

# Hometown impact

## Discover how 3 ASU graduates are transforming lives through education and innovation in southern Arizona

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News  
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**Editor's note:** *This story was featured in a special Tucson edition of ASU Thrive magazine.*

Story by Dave Perry

Greater Tucson is home to more than 12,400 degreed ASU alumni.

Every day, they are out in their communities shaking up the status quo in everything from K-12 education to commercial real estate.

They create jobs, pull up test scores and provide mentorship opportunities to students they can see themselves in — dreamers who will do just about anything to achieve their goals.

What do a former honors student, a speedy outfielder and an educator all have in common? Sun Devil pride and a love for the Old Pueblo. Learn how each of them, shaped by time at ASU, is working to make Tucson a stronger city.

### A safe haven for students

“Education changed my entire family’s trajectory,” says Jackie Vasquez-Lapan, ’08 BA in education.

That’s why she and her husband, Dave, and his family established the Lapan Sunshine Foundation — to give underserved students in the Wakefield community of south Tucson the opportunity to overcome challenging circumstances. Most of those journeys start in the after-school clubhouse program.

“At a bare minimum, they’re safe,” Vasquez-Lapan says.

At a full maximum, they’re building pathways to college and leading exceptional lives. Starting in sixth grade, every student at C.E. Rose, Hollinger and Wakefield middle schools can begin earning money toward their postsecondary education. The Lapan Sunshine Foundation provides economic resources, academic tools, cultural experiences and professional development that guide students toward achieving their goals.

As a first-generation college student who attended ASU on an athletic scholarship, Vasquez-Lapan recognizes the importance of having a strong support system. For her, it was her parents, restaurant owners Blanca and the late Albert Vasquez, who dreamed for all three of their children to go to college.

“I achieved their dream,” Vasquez-Lapan says, “and I’m passing that on to other kids who grew up like me.”

In addition to educational opportunities, students find mentors and meet role models, including ASU graduates.

First-generation college graduate John Asigbekye, ’18 BSE in electrical engineering, was a beneficiary of the Lapan Sunshine Foundation when he earned his master’s degree.

Now he gives back, coming to the clubhouse each summer. He says there, he finds inspiration.

“There is this burning desire in their eyes,” Asigbekye says. “It’s fresh energy every year.”

A designer with Bay Area technology company Analog Devices, he started a scholarship program, funding three \$1,000 scholarships each year for first-generation college students studying science, technology, engineering and math.

More than 3,000 students have come through the clubhouse. So far, 222 are college graduates.

“Hearing them say they don’t think they could have done it without our help, that they never would have graduated ... it really is amazing,” Vasquez-Lapan says.

## **A hard job he loves**

Gabriel Trujillo recognizes he may have “the hardest, most complex (and) most labor-intensive job in the city of Tucson. And I love it,” he says.

Trujillo, an ASU alumnus with five degrees, including a doctoral degree in education, is in his ninth year leading the Tucson Unified School District as superintendent. The district serves 40,000 students, 89 schools and 8,000 employees.

“I feel a sense of urgency every day I come to the office,” Trujillo says.

Plenty keeps him awake. Atop the list is “the safety and security of our students and staff.” Right behind that is, “Are we doing all we can to remove the barriers and obstacles that poverty presents

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to kids and families?”

Ten years ago, TUSD was in “a very, very challenged place,” Trujillo says. A quarter of its schools were rated as failing on standardized testing.

Today, 90% of TUSD schools are rated “A,” “B” or “C.” Trujillo gives the credit to “our amazing students, our parents and ... the thousands of wonderful employees who work hard every day for our kids.”

Trujillo visits three to four schools a week to talk to employees, observe classrooms and ask parents how he’s doing.

“I really believe visibility is important in this job,” he says.

The modern K-12 landscape can “really challenge our ability to move quickly and be as innovative as we can be,” Trujillo says.

But, he knows, TUSD must innovate.

Over a quarter-century in education, Trujillo has witnessed three seminal events: the arrival of the internet, school choice and the pandemic.

With school choice, 40,000 students and families figured out there were alternatives to TUSD, he says, meaning the district must re-recruit students every year. It also means redeveloping programming to help the modern learner thrive.

With the arrival of the internet, students shaped by digital devices and a barrage of immediate information are “wired differently,” Trujillo says. They have “an intense need to connect with each other, to collaborate, to create content. We’re challenged to think differently ... about teaching and learning.”

TUSD has doubled the number of high school students in career and technical education. And it has embraced a “dramatic return of the arts” through the district’s Opening Minds through the Arts Department, which helps integrate arts into the classroom by addressing brain-based learning.

Trujillo’s drive to rebuild the district was conceived during his time at ASU’s [Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation](#), where “some of the most knowledgeable experts in teaching and learning” led him to realize public schools are “the lone transformational institutions in American life.”

“The superintendent’s job is to craft a clear and consistent message of expectations, as well as values and virtues that are going to be student-centered, family-centered and community-driven,” Trujillo says.

“Otherwise,” he says, “we’re just a collection of 89 different schools.”

## **A business built to grow**

Ideas flow from Bob Collopy like water fills a river. That’s how he sees business, too.

“There’s a river” of opportunity, “and it’s an entrepreneur’s job to get as close to that river and irrigate it as best they can,” says Collopy, ’14 BS in marketing.

Under Collopy’s leadership, Fort Lowell Realty and Property Management now has 75 people managing more than 3,500 commercial, residential and retail stores in Tucson.

He is now preparing Fort Lowell Real Estate “to leverage its full spectrum of services to meet the needs of investors.” He wants to build more partnerships and expand rental property acquisitions.

At ASU, he affirmed core principles: Know the customer. Provide exceptional value. Be a one-stop shop. Commit to the long run. Do what you say you’re going to do.

At [Barrett, The Honors College](#) at ASU, in which Collopy was a scholar, he “could really feel the difference in how much I was learning, how difficult the courses were and how seriously students took things,” Collopy says.

While there, Amy Ostrom, then an ASU assistant professor of marketing, guided him to build a business “from the perspective of what the client sees in front of them”; still invaluable to him today.

His graduate thesis was a guide on how to sell a book to the public. Collopy wrote a novel titled “The Phoenix Cycle” and then devised a plan to market it. Part of that plan was building a website, learning photography and video production, establishing a social media presence and identifying influencers.

He says that this too gave him “the basis of what I needed to do when I got out of college.”

*Author bio: Dave Perry is the former president of the Greater Oro Valley Chamber of Commerce.*

*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Jackie Vasquez-Lapan and her husband, Dave, founded the Lapan Sunshine Foundation, giving underserved students in the Wakefield community of south Tucson the opportunity to overcome challenging circumstances. Photo by Sabira Madady

**Text image(s)**





Former Lapan Sunshine Foundation student and ASU alumnus John Asigbekye supports students through a STEM scholarship. Courtesy photo



Gabriel Trujillo has earned five degrees from ASU, including a Doctor of Education in 2012. Photo by Sabira Madady



Bob Collopy, '14 BS in marketing, president of Fort Lowell Realty and Property Management.  
Photo by Sabira Madady