

The Big List

Meet 50 people shaping everyday life in the Coachella Valley.

STEVEN BILLER OCTOBER 7, 2019 ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT, CURRENT PSL, HEALTH & WELLNESS, LGBT

Also contributing to this story: Derrik J. Lang, Winston Gieseke, Miranda Caudell, Janice Kleinschmidt, Steve Siler, and Greg Archer.

What do you call the 50 people whose everyday work and decision-making impact your quality of life? *Palm Springs Life* editors grappled to answer this question, cringing at the hackneyed “influencers” and eschewing labels such as “powerful” and “elite.” But the 50 individuals we selected for what we call The Big List do, in fact, control different aspects of life in the Coachella Valley. Some of their decisions and actions have a seismic impact, while others persuade, educate, advocate, and otherwise support initiatives to serve the greater good.

We looked at critical components of desert life, from clean air and water and the environment to healthcare, education, and tourism, the lifeblood of our valley’s economy. We also considered personalities in business, transportation, preservation, arts and culture, and philanthropy as well as leadership in the Native American and LGBTQ communities.

Trimming the list to 50 personalities was no easy task, especially when we had to cut so many people we know and respect. But we had to draw the line somewhere. Among those we lopped off were elected officials and media personalities.

While you might be familiar with some of the people we’ve selected for this feature, others will be new. Regardless, they share the qualities we were looking for: They are influential and consequential — imagineers and decision-makers who love the Coachella Valley as much as we do.

SUSAN DAVIS

Founder and President | Desert X

The former public relations and communications professional launched a three-month-long exhibition of site-specific art across the Coachella Valley. Desert X

features top artists, such as Doug Aitken (*Mirage*, aka “the mirror house”) and Sterling Ruby (*Specter*), attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors, and establishes the region as a contemporary art destination. — *S.B.*

RON CELONA

Artistic Director | Coachella Valley Repertory Theatre

The winsome leader of the most successful (and only Equity) theater company in the Coachella Valley rallied the support of donors and Cathedral City government leaders to transform the former IMAX movie theater into a thriving new playhouse. Aside from the theater, CVRep has a conservancy employing 10 instructors and, unlike many other performance venues, stays open for the summer, offering jazz and classical music series and other productions. — *S.B.*

MICHAEL CHILDERS

Photographer and Producer

Best known for his celebrity photography (Palm Springs Art Museum recently exhibited his portraits of Andy Warhol), the quotable raconteur opens his golden Rolodex to call in stars of stage and screen to perform and support his favorite desert charities. It’s amazing how they always say yes. His annual One Night Only (April 22, 2020) at McCallum Theatre, for example, benefits the Barbara Sinatra Center for Abused Children. — *S.B.*

LOUIS GRACHOS

CEO and Executive Director | Palm Springs Art Museum

Five months into his tenure, Grachos — previously the director of the Contemporary Austin in Texas — is laser-focused on growing the membership, endowment, and collection at the desert’s largest cultural institution while also putting his mark on the exhibition, education, and outreach programs. — *S.B.*

JAMIE KABLER

Founder | Rancho Mirage Writers Festival

Kabler founded the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival in 2014, calling it “Coachella for the brain.” The always sold-out literary event presents an A-list lineup of *New York Times* best-selling authors, MacArthur Fellows, and winners of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book, Tony, and Academy Awards. — *S.B.*

PHILLIP K. SMITH III

Artist

The Palm Desert-based artist’s massive and immersive installations for the Coachella

Valley Music and Arts Festival and Desert X — with their colorful LEDs and reflective mirrors — draw the eyes of the world to the Coachella Valley. — S.B.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PHILLIP K. SMITH III

TRACY DIETLIN

Founder | CV Music Awards

The undisputed champion of the local musician promotes and celebrates the desert scene through her publication, CV Weekly, and the CV Music Awards, which she launched to honor talent in 45 categories.— S.B.

PETER MORUZZI

Founder | Palm Springs Modern Committee

The architectural historian and author (*Palm Springs Holiday, Palm Springs Paradise*) works behind the scenes with city leaders on issues of preservation. He was a key figure in the saving of Kaptur Plaza and remains vocal about the restoration of downtown's Town & Country Center. — S.B.

YAYA ORTIZ AND RUBEN GONZALEZ

Co-founders | Culturas Music & Arts

This duo formed Culturas with friends, enlisted local artists to create a spectacular 1,000-foot mural depicting the history and struggles of the Mexican community in Coachella, and launched the Synergy Music & Arts Festival (Nov. 9), now in its eighth year. They also plan to open an arts center in the city's historic downtown. — S.B.

