

NONPROFIT

Bonilla elected president of Arizona American Legion Auxiliary-West Valley

By Marge Christianson
SPECIAL TO THE INDEPENDENT

Yolanda Bonilla, a Chandler resident and 20-year member of the American Legion Auxiliary (ALA), was unanimously elected ALA department president for the state of Arizona at the 2017 American Legion Auxiliary Convention held in Carefree.

Also elected were Surprise resident Amy Hankins, as West Valley's District II president (second term), Sun City resident Doris Theiss, as president of the John J. Morris Auxiliary Unit in Peoria, and Deb Hammonds, as president of the Earl E. Mitchell Unit in Glendale.

"Over the next year, the American Legion Auxiliary will positively affect the lives of thousands of Arizona veterans, military, local families and their communities—and my goal is to make sure we can continue to do so in the years to come", said Ms. Bonilla.

Accordingly, she has selected the American Legion



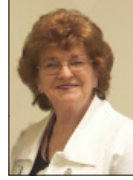
Yolanda Bonilla



Deb Hammonds



Amy Hankins



Doris Theiss

Auxiliary's Girls State program as the Department President's Special Project during her year-long tenure as president.

Ms. Bonilla points out that like many volunteer programs, the ALA is struggling to maintain the level of volunteers needed to perform the critical work done by the organization.

"By reaching out to youth, we believe we can simultaneously build a stronger America and a stronger patriotic organization" she said.

ALA Girls State is a week-long program, conducted by American Legion Auxiliary volunteers, emphasizing the workings of government and responsible citizenship. Taking place at the University

of Arizona in Tucson, about 300 Arizona high school girls participate in the program each year. Because it is a highly accredited learning experience, participants often receive college credits for attending. But Auxiliary units across the state are struggling to maintain their current level of support.

"Even though the program is conducted by volunteers, the costs — such as accommodations, food and supplies — continue to rise," said Ms. Bonilla.

Historically supported solely by the Auxiliary units in Arizona, the program costs more than \$100,000 each year. Rather than cut participation in the program, the Department of Arizona

Auxiliary is hoping to build a reserve fund to cover the increasing costs.

Over the next fiscal year, the organization plans to hold various fundraisers and reach out to local businesses across the state to raise the needed funds.

As a junior in high school, Ms. Bonilla had the privilege of attending the American Legion Auxiliary's Girls State Program.

"It changed my life," said Ms. Bonilla, who still maintains friendships made in the program which she attended more than 40 years ago.

Like Ms. Bonilla, many former delegates return to serve as staff at ALA Girls State.

Ms. Bonilla is married to Army veteran Domingo Bonilla, who was awarded both the bronze and silver star for his military service in Vietnam. Domingo Bonilla was elected as Arizona's Department Commander for the

American Legion during the American Legion's 2017 convention also occurring in Carefree.

Mesa resident Cindy Queen was elected as ALA department first vice president, while Phoenix resident Patricia Lugo was elected second vice president at the convention.

Last year, Arizona ALA members volunteered more than 175,000 hours of service to veterans and to the Veteran Health Care System in Phoenix, Prescott and Tucson. They host annual "Christmas Shops" at these locations where hundreds of veterans shop, at no cost, for themselves and their loved ones. The Arizona American Legion Auxiliary partners with the Arizona Veterans Administration to conduct a Veteran's Creative Arts Festival — a program designed to further rehabilitate both inpatients and outpatients through art. Arizona members donate clothing and personal care items to local veteran organizations

such as Veterans Helping Veterans, Veterans First and Mary Ellen's Place. They attend and contribute truckloads of clothing and other goods to local stand downs supporting veterans.

This past year, the Arizona American Legion Family raised more than \$50,000 for Soldier's Best Friend and organization that pairs combat veterans with a specially trained companion dogs. These described efforts just skim the surface of the work being done across Arizona by the American Legion Family.

For more information about the American Legion family efforts or how to help, contact the email ALADeptAZpr@gmail.com or visit www.ALADeptAZ.org.

Editor's Note: Marge Christianson is public relations volunteer for American Legion Auxiliary, John J Morris Unit 62, Peoria.