

VOLUNTEERS

# Legion members recognized for community efforts

By Marge Christianson  
SPECIAL TO THE INDEPENDENT

An effort to feed some of Phoenix's homeless population was a modest idea started by an El Mirage husband and wife Josephine and Oscar Herrera. That idea has since blossomed into a program that recently received national accolades.

In April 2015, the Herrereras were on their way to the Tony F. Soza/Ray Martinez American Legion Post in Phoenix when they spotted several men sitting in an open field under the hot sun. They later found out the city of Phoenix had just condemned a men's overflow homeless shelter downtown. As fate would have it, Mr. Herrera, a Vietnam Navy veteran, had just received some long-awaited positive health news and the couple felt that now was the time to help these men — some of whom were veterans.

Ms. Herrera, then president of the American Legion Auxiliary for Department of Arizona, knew where to go for help: the American Legion Auxiliary unit where she is a member. The unit members, including its junior members, began making and delivering sandwiches to the homeless men every Sunday.

"At the start, the Phoenix police helped us find a downtown location where we could set up to distribute the 100 sandwiches that we made at the Legion Post," stated Ms. Herrera. "As word spread among the homeless community, so did our volunteer network."

Soon, more auxiliary dollars were allocated so that nearly 100 people each Sunday were provided not just a sandwich, but a variety



Josephine and Oscar Herrera are joined by other volunteers who do their part to assist the community. [Submitted photo]

of full sack lunches, including dessert and soft drinks. The Sons of the American Legion joined in to assemble the meals, and, in true family spirit, the American Legion Riders from Post 41 began assisting in meal distribution and security. To date, the American Legion Family has provided more than 3,000 meals to this vulnerable population.

In recognition of their outstanding community work, Auxiliary Unit 41 was awarded the National President's Award of Excellence at the 96th American Legion Auxiliary Convention held in Cincinnati this past August. They were one of only five ALA units (out of more than 8,000) to receive the award by ALA National President Sharon Conatser. The National President's Award for Excellence is presented annually to ALA units that represent the "best of the best" in planning and implementation of the Auxiliary's mission.

"This unit understands that working as a team, being inclusive rather than exclusive, and building brand recognition in the community is the key to enhancing our membership," said ALA Central Division National Vice President Lynda Lancaster during the awards presentation.

But that is not the end of the story. Ms. Herrera, an administrator at the Rio Salado Community College in Surprise, is taking the effort one step further.

"Part of the Auxiliary's mission is to engage the community in our mission to serve veterans, military, families and community," she stated. "Our students need and want to learn to give back. They will be helping us build and continue this program."

As is the school itself. To accommodate the volunteer and program growth, the lunches will be prepared in the school's kitchen on Saturdays.

The John J Morris American Legion Family in Peoria

was also recognized at the ALA National Convention for its efforts in working with Luke Air Force Base families, engaging the local community in patriotic events, promoting Americanism to local youth and developing leadership among its junior members. The Peoria Unit was a National President's Award

recipient last year.

"Arizona ALA members are recognized year after year for their tremendous efforts among a nation of patriotic women who have taken on the responsibility of nurturing America in their towns," stated Jan Cushing, of Surprise, who was officially installed at the convention as

the 2016-17 Arizona Department President, noted. "Arizona can be proud to have this kind of exceptional effort occurring thru its 85 Auxiliary units across Arizona."

Across the country, in the local communities, American Legion Auxiliary members have dedicated themselves for nearly a century to meeting the needs of America's veterans, military, their families and community. The volunteer millions of hours yearly, with a value averaging \$2 billion each year. As part of the world's largest women's patriotic service organization, ALA volunteer across the country also step up to honor veterans and military through annual scholarships and with ALA Girl State programs, teaching local high school juniors to be leaders grounded in patriotism and Americanism.

Visit [ALAforVeterans.org](http://ALAforVeterans.org) or email [ALADeptAZpr@gmail.com](mailto:ALADeptAZpr@gmail.com).

**Editor's Note:** Ms. Christianson is public relations volunteer with American Legion Auxiliary, John J Morris Unit 62.