PAUL TOLLETT

President and CEO | Goldenvoice

The soft-spoken maestro of the Coachella Music and Arts Festival and its country

music sibling Stagecoach not only reshaped the modern music fest, he spotted the importance of such acts as the Killers and Diplo long before they were headlining arenas or booking Vegas residencies. Each spring, his events draw almost a quarter-million people to the desert, creating an economic impact of more than \$494 million. Goldenvoice also helps support other local events, including Splash House and Modernism Week. — *D.J.L.*

TRACY CONRAD

Chief Operating Officer | Smoke Tree Ranch

A former emergency room physician, Conrad converted a 1920s Mediterranean-style mansion into The Willows, an eight-bedroom hotel; landed a top executive position at the historic Smoke Tree Ranch; and emerged as a champion of preservation in Palm Springs — a go-to resource and reliable consultant and adviser. She’s also a founder of the Aluminaire Foundation’s California chapter, formed to preserve and permanently relocate architect Albert Frey’s aluminum-clad Aluminaire House — produced in 1931 with the Architectural League of New York for the annual Exposition of Architecture and Allied Arts in New York — to Palm Springs. — *S.B.*

GARY JOHNS

President | Palm Springs Preservation Foundation

Known for his annual Modernism Week lecture, “Lost, Saved & Endangered: Modernist Architecture in Palm Springs,” this passionate volunteer presides over the foundation charged with identifying, researching, and writing nominations to preserve historic residential and commercial structures. — *S.B.*

ANDREA ZITTEL

Artist

Based at A–Z West — the Joshua Tree property that encompasses her home, studio, and semi-public art installation, Planar Pavilions — the artist (and co-organizer of High Desert Test Sites) garners international acclaim for her architecture- and design-inspired experiments in living that assert freedom through structure. — *S.B.*

LGBTQ

MIKE THOMPSON

CEO | The Center

In five years at the helm, Thompson has transformed the Palm Springs–based LGBTQ community center’s organizational structure, staff, and array of educational, social, and support programs aimed at everyone from youth to seniors, from Palm Springs to the eastern Coachella Valley. The Center moved from a tiny second-floor strip-mall

office to a continually expanding multilevel facility worthy of increased foot traffic. “This year, we had more than 70,000 visits,” he says. “When I started, the number of visits was at 13,000.”



But it’s not only the space that has increased — so has the type of outreach, even if the mission remains the same. “Our No. 1 strategic initiative is ending isolation and loneliness,” Thompson says, quickly acknowledging that not every group has the same needs. In Palm Springs, the majority of The Center’s work is with the 50-plus crowd, and it hosts programs such as bereavement and long-term survivors therapy. In the East Valley, participation skews much younger. And when that area was seeking resources for LGBTQ people, The Center partnered with Building Healthy Communities, a California Endowment program now known as Alianza, and went in to listen. “We’re now working with young Spanish-speaking, queer-identifying kids and continuing to find ways to engage with them in their community,” Thompson says, adding that one of their accomplishments was establishing the East Coachella Valley Pride festival. (The third annual event takes place Oct. 26.)

Thompson has also built a robust board and a staff of 20 professionals to serve more than 68,000 residents with programs that connect people to community and resources such as its Community Food Bank. — *W.G.*

ALEXIS ORTEGA

Director of Community Engagement | The Center

“Growing up, there were a lot of things about me that made me feel like I didn’t fit into spaces,” says Alexis Ortega, director of community engagement at the LGBTQ Community Center of the Desert. With her father born and raised in Mexico and her mother a third-generation Mexican-American, Ortega often wondered if she was Latina enough. She was a tomboy who couldn’t relate to the other girls who wanted quinceañeras. And she identified as queer.

It wasn't until college that she discovered what it was like to be part of a queer community, and after graduating from Stanford University with a degree in economics, she returned to her hometown of Palm Springs desperate to hold on to that feeling and to reignite her passion for LGBTQ causes.

Yet again, she found herself asking, "Where's the space for me?"

It's a question that may elicit surprise, considering Palm Springs' reputation as a "gay mecca," but Ortega is quick to counter the cute moniker, saying, "It's that for a certain type of person." And to some degree, she's right. The city is one of the most LGBTQ-friendly places on the map — mostly for those who are older, white, and male, a far cry from the rest of the region's demographics. Consider the 9,000 people who call the actual town of Mecca, approximately 40 miles east of downtown Palm Springs, home, or the 45,000 residents of the city of Coachella, approximately 96 percent of whom are Hispanic.

Much of Ortega's outreach concentrates on the East Valley, where acceptance for gender expression has been slower to take root. She engages folks who are part of the queer community but who maybe don't have the support — or the space — they need. More than anything, she listens.



Alexis Ortega focuses much of her work in the East Valley.

“We aren’t going into these places and creating something,” she says. “We’re trying to lift up the work and the community that’s already there,” whether its establishing a network of support and communication for teens or partnering with groups to organize events, such as the East Coachella Valley Pride festival (Oct. 26) at Coachella’s Veterans Memorial Park. The event features speakers, bands, and educational resources. It’s the epitome of progress for a city that, four or five years ago, might have only dreamed of having its own pride parade — about the same amount of time that has passed since the death of 20-year-old Juan Ceballos of Mecca, Ortega adds. Ceballos, who friends say had openly discussed his sexual orientation, was gunned down outside his home in 2014 in what many consider a hate crime. Now, that same small, tight-knit community has hosted a drag queen game night. Again, progress.

As humble as she is heartfelt, Ortega insists on sharing her spot on this list with the countless others who have made this growth and acceptance possible, such as The Center’s CEO, Mike Thompson, and the youth themselves, stressing the importance of collaboration and partnership. Still, she shines as a catalyst for change, inspiring and empowering other young people who self-identify as queer to feel pride of person and pride of place — to know that they can find a gay mecca right in their own backyards.

