



Lee Ann Witt has served as executive director of Scottsdale Leadership since October 2019. Throughout the pandemic, she has guided the organization to continue educating community members on servant leadership.

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# The Independent Interview: Lee Ann Witt pushes Scottsdale Leadership forward

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## **MILESTONES & MEMORIES: THROUGH THE EYES OF SCOTTSDALE LEADERSHIP**

“Milestones and Memories: 35 years of Scottsdale Area History...as seen through the eyes of Scottsdale Leadership alumni and honorees” celebrate the past 35 years of Scottsdale’s evolution as a dynamic, diverse and desirable destination and hometown.

Images in the exhibit portray just some of the milestones in recent Scottsdale history, selected to evoke memories for residents and visitors alike. Photographs are paired with insightful comments by Scottsdale Leadership graduates or recipients of the Scottsdale Leadership’s Drinkwater community Leadership

Award; each person quoted has been involved in helping create or carry on the milestone project as community volunteers or business/civic leaders.

The exhibit will be open through Dec. 31.



By [Melissa Rosequist](#)

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Creating a positive, lasting impact in Scottsdale — that’s Lee Ann Witt’s mission.

Witt serves as executive director of Scottsdale Leadership, a home-grown 501(c)(3) leadership organization that has had about 1,000 community members complete its program.

In 1986, Scottsdale Leadership was formed by four residents and opened with an initial class of about 20 people.

“We’re celebrating our 35th anniversary this year,” Witt said. “We have graduated over 1,225 alumni, and each year we take a class that usually goes September-May. Through the years, those class sizes have increased to an average of 45 people.”

Witt took the job as executive director about two years ago, after graduating from the program herself. Just months later, COVID-19 hit and Scottsdale Leadership was forced to pivot its operations.

Embodying the namesake of her organization, Witt didn’t let the pandemic deter from Scottsdale Leadership’s mission.

Scottsdale Leadership offers community members a nine-month “core Program,” which includes 14-class days addressing relevant, timely and comprehensive issues and interest areas.

Participants also work on a group sustainable project for a nonprofit organization that has a mission of making things better for the community.

Last year, the core program revamped Arizona Helping Hand's warehouse to make shopping for foster children essentials — clothing, shoes, diapers — easier to navigate.

“The Project Lead It Forward has had quite an impact,” Witt explained. “So far, we’ve had 73 projects over time that have impacted over 400,000 people.”

Witt explains Scottsdale Leadership seeks a diverse background of ages, industry and ethnicity to make up the classes.

“Our job is to develop them into community leaders,” Witt says — a mission that is more important than ever.

“Many of them come in as leaders from their community, but now they have a greater appreciation of Scottsdale, and how they can plug into other boards and entities, or help shape Scottsdale.”

Participation includes, according to the organization, access to community decision-makers; opportunities to discuss current community issues; leadership development programming and opportunities; behind-the-scenes tours of community facilities and connecting with the 1,225 past Leadership graduates.

“Through the years we have graduated nine city council members; two members of Arizona Corporation Commission; two legislative reps; a senator; and numerous people in city, county and state boards and commissions — I love to brag on that,” Witt said. “Most importantly is, you don’t have to go to the high level — there’s a lot of our alumni that serve in a number of capacities [such as] nonprofit, smaller-groups — an environment to make our community better is what we’re all about.”

Witt says the number of people involved in Scottsdale Leadership, and those its impacted, makes her very proud.

“When I was in class, my small group worked with the PTSD Foundation, and our mission on that project was to bring awareness to the chapter that had just formed in Phoenix,” explained Witt. “We still connect, our event turned into something bigger than what we thought — we were able to raise money, but that wasn’t the intent. That chapter is still in existence, has grown to over 100 [members] and they’ve done some splinter-group mechanisms off of that — I’m very proud.”

## **Leaders in the community**

It isn't difficult to find a graduate of Scottsdale Leadership — when working with different organizations and entities throughout the city, Witt contends graduates are everywhere.

“I will sit in on different groups and conversations, and it's like ‘Oh wow, you went through too.’ There are some really impressive folks out there, that have gone through the program,” Witt said. “It just speaks volumes.”

The history of Scottsdale Leadership is being displayed in physical form at Civic Center Library; the city history exhibit will be displayed through the end of the year.

In 2020, Scottsdale Leadership produced a smaller class of graduates to ensure safety protocols could be followed. Witt says, the result was still as impressive.

“It was a great year — a smaller group sometimes leads to a more intimate setting or bonding. It was a dynamic group,” Witt explained.

This year, Scottsdale Leadership accepted 35 participants because of the ongoing pandemic. Witt says the group still wants to be mindful of the pandemic and provide safety measures.

Even with COVID-19, the 2021 class is on track to do five Lead It Forward projects.

Witt says Scottsdale Leadership is working on its strategic plan to take the organization into the future, and she predicts the community will see the organization in the public eye more often. Witt predicted a Scottsdale Leadership presence at the Parada del Sol and Canal Convergence this year — two of the city's staple events.

Each spring, Scottsdale Leadership opens its recruitment for new participants, and selects the class in June.



## Melissa Rosequist

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I first started my journalism portfolio at the age of 15 while in high school before going on to study at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications. Being in the journalism field is the only professional avenue I was ever interested in, and have worked hard covering topics from school boards to hard news while working for the Independent, where I have been awarded for my reporting.

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