

Healthy Communities



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Changing Lives



Project CENTRL Changed Her Life

Diane Joens, Mayor of Cottonwood. Co-founder, Stewards of Public Lands. Editor and publisher, The Verde River Almanac. Champion of water rights, reclamation and downtown development. Joens never imagined herself in any of these leadership roles before she was selected for Project CENTRL in 2001. Then she achieved all of them.

"Project CENTRL was a life-changing experience," she said.

Developed by UACE, Project CENTRL is an intensive two-year program that cultivates passionate leaders to serve rural communities in Arizona. This Center for Rural Leadership has graduated more than 500 over the past two decades.

"I wanted to learn to be a leader," Joens said. And learn she did.

Joens recalls a seminal seminar early in the program. "A lady talked about doing what your heart tells you to do - and that really spoke to me. It changed my decision making about what to do. Get involved in volunteer work and serve the public - that's the route I took."

She retired from her county job and rolled up her sleeves.

Her Project CENTRL internship tackled the complexities of water in the Verde Valley, where she's lived 24 years. She compiled, edited and published The Verde River Almanac, a review of Arizona water rights, water disputes, the river's history, geography, geology, hydrology and much more. She collaborated with researchers and writers and engaged financial supporters ranging from the Salt River Project and Sierra Club to local businesses and citizens.

Joens partnered with the Clarkdale police chief to establish the nonprofit Stewards of Public Lands who "lead by doing." These volunteers work across jurisdictions to clean up and stop illegal dumping to protect the Verde watershed and its aquifer. "The beautiful Verde River runs through our town. The Prescott National Forest is on one side, the Coconino on the other. Why people want to dump I do not know," she said. "In the first four or five years we took a full 40-yard dumpster of trash out of the forest every month."

Joens ran for Cottonwood city council in 2003, then mayor in 2007. She's in her second term as mayor. "The public elected me to serve. That pretty much astounded me. I would never have had the guts to do that without Project CENTRL."

Her passion for Cottonwood and the river is infectious. She rattles off accomplishments:

A \$17 million recreation center. A revitalized downtown - with streetscape upgrades, wine tasting rooms, restaurants, a new hotel, antiques, a refurbished center for the arts, a popular watering hole in a onetime gas station, even the aroma of fresh-baked bread. Up next? A solar-powered reclamation plant in the riverfront park.

"When you're a mayor you can't claim anything as your own. It's really teamwork," Joens said. "We want Cottonwood to be a destination." This riparian area in Central Arizona could draw visitors for birding, cycling, hiking, kayaking and other recreation.

"I don't have an agenda. I do have a vision 20 to 25 years out there of what I want the community to look like. I see the city moving in that direction."

Project CENTRL honored Joens for her work to protect the Verde Valley watershed and selected Cottonwood as the exemplary site for its next economic development seminar.

Everett Rhodes has directed Project CENTRL since 1997. "This experience involves sharpening your tools and using them to make an impact on rural Arizona," he said. "It's an adventure, a journey - and not just for two years. It's a lifelong journey."

Nogales Family Resource Center

When Angelica Rodriguez first came to the Nogales Family Resource Center, she knew no English, had never used a computer and had no diploma.

"Now I am getting my GED this month and I am learning English and learning about computers, so I can get a better job," the 24-year-old single mom said.

Rodriguez credits the Center, funded in part through the UACE, Santa Cruz County Cooperative Extension and First Things First, with changing her life and the lives of her children, José, 7, and Daniela, 2.

On a recent morning, the three snuggled on a comfy couch at the Center, with José and his mom taking turns reading "Alice in Wonderland" to Daniela.

They feel at home at the Center. While Rodriguez is in class, her children take part in puppet shows, story times and arts and crafts. There is also plenty of time for the family to play together.

Like other moms who come to the Center, just north of the border, Rodriguez has built a support system, said Debbie Curley, program director. She said most of the families come from poverty, and many have experienced domestic violence.

"We talk about our problems and how we feel," Rodriguez said. "Moms listen to each other."

Curley said the Center fortifies families. "Parents are getting tools they need to build self-sufficiency, which helps them provide better for their children."

Children thrive at the Center, Rodriguez said. "My son is learning to read English, and we are able to learn together. I am hoping to learn as much as I can here so I can get a good job and buy a home for my children. I want them to get a good education.

"They have changed my life so much here."

