Last year, we had a whole bunch of players who didn’t care, didn’t show up to practice, everything like that,” junior LB Antony Smith said. “This year, it’s not like that anymore. The program has definitely shifted. Everybody is at practice on time, everybody’s here, everybody’s working, everybody’s going full speed. We don’t have anybody faking being hurt because they don’t want to practice...



Saguaro football during a summer practice in July 2026. (Photo courtesy Saguaro Football Instagram account)

It’s definitely way better than last year, Our culture last year was terrible. You can tell Coach Butch has really been putting his hand down.”

Since taking over, Saguaro’s participation numbers have grown from just 13 in the spring to the 30s now.

Offensively, Coach Goncharoff expects Saguaro to look similar to years past, noting they’re a RPO-driven team.

“It kind of fits the personality of the players that we have,” Goncharoff said.

The Sabercats also return the team’s leading receiver from last year, senior WR Oliver Gibson. In addition to Gibson, Saguaro has weapons they believe people have overlooked. One of them is Mar’taj Meadows, a

junior wide receiver who transferred to Saguaro and had to sit five games last season.

“He’s a really solid piece, and he’s basically one of the stars on our offense,” Smith said.

“A lot of people don’t know about Mar’taj Meadows, but they will,” Goncharoff said. “I think he’s one of the most talented people in the state.”

Smith also believes the team’s quarterback, Edison Orellana, has the potential to have a big year this year, too.

“You can expect us to come and surprise people,” Meadows said.

Defensively, Goncharoff said things will be more of the same, as they retained their defensive coordinator from the prior season. When

### SAGUARO SABERCATS

**KEY RETURNEES:** Senior WR Oliver Gibson, junior LB Antony Smith, junior WR Mar’taj Meadows

**NEWCOMERS TO WATCH:** Junior QB Edison Orellana, Sophomore CB Mikko Ramirez

it comes to players, Goncharoff said Smith has stepped up as a big leader on the field and expects him to have a big season this year.

Saguaro’s schedule is absolutely grueling this year, but they’re not concerned about what the other programs are doing. Goncharoff believes if they focus on just trying to compete each day and improve, then the rest will take care of itself.

“We’ve been working hard all off-season, making sure we’re getting everything together,” Smith said. “Everybody’s talking about us being light on players, but that’s actually a non-factor to us. You only play with 11, and our 11 can compete with any 11 in the state.”

“Each team has a ceiling, and I don’t know what that ceiling is,” Goncharoff said. “I do know where we started, and where we are now, we like where we’re going.”

*Brittany Bowyer is a Report for America corps member, covering sports for Independent Newsmedia in Arizona. Report for America places talented journalists in local newsrooms to report on under-covered issues and regions.*

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