

Sun Devil tough

New board chair emphasizes pride, advocacy

When George Diaz, Jr., took the reins as chair of the Alumni Association's board of directors in July, he began a position that he had been well trained to accept. Diaz, the senior public affairs representative for Pinnacle West Capital Corp., has spent his career lobbying for change, and says he is ready to take on the challenges of leading the association during the 2012 fiscal year.

One of the highest priorities for Diaz is to help Sun Devil alumni champion support for Arizona State University.

"In my line of work, I pay attention to who advocates for what," said Diaz, who lobbies professionally for Pinnacle's companies, which include Arizona Public Service (APS), APS Energy Services, and the El Dorado venture capital firm. "I want alumni to have tools to advocate effectively, because ASU is so critical to the community in so many aspects."

If Diaz seems passionate about ASU's centrality to the Valley of the Sun, it may be because the institution has played a central role in his own life. Introduced to the university as a child when his mother would occasionally bring him to her graduate classes and Sun Devil sporting events, Diaz understood that attending college was an option for him.

Later on, Diaz obtained an undergraduate degree in social and behavioral science at ASU's West campus. An ASU-sponsored internship at the Arizona Legislature and speaking with classmates in his master's of public administration program helped cement his interest in working as a lobbyist.

Before joining the Alumni Association's board of directors, Diaz was involved in the Los Diablos alumni chapter, which oversees the Los Diablos Scholarship, a comprehensive program that includes mentoring and networking components as well as service projects designed to boost academic opportunities for Arizona students from underserved communities.

Diaz said scholarship programs like Los Diablos, which primarily serves Latino/a students, are critical for ASU to achieve its goal of increasing access to the university.

"ASU has to grow its pipeline of local students coming from underserved communities," he said.

Growing the association's membership is always a concern for the board chair, and Diaz identified communication as crucial to helping alums understand the value that ASU brings to the community and the value that the Alumni Association provides to members.

"When I ask people to join, they say 'what's in it for me?'" he noted. "It's important for people to know what's going on – that way they can understand both that their degree is worth a lot and that ASU is at the forefront of research institutions."

One of the best vehicles the association has for outreach to alumni is its network of chapters, clubs and connection groups, Diaz asserted, because the groups promote direct involvement with ASU.

"If people have a hand in a program, they will advocate for it," he said.

Diaz admitted that reaching what he called a "threshold level" of proud alumni member-advocates would be a challenge, but he said he took inspiration from the example of people such as 2011 NCAA wrestling champion Anthony Robles, who coined the term "Sun Devil tough" to describe how he overcame obstacles.

"It's not just an athletic term," Diaz said. "It means no task is too tough."

By Liz Massey, managing editor of ASU Magazine.

