

## WHY EAST VALLEY ALUMNI ARE AT THE HEAD OF THE CLASS

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[Arizona State University](#), [Blog](#), [Education](#), [Higher Education](#), [PHXEastValley](#), [Startups](#)

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### *IT'S ARIZONA'S SECRET SAUCE*

## **Pop quiz. What drives competitive advantage, creates dynamic economies and builds success in the global marketplace?**

### **The answer? The very best talent.**

And the metro Phoenix East Valley region is leading the way, thanks to a broad range of incomparable education assets.

Consider this: The region is anchored by Arizona State University, a national leader in innovation and research, as well as one of the largest community college systems in the country and a host of private colleges and universities.

Meanwhile, Communiversities at Queen Creek offers degree programs from several colleges and universities all in one location. And the East Valley Institute of Technology stands as a national model for career and technical education.

With that as a backdrop, it's no surprise that the region boasts one of the largest skilled and diverse talent pools in the country. Here are four success stories at the head of the class. **im**

### **Taylor, President and CEO Ipro Tech.**

Kim Taylor likes to joke that he was on the “26-year plan” at [ASU](#). But the punchline is that as a young college kid, Taylor took an entrepreneurial itch and turned it into three successful tech businesses that ultimately garnered \$175 million of enterprise value creation. Along the way, he combined the “school of hard knocks” with a more formal education at ASU – thus the 26-year plan.

Today the tech entrepreneur, a member of the university's elite [Sun Devil 100 Class of 2017](#), is on an enviable and entirely different plan: growing [Ipro Tech](#), a global leader in eDiscovery technology.

Taylor relocated the company to Tempe, drawn by the proximity to ASU's talent pool and the concentration of East Valley tech companies. The city's central location, light rail, and value helped seal the deal.

Recently acquired, Ipro Tech is charting a course for expansion and Taylor will continue to rely on ASU for interns and new hires, as well as mentor up-and-comers at the university's [Startup Mill](#).

"The workforce is the hardest thing for companies today," Taylor said. "I need that strong, educated workforce that is hungry... The more I can pull from ASU, the better."

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### **Jennifer Duff, President Jef International Inc.**

Jennifer Duff's two career paths couldn't have gone in more opposite directions: fashion and bass fishing. One took her through the high-stakes fashion industry as a buyer; the other lured her to high-profile angling competitions and an international sport fishing business.

The common thread through both passions? [Mesa Community College](#).

"I attribute my success as an entrepreneur to having a well-rounded education that allowed me the flexibility to adapt my career to my interests, and sustain a business for over 27 years," said Duff, president of Mesa-based [Jef International Inc.](#)

Duff fell into bass fishing, first as a hobby and then a pro sport. After a stint competing in Japan, a new career surfaced. Today, Duff's sport fishing tackle and equipment company does business worldwide and is a market leader.

One of MCC's standouts, Duff is a member of the alumni [Hall of Fame](#). MCC itself is a powerhouse, serving 40,000 students annually and offering more than 200 certificate and degree programs.

Doing business amid a diverse talent pool is critical for Duff, who relies on bilingual employees with international cultural experiences.

"Diversity in every arena helps us adapt to a 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy and creatively solve problems of today and tomorrow," she said.

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*Ben Smith (right) and Congressman Tom O'Halleran (left)*

### **Ben Smith, EdTech entrepreneur and school board member**

As a young boy, Ben Smith got his hands on an old Commodore computer and dove into the world of programming. Next came tinkering with a PC. Soon he was ready for something more.

A high school sophomore, Smith decided to enroll in the then-fledgling [East Valley Institute of Technology](#).

By reaching beyond the standard classroom, he received invaluable hands-on experience. As important, Smith's instructor sang what is now EVIT's gospel: Hands-on experience can translate to employment in the real world.

After high school graduation Smith followed his entrepreneurial spirit into the world of tech and education. "EVIT gave me that confidence," he said.

Today, Mesa-based EVIT plays a critical role offering high schoolers more than 40 occupation-focused programs that help them earn industry credentials and college credit.

Smith set his sights on both career and higher education, attending MCC and earning a degree from ASU. Three years ago, he was also elected to the Mesa Public Schools Governing Board.

Smith's latest startup, the nonprofit Advanced Restoration Scholarships, aims to boost hands-on experiences through organizations like EVIT. Students will restore muscle cars and convert them into electric vehicles. Proceeds from car sales will support student scholarships.

For Smith, it's an opportunity for students to see how these experiences can carry them into the job world – just as he did decades ago.

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## Debra **May Himes, Owner and President Debra May Himes Interior Design & Associates**

After 40 years in the interior design field, Debra May Himes has celebrated her share of career highs, from creating her own furniture line to landing high-end projects to earning sought-after certifications.

NAU's Flagstaff campus, with its strong academics and mentoring, provided the stepping stones Himes needed at the start of her professional life. Now the university's extended campus at [Communiiversity at Queen Creek](#) offers those same stepping stones to students in the East Valley.

"NAU is the base for my success story," Himes said. "It gave me the foundation to go forward."

A longtime fixture in the East Valley, [Debra May Himes Interior Design & Associates](#) serves clients around the country.

Himes is a leader in the design community, serving as past president of the American Society of Interior Designers, Arizona North, and a LEED accredited professional with expertise in green

building. She is also the visionary behind the stunning Jonathan David furniture line that brings custom touches to her projects.

Beyond professional accomplishments, Himes is the recipient of NAU's [Dr. Cliff Harkins Distinguished Citizen Award](#) for serving the community. She is confident that the university's extended campus will provide the same launching pad that helped her career and community advocacy take off.

"At NAU, you're not just a number, you're a future leader," Himes said.