“For me, pride, specifically pride of place, means having an understanding of and celebrating the differences between each of the communities and respecting those,” she says. “And it also means having real conversations about what equity looks like and why some communities have been consistently ignored. I love being from the Coachella Valley, and I want to make it a place where everyone who lives here feels valued.” — *M.C.*

EDUCATION

DAVID VOGEL

Founder | DIGICOM

The former president of Disney’s Buena Vista Motion Pictures Group has transformed digital media education in the Coachella Valley, creating DIGICOM to teach students how to make short storytelling videos about their lives and, in the process, hone their creativity as well as their critical thinking and communication skills. The students’ training culminates in the DIGICOM Film Festival, which screens annually to a full house at the Richards Center for the Performing Arts at Palm Springs High School. Vogel is now working with College of the Desert to establish the Regional Center for

Digital Media Education at the forthcoming West Valley campus in Palm Springs, creating a career pathway for students and a skilled workforce for the region. — *S.B.*



Illustration: Stuart Funk

JOEL KINNAMON

Superintendent and President | College of the Desert

Presiding over dramatic expansion of East and West Valley campuses, Kinnamon tunes the community college's academic programs to create a pool of talent to fill current and future jobs in critical areas of the Coachella Valley economy, such as healthcare, sustainable technologies, digital media, culinary arts, and hospitality. — *S.B.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY ETHAN KAMINSKY

JAKE ZHU

Dean | CSUSB Palm Desert

In his position since July, the dean of California State University, San Bernardino's Palm Desert campus will be pivotal in creating a educated workforce to attract businesses and high-skill jobs and finally achieve a year-round economy for the region. Zhu, a professor of information and decision sciences with a particular interest in cybersecurity, has held many leadership positions at CSUSB since his tenure began in 2002. — *S.B.*

PHILANTHROPY

HELENE GALEN

Philanthropist

The namesake of Palm Springs Art Museum's Palm Desert outpost and the performing arts center at Rancho Mirage High School has been a philanthropic force in the Coachella Valley for 30 years. Of the many charities she supports, her favorites are Barbara Sinatra Center for Abused Children, Eisenhower Health, Jewish Federation of the Desert, McCallum Theatre, Desert AIDS Project, and the Palm Springs International Film Festival. — *S.B.*



HAROLD MATZNER

Philanthropist

The desert's top cultural institutions — Palm Springs International Film Festival,

McCallum Theatre (he's chairman of both), and Palm Springs Art Museum — count on Matzner's contributions of wisdom and donations (more than \$60 million to Coachella Valley charities over the past 30 years). He understands nonprofits, has the vision and clarity to advance their missions, and, as a natural-born salesman, knows how to attract other donors and valuable publicity. — *S.B.*

BARRY MANILOW

Musician and Philanthropist

Everyone knows he writes the songs that make the whole world sing, but Manilow is also a tireless philanthropist who regularly gives back to Greater Palm Springs, a community the Brooklyn-born singer-songwriter has called home for more than 20 years.

The 76-year-old hitmaker hosts sold-out benefit concerts at the McCallum Theatre and other venues, raising millions of dollars for charities such as the Boys & Girls Club of Coachella Valley, Desert Cancer Foundation, United Cerebral Palsy of the Inland Empire, and Desert AIDS Project.



The Emmy, Tony, and Grammy winner also founded the Manilow Fund for Health and Hope, a nonprofit supporting local organizations that focus on cancer, AIDS, children's issues, abuse victims, and homelessness. And his Manilow Music Project has provided more than \$10 million in instruments and funds to hundreds of schools.

“It feels great to do something that's helpful in the world of music for young kids because music can change kids' lives,” he recently told *Palm Springs Life*. “It sure did mine. Listen, in the slums of Brooklyn where I grew up, it was a choice of a gang or the orchestra, and because I was a skinny malink who couldn't fight my way out of a laundry bag, I joined the orchestra.” — *D.J.L.*

DONNA MACMILLAN

Philanthropist

The former chairwoman of Palm Springs Art Museum’s board of trustees and her late husband, Cargill, transformed the institution’s permanent collection with a gift of more than 100 contemporary works by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Andy Warhol, Anish Kapoor, Ellsworth Kelly, and Roy Lichtenstein — and she keeps on giving. MacMillan also sits on the boards of College of the Desert Foundation, McCallum Theatre, and Palm Springs International Film Festival and donates to many other charities. — *S.B.*

BUSINESS

TODD BLUE

Chairman and Dealer Principal | indiGO Auto Group

You get the feeling you’re being watched at the home of Todd Blue, not by security cameras or even other people, but by 18 of the former real estate developer’s rare and historic Porsche sports cars, each parked facing inward with its shapely tush to the wall and signature big round eyes — er, headlamps — pointed toward visitors to his open structure that could easily fit a single-family home (or two).



Todd Blue’s indiGO Auto Group makes a big economic impact.

