

## Event honors difference makers in disability community



### 2016 Disability Awards and Recognition Event

Award recipients pose with Mayor Greg Stanton at the disability awareness and recognition event on Thursday, Oct. 6, 2016. Emily Balli/The Republic

Six people and projects were honored by the city of Phoenix on Thursday for the difference they make in the disability community.

The Phoenix Mayor's Commission on Disability Issues held its 2016 Disability Awards and Recognition Event on Thursday afternoon at the Pueblo Grande Museum, 4619 E. Washington St. The awards have been given out each year since 1993.

Recipients are nominated by members of the community for excellence in accommodating and improving access for those with disabilities. This year, more than 30 people and organizations had been nominated, according to Christian Johnson, chair for the Mayor's Commission on Disability Issues.

Christopher Sign, anchor for ABC15 Arizona, introduced each award recipient and emphasized throughout the event the importance of inclusion in the community.

Also addressing the crowd, Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton said he appreciated the commission for its leadership and accessibility advocacy.

"We have come a long way — we're celebrating that here today — but we know we have a long way to go," Stanton said.

Melanie Isaacs accepted the Business Excellence Award – Non Profit for PAL Experiences. She and her husband, Adam, founded the non-profit that works to make venues more accessible for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

PAL Experiences works with facilities to create customized videos, maps, guides and other information so that people with disabilities can know what to expect before they arrive to a particular entertainment venue. Isaacs said [PAL Experiences](#) takes accessibility to the next level by going beyond physical accommodations, like wheelchair ramps.

"It's really inspiring that what we are chipping away at is getting noticed and making a difference," Isaacs said. "What really makes me excited is that the community, folks who are using our programs, spoke up and said that they liked it, and that's why we start each day with the goal of getting more venues accessible to everyone."

So far, PAL Experiences has created three permanent programs with the Arizona Diamondbacks, the Phoenix Suns and the Phoenix Children's Museum, and five pilot programs at other venues, including aquariums and zoos, Isaacs said.

Isaacs said she hopes to eventually have PAL Experience programs in everyday places, like grocery stores, the airport and at dentist offices.

Other winners:

- Lyle Steely accepted the Architectural Award for SmithGroup JJR and Mountain Park Health Center. The new health center was created with accessibility in mind at every step of the way, with wide hallways, automatic doors and larger medical examination rooms.

- The Business Excellence Award was given to Edward Kim, president and CEO of Cigna Medical Group. Kim and Cigna recently updated the accessibility icon on parking spots and signs at all of its clinics in the Maricopa County. This symbol illustrates a person in a wheelchair moving forward. In a video that played when Kim accepted the award, he said that the icon reflects how all people with disabilities can be active and engaged.
- Ron Brooks and Scott Smith accepted the Community Service Award on behalf of Valley Metro for their regional para-transit plan update. Valley Metro won the award for making Dial-a-Ride more accessible and inclusive by extending hours and allowing people to take one vehicle through different regions. Before, riders would have to switch vehicles from region-to-region, making it especially difficult for persons with disabilities to use the service.
- Jeanmarie Jacoby, a special education teacher at Sweetwater Elementary School in Glendale, won the Outstanding Educator Award, which is given to a teacher who provides "exceptional service and support to the access and functional needs community."
- The Walter Olsen Lifetime Achievement Award went to Norbert Senftleben, a retired Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport architect, for making accessibility improvements to the airport, including adult changing stations.