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Mesa 2023 Citizens of the Year named

By Paul Maryniak, Tribune Executive Editor

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(Left) Sally Harrison and (Right) Vic Linoff

Two longtime paragons of community service and leadership are the 2023 Mesa Citizens of the Year.

Sally Harrison, president/CEO of the Mesa Chamber of Commerce is the 2023 Mesa Woman of the Year and Vic Linoff, a champion of historic preservation in the city and throughout the East Valley, is the 2023 Man of the Year.

They join over 140 people who have earned that designation since 1935 for having “demonstrated significant long-term commitment and accomplishment through a broad-range of volunteerism enhancing the community by their service and excellence of leadership.”



Sally Harrison

Sally Harrison

A Washington State native who moved to Mesa in 2004, Harrison joined the Mesa Chamber of Commerce staff in 2008 as the director of programs.

After about two years in that position, she was promoted to the position of vice president of development, utilizing her marketing and event management skills to extend the Chamber's footprint in both the business community and the city at large.

The Chamber board appointed her president and CEO in 2013.

"I look forward to coming to work every day," Harrison says on her LinkedIn profile. "It's my pleasure to represent the business community through my Chamber work. I do something different every day and get to meet new people all the time. What can be better than that?"

Mike Hutchinson, executive vice president of the PHX East Valley Partnership and the 2011 Mesa Man of the Year, noted that since she first joined the Chamber, "Sally has been very active in Mesa non-profit organizations and community initiatives" and has been part of "innumerable boards."

Currently, she is serving on the Mesa Public Safety Foundation and House of Refuge boards.

She also is president of the Mesa Industry and Defense Council and is an advisory member on the City of Mesa Economic Development Advisory Board.

She also is active in the Mesa Rotary Club, the Mesa HoHoKams and the East Valley Chambers of Commerce Alliance and has graduated from citizens academies of both the Mesa Police and Fire and Medical departments as well as Mesa Leadership.

“Sally is well known for her ‘can do’ attitude and often assumes leadership roles in the organization that she joins,” Hutchinson said.

“She is passionate about many causes, including serving veterans needs and raising awareness about teen suicide.

She has been honored for her service by several nonprofits and is a recipient of the Mike Whalen Spirit of Community Service award from Visit Mesa and the Paz de Christo Feed, Clothe and Empower award.

“Volunteering her time to help make a difference for others is what Sally has exemplified for many years,” said one person who nominated her for the Mesa Woman of the Year award. “It is evident by her tenure in the organizations that she is involved with that she is there for a purpose and to make things better.”

A mother of two sons, the late Bryce Harrison and Blake Harrison, she is anticipating her first grandchild next spring.



Vic Lenoff

Vic Linoff

Linoff moved from his native Minnesota to Mesa over 56 years ago and has been an entrepreneur and successful small business owner.

As the owner of Those Were the Days! store on Mill Avenue in one of Tempe's oldest buildings, Linoff was active for many years in that city's Chamber of Commerce as well as the Mill Avenue Association and various civic organizations that promoted community and business vitality in Tempe. He also was a member of Tempe's Historical Preservation Foundation.

Linoff opened what became one of Tempe's oldest retail establishments in a building that was erected in 1907.

In 2008, "after 35-years in the antiques and books business, seven-days-a-week and three nights, my wife and I decided that maybe we were aging out and reluctantly concluded to close the bricks-and-mortar operation," he recalled.

"Although, still successful, it had taken a physical toll on us. Those Were The Days! still exists in an on-line form. We continue to be a specialty non-fiction bookseller," he said.

He and his wife also still own the 1907 Goodwin Building.

“He actively participated in many municipal and regional planning activities that have led to several significant enhancements to the region’s transportation networks including new and expanded bus routes and light rail improvements,” Hutchinson noted.

As a resident of Mesa, Linoff has also been extremely active in civic issues, including the significant redevelopment activities that occurred in the past 40 years in downtown Mesa, Hutchinson said.

“He also was keenly interested in preserving Mesa’s history and was the driving force behind the city’s first historic preservation ordinance and the establishment of the Historic Preservation Advisory Board,” he noted, adding that “many people would argue that Vic has done more than anyone in the city to preserve Mesa’s history including the preservation of buildings and iconic neon signage.”

As president of the Mesa Preservation Foundation, Linoff has been an ardent advocate for the structures that reflect the city’s deep, rich history.

He has compiled a lengthy set of images of some of Mesa’s iconic neon signs and buildings at the foundation’s website, mesapreservation.org.

He has been active in preservation efforts for such landmarks as the old Nile Theater in downtown Mesa and more recently the Buckhorn Baths.

An author, newspaper columnist and Mesa Community College adjunct faculty member, Linoff also has been leading the effort to not only preserve the neon signs that once dominated Main Street but to create a permanent museum downtown for them.

He also has earned numerous awards from civic and professional organizations in Tempe, Mesa and throughout Arizona

“In all the work Vic has devoted to Mesa’s downtown revitalization and historic preservation, he prefers to work collaboratively and lead from behind,” said one of his nominators for the Mesa Man of the Year award. “Vic’s preference is that others get the credit and recognition.”

Linoff and his wife Vicki have been married for over 50 years and have a daughter and two grandchildren.

Rude awakenings

The Mesa Man of the Year award was established in 1935 by Charles Mitten, the onetime owner-publisher of the Mesa Tribune's predecessor, the Mesa Journal-Tribune. Deciding the award is in the hands of the Mesa Citizen of the Year Association – one of the oldest groups of its kind in Arizona.

A Woman of the Year award was created in 1969. Only in 1940 and 2020 were no awards given to either a man or a woman.

But Mitten – himself a Man of the Year in 1961 – probably never envisioned the way the association tells recipients of the award that they had won.

The announcement comes at the crack of dawn – actually, a tad before that.

Harrison recalled a small entourage arrived last weekend pounding on the door at 6 a.m. “and within seconds standing at the foot of the bed yelling, ‘Sally wake up! Get up! You’re the Woman of the Year.’”

Saying she was “shocked, speechless,” Harrison added, “It’s quite an honor and so very humbling to be recognized when there are so many deserving people in Mesa.”

Linoff said he was “stunned, flummoxed and in-denial.”

“I anxiously await the inevitable apologetic phone call saying the recognition was actually meant for the other Vic Linoff in Mesa,” he joked. “Actually, I am embarrassed that Sally Harrison has to share the honor with me. She deserves better.”

As for the rude awakening, Linoff continued to joke.

“‘Rudely’ is a good word,” he told the Tribune. “The notification was their standard modus operandi -- bang on the door at 6:30 in the morning. Explode into the house and rouse me from my best sleep of the night – and expect me to explode with excitement. Now, if it were the Nobel, Pulitzer Prize or MacArthur Foundation, I may have been more receptive.”

The Mesa Citizen of the Year Association also promotes “the need for residents to be involved in the wide breadth of volunteer activities in Mesa and the positive impact that volunteerism has on the well-being of Mesa’s residents and neighborhoods,” Hutchinson said.

More recently, it also recognized Mesa Public Schools graduating seniors who have provided exemplary volunteer service in their school and the community.

This year's award recipients will be honored at the Association's Annual Banquet on Feb. 22 at the Double Tree Hilton Phoenix/Mesa.

The community celebration of volunteerism will begin with a reception at 5:30 p.m. followed by dinner.

To purchase banquet tickets, visit mesacitizenoftheyear.org or contact Debby Elliot at 480-969-2731.