Creepy? Hardly. To the founder and CEO of indiGO Auto Group, it’s 7,000 square feet of pure heaven — a treat to stare into those 36 “eyes.” The Porsches themselves were as varied as they were beautiful, running the gamut from vintage greats like his 1954 356 Speedster and early 911 Turbo to late-model legends-to-be like his brand-new 911R. Porsche’s latest hypercars — the Carrera GT and a 918 Spyder — were present and accounted for, looking every bit the million-dollar masterpieces they are, while outside the door was one of fewer than 350 Porsche 959s ever built, none of which could be legally imported to the United States until a 2001 “Show and Display” law opened the door to them. Blue owns two of them, with this one being the

beneficiary of a recently developed \$2 million “Canepa” performance upgrade package that nearly doubles the 959’s power output. Oh, and every one of these sensuous and sculptural speed machines was rendered in a fetching shade of blue.

Of course, that’s his name. So, too, have Blue’s businesses been azure-themed, at least in name, including Cobalt Ventures LLC, a real estate and financial services enterprise he co-founded in 1998, and indiGO Auto Group, a collection of new and classic car franchises Blue created in Houston in 2010, with 14 franchises in greater Houston, St. Louis, Missouri, and the Coachella Valley, where it represents Aston Martin, Audi, Bentley, BMW, Jaguar, Maserati, Lamborghini, Land Rover, McLaren, Porsche, and Rolls-Royce.

While Blue’s favorite color may surprise no one, his ascent to prominence among automotive retailers during the last nine years has been remarkable. Like most enthusiasts, Blue had loved cars since he was in pre-school, but he never considered dealing in them as he graduated from George Washington University in 1992 or during most of the next 15 years that followed. During that time, Blue enjoyed success in financial services and real estate, as well as in his Kentucky-based family’s steel business. Only after profiting from restoring and selling a classic Maserati did he consider becoming an automobile dealer, albeit a vintage automobile dealer — and in 2006, indiGO Classic Cars was born.

“Let’s be absolutely clear,” Blue says. “That was definitely a business to justify my desire to collect in the beginning. I would buy postwar European sports cars and sell them and kind of say, ‘That’s a business.’ I kept doing other things like real estate because I couldn’t feed my kids like that, but that’s how I got started.”

In 2009, amid the economic recession, the opportunity arose to purchase the Houston, Texas-area Porsche dealership, and despite knowing little about the inner workings of a new-car dealership, Blue took control of Porsche North Houston, which he combined with indiGO Classic Cars to form indiGO Auto Group.

“At first, I had no idea how [to be a car dealer],” he says. “I immediately recognized I needed to get good people around me. That was job one.”

Just as helpful, Blue adds, is that as an outsider, he had no bad habits or staid sales practices to unlearn. “It was the perfect way to learn. I sat across from salespeople and service people and learned the car business.”

What he did know was how to be his customer. As someone who had bought numerous luxury-brand automobiles and lived the lifestyle from childhood, he knew

what his customers were looking for in a car-buying experience. “One of the reasons why I think we are so successful is credibility. I was my customer, genuinely, legitimately.”

And he hasn't been afraid to invest. Blue moved his 13,000-square-foot Houston dealership into a state-of-the-art, 60,000-square-foot facility; acquired and revamped a nearby Lamborghini franchise; and acquired and consolidated two St. Louis–area Porsche dealerships into one similarly spiffy new facility of their own.

But when Blue stumbled onto Desert European Motorcars in Rancho Mirage while exploring prospects in Southern California, a business mentor helped him recognize the unique opportunity, which led him to become the owner of the multi-franchise business in 2013.

“He told me, ‘You need to understand the desert. You need to understand how much people love to celebrate their success out there. They're different, quite frankly, than even other communities in this kind of region. People are proud of their hard work and they want to celebrate it.’

“And this is true whether they have a steel service center in Detroit or a dog food company in Missouri or something else in Seattle,” Blue says. “When they go to their second or third home in the desert, having gotten out of, say, a Tahoe in Detroit, they get to drive their Porsche, Rolls-Royce, BMW, Bentley, or Lamborghini.

“I also think the desert is a unique place for the car business and for the celebration of the automobile for other reasons: People are in a more relaxed state of mind, whether they have played golf that morning or bridge or worked out or had lunch. When they come to shop for a car in the desert they are truly in a different mindset. Calm. Enjoying the experience. It's everything you [as a dealer] want. And overall, it truly is a great lifestyle in this area for car culture. You don't have to deal with the hustle and bustle of big cities yet you have access to great opportunities very close by.”

All of this makes doing business here different than in his other markets. “We aren't just selling transportation; we're selling dreams. We're selling a celebration.” And this mantra applies to a \$29,000 Audi as much as a half-million-dollar Rolls-Royce, he says. “We're not trying to win sales championships or anything but to create that excitement.”

But sales have increased — a lot. Since indiGO acquired its first Porsche store in Houston, sales have rocketed from 180 cars in 2010 to almost 4,000 vehicles, comprising well over \$750 million in revenue, in 2018. The company's footprint has

expanded in the Coachella Valley with a newly constructed Jaguar/Land Rover dealership in Rancho Mirage, ongoing renovations of its other prestige brand facilities there, and, significantly, construction of the world's first "Destination Porsche" dealership on South Palm Canyon Drive that Blue worked closely with Porsche executives in Stuttgart, Germany, to design and build as a stylistic model for other Porsche dealerships worldwide.

In so doing, Blue has contributed massively to the local economy, employing 317 full-time and five part-time personnel, according to the company.

Besides being among the largest contributors to the Rancho Mirage tax base, indiGO has spent more than \$30 million in construction projects alone since 2016 and has another \$10 million of projects on the way after the company's dedicated service facility breaks ground near Audi Rancho Mirage. IndiGO also moved its annual Drive for Kids fundraiser from Houston to the Coachella Valley, which has brought tens of thousands of dollars to local youth charities over the past few years — including the Barbara Sinatra Center for Abused Children and the Ray of Hope Retreat.

Blue also serves on several advisory boards, and last January, the Rancho Mirage Chamber of Commerce nominated indiGO for the Large Business of the Year Award while recognizing Blue with its top honor: 2018 Business Person of the Year.

For all his success and status, Blue projects surprisingly little ego. Enthusiastic without being loud, proud of his achievements without being boastful, Blue's down-to-earth countenance was summed up perfectly when, after all we had discussed, I casually praised some members of the Porsche Palm Springs sales staff whom I met when I stopped by unannounced and asked for a tour of the beautiful new building on a weekend morning. "Oh, thank you for that," he beams. "It makes me so happy when I get compliments for my team. We really are a family. That's the greatest compliment I could ever get." — *S.S.*

TRINA TURK

Owner and Designer | Trina Turk

Palm Springs' optimistic spirit inspired the designer's bright, bold fashions, available at Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom, Macy's, and her popular Trina Turk boutiques in Palm Springs and Palm Desert. Sure, her fall line nods to the rolling hills of Northern California wine country, but you need only attend events like Modernism Week or Fashion Week El Paseo to see her heart is in the desert. — *S.B.*



Illustration: Stuart Funk

JOHN POWELL JR.

CEO | Peter Rabbit Farms

In fall 2018, voters elected the farmer to his third term as president of the Coachella Valley Water District board of directors. His tenure gives local farmers control of three of the board's five seats, ensuring the needs of East Valley agricultural customers remain a priority for the district. — *G.A.*

MICHAEL BRAUN

President | Grit Development

Love it. Hate it. There's no denying the impact that Braun's had — and will continue to have — on downtown Palm Springs (and other parts of the Coachella Valley, too). With his Grit-led redevelopment, The Kimpton Rowan Palm Springs added more than 150 rooms and the first rooftop pool to the area, while his retail cropping introduced big-name brands, such as Sephora, Kiehl's, and West Elm. — *D.J.L.*

DENISE WILSON

Founder and President | Desert Jet

The pilot-turned-executive presides over the Coachella Valley's first and only fixed-base operator offering aircraft management, maintenance, and charter service. Her company's new 32,000-square-foot Desert Jet Center — with a state-of-the-art terminal and hangar facility — has transformed Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport in Thermal. — *S.B.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY ETHAN KAMINSKY

ENVIRONMENT

JIM BARRETT

General Manager | Coachella Valley Water District

Jim Barrett exudes an air of grace while talking about the seven water-related services that the Coachella Valley Water District offers to support the economy and safeguard public health: Sanitation, recycled water, irrigation water, agriculture drainage, groundwater replenishment, storm water flood control, and water conservation all fall under his domain as the district's general manager.

“Our mission is to provide sustainable water services,” says Barrett, who has served in the position since 2013 (after working as assistant general manager since 2010). “From a governing standpoint, CVWD has been very forthcoming trying to forecast and accommodate the needs of the region.”

Those needs are vast, and Barrett's role is significant.

As a public agency, CVWD relies on ratepayers who purchase services to govern policy creation and enforcement. The ratepayers are eligible to vote for the board of directors, of which there are five. “The board of directors sets the policy — my job is to implement that policy — to work with our staff to accomplish what the board sees the need to be done. The cities and counties define what they want to see. Our job as a public utility is to find a way to support that, not to define it or restrict it.”

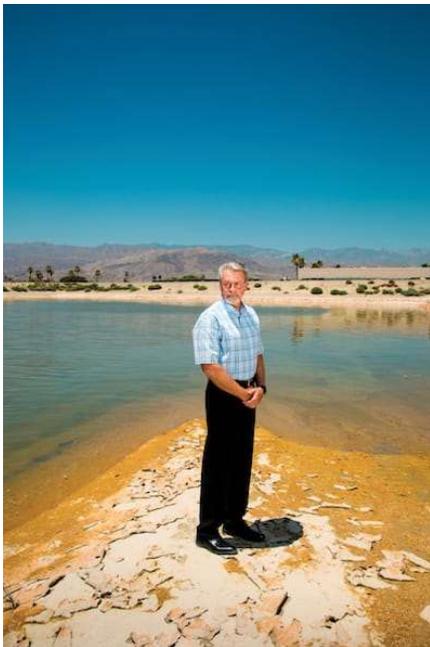
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to implement that policy — to work with our staff to accomplish what the board sees the need to be done. The cities and counties define what they want to see. Our job as a public utility is to find a way to support that, not to define it or restrict it.”

The district has 560 employees and an annual budget of \$393 million to ensure clean and safe drinking water for Riverside, Imperial, and San Diego counties.

CVWD began more than 100 years ago as an irrigation district to serve agriculture. When the community recognized that all of the water was coming out of the ground, the district, needing a source to replenish it, collaborated with the federal government to obtain rights to the Colorado River.

When the district got into the drinking water business in the early 1960s it faced many challenges, one of which was managing how agriculture and other factors, such as residential and commercial developments and golf courses, affect water supply. “Our desire [with] source substitution is to try to leave that better-quality water that gets pumped out of the ground for drinking purposes and find other ways to meet irrigation needs,” Barrett says, citing the Mid-Valley Pipeline, which blends treated wastewater with Colorado River water so that it can be delivered to golf courses, thereby avoiding the use of groundwater.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL LEWIS

Clean drinking water is always a top priority for Jim Barrett.

Ensuring clean drinking water will always be a key issue. CVWD’s state-certified laboratory tests for approximately 100 different constituents or substances on a regular basis, analyzing more than 20,000 water samples annually.

Barrett is also interested in helping disadvantaged communities in the East Valley. “The challenge we face is that we cannot use current ratepayer money to extend our system to new users,” he says. “We have been working with the state and federal government to get loans and grants, primarily grants, to find a solution to get better water quality and waste water collection to those mostly mobile home parks in East Valley.

“We also have worked with Indio Water Authority and Coachella Valley Municipal Water District to look at the two major basins we have in the region,” Barrett says. “We submitted plans to the state two years ago and found out this summer that they were accepted by the state.”

On some level, the state’s endorsement extends to Barrett himself, an acknowledgement that he has been the right decision to serve the people and businesses of the Coachella Valley. — *G.A.*

PHIL ROSENTRATER

Executive Director | Salton Sea Authority

The rising salinity and lowering elevation of the Salton Sea threatens human health, the ecosystem, and the economy of the Coachella Valley and beyond. The Riverside County economic development executive manages the joint powers authority — consisting of two counties, a water district, and a tribal government — that’s charged with restoring wetlands, reducing dust, and managing agricultural runoff to curb economic loss (property values) and improve conditions for recreation and investment. — *S.B.*



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SALTON SEA AUTHORITY

WAYNE NASTRI

Executive Officer | South Coast Air Quality Management District

A champion in the war on smog, Nastri oversees the development and implementation of strategies to manage Southern California's air quality, including an award-winning mobile app (aqmd.gov/mobileapp) to monitor air quality for more than 17 million residents in Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties, with interactive air quality maps, health alerts, and an 800 number to report air quality issues. — *G.A.*

DOUG HERREMA

Field Manager | Bureau of Land Management

A veteran BLM program analyst and manager, Herrema leads the Palm Springs–South Coast Field Office, which oversees almost 2 million acres of public lands in Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties — including the desert's Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains and Sand to Snow national monuments, which offer recreational opportunities for the public and diverse landscapes for plants and wildlife. — *S.B.*

MARK KRAUSE

General Manager | Desert Water Agency

The engineer's analytical and planning finesse streamline the agency's management of groundwater, drinking water, recycled water, and water conservation in Palm Springs and Cathedral City. A key player in the integration of regional water management planning that led to almost \$20 million in grant funding that local water agencies can access, he also oversaw the introduction of electronic meters and online tracking to allow customers to directly manage and conserve water. — *G.A.*

JIM DEFORGE

Executive Director | Bighorn Institute

The research biologist leads the organization that studies and promotes the judicious management of the desert's endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep, whose population has declined over the years due to disease, predation, habitat loss, and human disturbance. — *S.B.*



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BIGHORN INSTITUTE

NATIVE AMERICAN

JEFF GRUBBE

Chairman | Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians

For the last seven years, Grubbe has overseen the business and government affairs of the 500-member federally recognized Native American tribe, which employs more than 2,300 people in the Coachella Valley through various gaming and recreational enterprises. Several new projects slated for 2020 and 2021, including a cultural museum and spa, a 10,000-seat sporting and entertainment arena, and a third casino, are expected to bring thousands of jobs to the region. — *M.C.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY ETHAN KAMINSKY

THOMAS TORTEZ

Chairman | Torres-Martinez Band of Cahuilla Indians

The chairman of a sovereign Indian nation with 24,000 acres of reservation land on the eastern edge of the Coachella Valley, some of which borders the Salton Sea, also serves as a board member on the Salton Sea Authority and has been instrumental in efforts to restore the area's ecosystem, specifically through the tribe's wetland pilot project and partnerships with the SSA and the state of California. If left in its current state of decline, the sea could ultimately lead to widespread ecological and human health disasters. — *M.C.*

SPORTS

LARRY ELLISON

Owner | Indian Wells Tennis Garden and BNP Paribas Open

A decade ago, the billionaire tech mogul and die-hard tennis aficionado snapped up the Indian Wells Tennis Garden and BNP Paribas Open for \$100 million. In that time, Ellison, who lives part time at his 246-acre Porcupine Creek estate in Rancho Mirage, transformed the once-boutique venue and competition into a state-of-the-art extravaganza and can't-miss event rivaling the world's best stadiums and tournaments.



The real-life Tony Stark's entrepreneurial attention to detail has reshaped almost every nook and cranny of the venue — from introducing a high-tech multi-angle instant replay system on every court to adding a second, 8,000-seat stadium. Under his direction, scheduled practice sessions were added where spectators could salivate over top players up close before their matches. It's now a staple of every major tennis tournament around the globe.

The effect of Ellison's sporty endeavor goes beyond the baseline. The tournament attracts more than 400,000 fans to the Coachella Valley and has a \$466 million impact on the economy, according to a George Washington University study. Oh, and did we mention how much better the food is now at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden? — *D.J.L.*

ALEX HAAGEN

Owner | Empire Polo Club

Coachella. Stagecoach. Desert Trip. Rhythm, Wine & Brews. None of these events would have a home in Indio if it weren't for this savvy real estate developer, who built the 78-acre venue more than 20 years ago and cultivated relationships with top event producers. When his property isn't graced with the presence of the Rolling Stones or Beyoncé, it does actually host polo matches ... and lots and lots of weddings. — *D.J.L.*

HEALTH AND MEDICINE

MICHELLE FINNEY

CEO | Tenet Healthcare–Southern California Group

The first Tenet executive to oversee all three of its desert hospitals (Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs, John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Indio, and the Hi-Desert Medical Center in Joshua Tree), Finney works to better coordinate services between the institutions, address long-standing staff concerns, and boost low ratings — for which she was honored with this year's Desert Visionary Award from the Women Leaders Forum of the Coachella Valley. — *W.G.*

ANN MOSTOFI

Vice President, Patient Care Services | Eisenhower Health

The Eisenhower Health executive emerged as a leader for her advocacy for recruiting top medical and nonmedical talent to the hospital and its off-campus care centers — especially in nursing, her own field, which she has said is as much a calling as it is a career. She's often responsible for hiring the professionals who provide Eisenhower's care and support. — *S.B.*

DAVID BRINKMAN

President and CEO | Desert AIDS Project

Can you imagine a world without AIDS? Brinkman has devoted his life to making that happen. His organization is one of the top nonprofit groups in Greater Palm Springs, providing care to more than 4,000 clients. DAP is also in the midst of a \$20 million expansion, transforming a former county-run health clinic into a next-

generation facility that will offer medical, dental, and mental health services, as well as affordable housing. It's set to open in 2020. — *D.J.L.*

CONRADO BÁRZAGA

CEO | Desert Healthcare District

A Cuba native who relocated to the desert after leading the Center for Oral Health in Pomona for seven years, Barzaga brings a data-driven and empathic approach to a healthcare district that's growing its service area as well as access to primary and behavioral care and nutritious foods, and addressing homelessness. — *S.B.*

JENNA LECOMTE-HINELY

CEO | Health Assessment and Research for Communities

The leader of the nonprofit HARC oversees health and wellness research and analysis that affects healthcare programs and services in the Coachella Valley — including a comprehensive triennial local survey that the firm shares for free. Desert AIDS Project has used HARC data to mobilize a successful HIV-testing program, and Meals on Wheels refers to it when prioritizing services and securing funding. — *S.B.*

G. AUBREY SERFLING

CEO and President | Eisenhower Health

In almost 20 years in charge at the nonprofit hospital, Serfling has raised the level of care by introducing an organization-wide Performance Excellence program based on the Disney Institute's model for superior customer service and consistently garnering national recognition for clinical and service excellence, including being named one of the country's top 100 hospitals for its quality of care, operational efficacy, and financial performance. Serfling has recently signed agreements with UC Riverside's School of Medicine and UC San Diego Health to jointly train students and bring more opportunities for clinical trials and treatments to the Coachella Valley, respectively. — *S.B.*



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF EISENHOWER HEALTH

TOURISM

AFTAB DADA

General Manager | Hilton Palm Springs

After living more than 31 years in the Coachella Valley, Aftab Dada has earned a reputation as a leader and influencer in the world of tourism and is credited with having a major hand in reviving Greater Palm Springs visitation following a slump in the late 1980s.

In addition to his work as chairman of P.S. Resorts — an organization that creates and supports events, attractions, and activities that will appeal to visitors — Dada is treasurer of the Greater Palm Springs Convention & Visitors Bureau, a position he relishes with an association he deeply respects. “[The CVB] does a phenomenal job,” he says. “For the past nine years since we’ve had the president, Scott White, every program is done with research behind it.”

Dada and P.S. Resorts brought *Forever Marilyn*, a three-story-tall sculpture by artist Seward Johnson, to Palm Springs in 2012, an installation Dada calls “huge” for local tourism. (For those who ask, “Will she return?” Dada says, “Yes! We have agreed to a price, and we are exploring locations.”) The organization also supports Splash House and its partnership with Goldenvoice.



Aftab Dada wields great influence in local tourism.

For his efforts to boost Palm Springs tourism, Dada has won numerous accolades, including 2011 Businessman of the Year from the Palm Springs Chamber of

Commerce and the 365th star on the Palm Springs Walk of Stars, which he received in 2014.

A modest individual, Dada acknowledges that much progress has been made in local tourism since his arrival, saying, “It used to be scary in the early ’90s, even during the seasonal months, Sunday through Thursday. You could shoot a cannon, and [you] wouldn’t hit anyone.” Now, says Dada, who was a proponent of the \$40 million expansion of the Palm Springs Convention Center as well as the passage of a local tax to help fund the redevelopment of downtown, “We definitely feel this is a destination where you can come and get guaranteed 360 days of sunshine. You can literally come in and, if you are in downtown Palm Springs, you can park your car at one of the resorts, and you don’t have to get back in until you leave town.” — *W.G.*

SCOTT WHITE

President and CEO | Greater Palm Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau

White did the impossible, uniting nine Coachella Valley cities — each with its own history, character, population, and vibe — under one brand: Greater Palm Springs. And that was only the beginning, the foundation on which White has transformed destination marketing for the desert’s resort communities. With the financial and governance support of top hotel and attraction operators, as well as city leaders, White has put forward a Destination Development Plan that will boost the \$7 billion economic impact of tourism, the region’s No. 1 industry, which generates almost \$600 million in local and state taxes and \$450 million in federal taxes, easing the burden on local residents.

The plan asserts a strategy to increase annual visitation from 12.8 million to 16.8 million by 2025 and add air service to Palm Springs International Airport. The robustly staffed CVB also runs a Certified Tourism Ambassador program, supports business attraction initiatives and higher education programs in hospitality, and manages the annual Restaurant Week, in addition to its convention sales and visitor services. — *S.B.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY ETHAN KAMINSKY

NANCY NICHOLS

General Manager | Palm Springs Aerial Tramway

With its isolation thousands of feet above the desert floor, wastewater treatment plants, state public agency oversight, and footprint in global tourism, Palm Springs Aerial Tramway — arguably the desert’s most dramatic and distinctive attraction — could be thought of as a village of its own making. Nichols eschews the limelight, but she’s the one guiding smooth operations and overcoming challenges such as February’s unleashed storm washing out the attraction’s only access road. — *J.K.*

TRANSPORTATION

LAUREN SVIKER

CEO and General Manager | SunLine Transit Agency

While we all need to do whatever is within our ability to address climate change, Skiver’s responsibility requires much more than an eco-conscious lifestyle.

“Without the efforts of SunLine and other alternative fuel-friendly public transit agencies, the world would be a very different place,” she asserts. “As passenger cars contribute to the majority of the 5.8 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide dumped into the atmosphere each year, the need for environmentally clean public transit is crucial to our future.”

In 2002, SunLine became the nation’s first transit agency to put a hybrid fuel cell bus into passenger service and collaborated with the Department of Energy in evaluating the prototype.

SunLine began in 1977 with a fleet of 22 used diesel buses. Its current fleet includes 16 hydrogen-electric fuel cell buses (two more are in production), four all-electric buses, and 61 renewable natural gas buses. The goal is to reach a 100 percent zero-emission fleet by 2040.

Local ridership of 4.5 million people a year equates to a savings of almost 900,000 gallons of gas and 8 million kilograms of carbon dioxide.

“We continue to pioneer the zero-emission, heavy-duty vehicle space,” says Skiver, who has spent two decades in the transit industry, served eight years in the U.S. Army specializing in military intelligence, and has been in her current position since 2013. “We are constructing the largest hydrogen electrolyzer for transportation in the United States. Our hydrogen program is globally recognized, and we often get visitors from around the world to learn more about our successes.”

In 2016, the Federal Transit Administration awarded SunLine \$1.5 million to build the country's first maintenance bay designed from the ground up to support its zero-emission buses. This fall, the facility's Center of Excellence in Zero Emission Technology begins a curriculum to educate other transit agencies and original-equipment manufacturers.



Lauren Skiver brings an entrepreneurial spirit to transportation.

Another focus, Skiver says, is reconfiguring the route system. SunLine expects to make an announcement this spring about a rideshare service to connect individuals in areas difficult to serve with a 40-foot bus.

The advent of autonomous buses won't be announced nearly so soon. "The technology requires time to develop for mass deployment," Skiver says. "As an agency that prides itself on staying focused on the future, we are open to this new platform when it becomes commercially ready for our valley."

If you listen to her, though, you'll believe SunLine will be at the forefront when that day arrives. "An entrepreneurial spirit was installed in this agency many years ago by its board, and that spirit remains a key principle in the ability to play a role in pushing clean-fuel technologies forward." — *J.K.*

TOM KIRK

CEO | Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG)

The former La Quinta city councilman and executive director of the Salton Sea Authority took the reigns at CVAG — a joint powers authority that includes local cities and tribes and oversees transportation planning, especially road construction and improvements — a decade ago. He became a hero and a villain with the authority's CV Link project, which he describes as "a revolutionary new concept in active and alternative transportation" — a dual pathway that connects most of the valley's cities and accommodates pedestrians, bicyclists, and low-speed electric vehicles, such as golf carts. The first segment of CV Link opened in Cathedral City in 2018. — *S.B.*