



October 2005

the Incredibles

20 of the most dynamic women of the Coachella Valley

ROXANNE JONES AND STEVEN BILLER



One by one, they took their positions on stage.

Dressed in couture gowns by the world's top designers, 20 women — each having distinguished herself as a leader in the Coachella Valley — converged on this mid-August day to show, in one not-so-quick take, their resounding power and impact in this community.

Handpicked from fields including business, philanthropy, education, politics, and sports, they demonstrate how women

influence every part of life in the Coachella Valley. On the morning of the Palm Springs Life photo shoot, these women had little time to talk business. At 7 a.m., they checked in backstage at the McCallum Theatre. After being greeted by teams of volunteers, makeup artists, and dressers, they mingled over a quick, light breakfast and then reported to makeup and wardrobe.

It was A-list all the way — from familiar personalities such as U.S. Rep. Mary Bono to lesser-known leaders such as Mary Heckmann.

Saks Fifth Avenue cherry-picked fashions from its stores from Beverly Hills to New York, and even called in favors of a couple designers, to outfit our cast of leading ladies in the height of couture fashion.

It was well worth the effort — and an appropriate gesture to celebrate the movers and shapers who make the Coachella Valley look its best!

When MARY ROCHE retired from the Los Angeles Community College District after 25 years as an administrator and professor, she founded a retail bed-and-bath chain. Then, in the early 1990s, she and her husband moved to the desert to retire for good. “But I found myself wondering what to do every day,” she says. “I needed more purpose, to contribute in some way. I had to feed my soul.”

As she looked for opportunities, Roche says, “It was like going back 40 years. There were so few women in positions of responsibility.” She had found her purpose.

Roche got involved, serving on numerous boards (more than 25 at last count) and was elected in 2000 to the Indian Wells City Council (a post she still holds); she served as mayor from 2003 to 2004.

A piece was still missing, however. “I needed a way to connect with other women who were at the zenith of their careers and who wanted to contribute to empowering younger women,” she says. “There needs to be a better balance between men and women in leadership positions.”

So she founded the Women Leaders Forum in 2001 — “one of the most rewarding things I’ve done,” Roche says — and began partnering with women from all walks of life. Now boasting 150 members, the organization “has become a template for how to coalesce the vast intellect and diversity that’s out there in the valley.

“Each of us has strengths, talents,” Roche adds. “We’re on this planet to contribute and grow until we’re no longer alive. When you take yourself, your ego, out of the mix, amazing things happen.”

The impetus for BETTY BARKER’s community involvement was similar to Roche’s. “I had a career for 35 years,” says Barker, with characteristic modesty. An industrial designer (the only woman in her profession in the 1940s), she and her husband also founded the Chicago Bulls and owned the basketball team for 10 years. “When I retired and moved to the desert 30 years ago, I thought I would finally have time to go to lunch, play golf. But after one year of ‘retirement,’ I had to do something!”

And do something she did. Barker became involved with the Palm Springs Desert Museum (now Palm Springs Art Museum), eventually becoming president of its Women’s Committee (now the

Associates Committee). She founded the Children's Discovery Museum of the Desert and continues to serve as chairman of its board of trustees. A proponent of education — "Education is everything. It determines the rest of your life!" — she was a driving force in creation of the Palm Desert campus of California State University, San Bernardino, the first campus in the state system to be built with private funds.

While Barker, who co-chaired the capital campaign, is proud of her career and the example it sets for younger women, she concedes, "I'm only sorry that I wasted 35 years getting involved only in things directly related to my career. I urge young women to expand their participation, get involved in things that are for the good of all. It enlarges your view of the world."

Blazing trails in what was traditionally a man's arena — golf — MARLENE HAGGE VOSSLER took up the game at age 3 and won the Long Beach City Boys Junior title when she was 10. Three years later, she won several adult amateur titles and became the youngest player to make the cut at the U.S. Women's Open, finishing eighth. In 1949, at 15, she became the youngest athlete ever named Associated Press Athlete of the Year. She also was the youngest of the 13 women who founded LPGA in 1950. Her career on the LPGA Tour spanned a remarkable five decades; she won 26 titles between 1952 and 1972 and was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2002.

"In the beginning, I just followed my passion," Hagge Vossler says of her dedication to the game. "But there were people like me who wanted to make it their lifetime work to play golf; that's why I got involved in founding the LPGA. I just did what I felt I could do."

"She dedicated her life to the LPGA," said Hall of Fame member Juli Inkster when Hagge was inducted. "She was a great leader for all of us and forged a way for all of us to make a great living."

Hagge Vossler's advice to today's young women golfers: "Be dedicated, have determination and willpower, but don't let it consume you. You have to have a well-adjusted life and keep your perspective."

EDRA BLIXSETH arrived at the photo shoot still giddy from a weekend of play at her Yellowstone Club, a 13,450-acre private golf and ski resort in Big Sky, Mont. She certainly earned the good times. She emerged from an abusive first marriage to write the 1987 book *Uncharged Battery*, which was required reading for UCLA social work students and police investigators. Today, her main philanthropic interest is as president of Shelter From the Storm, which provides shelter, counseling, and education for abused and battered women and their children. "Your past makes your tapestry for today," Blixseth told *Palm Springs Life* when the magazine honored her as Hostess of the Year in 2002.

Each March, Blixseth hosts a two-day dinner, dance, auction, and golf tournament to benefit Shelter From the Storm at her Rancho Mirage estate, Porcupine Creek. She has opened the property for other philanthropic causes, including the American Cancer Society's Desert Spirit XVI gala last spring. Her success in business and compassion for people in need make Blixseth a role model for women leaders in the making.

The MARY HECKMANN School on the Shelter From the Storm campus has classrooms where the children of domestic violence victims learn in a safe environment. Heckmann, a Coachella Valley resident for 24 years and Shelter board member for eight years, is one of the area's most prolific leaders in education. She is a member of the Foundation Board of the University of Washington, the University Board of Pepperdine University, and on the Board of the University of California, Riverside, where she received her master's and doctorate degrees. Her experience with these institutions has helped raise the level of educational leadership in the Coachella Valley.

Anybody would be hard pressed to name a single part of life in the Coachella Valley that hasn't been positively touched by JACKIE LEE HOUSTON. The former Miss Washington could be the desert's high priestess of giving. She gives her time and her money — lots of it — to help organizations that find cures, educate children, boost the underprivileged, comfort the ailing, exhibit art and culture, and so much more. She and husband Jim have given so much to enrich so many lives that the rest of us can only say, "Thank you."

Regaining perspective was U.S. Rep. MARY BONO's motivation for getting involved in public service. "After Sonny died, it was a dark time in my life," she recalls. "Running for office gave me focus. It can be difficult to step out of the shadows, but sometimes a time of crisis is what it takes to get a woman going."

Elected in 1998 in a special election after Sonny Bono's death, Rep. Bono was re-elected for her fourth term in 2004. "I feel such an incredible part of this district," she says. "It has shaped my adult life. I feel a real love and passion for what I do, working with people to find answers to problems."

Bono serves on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which has jurisdiction over issues such as energy, telecommunications, health care, and the environment. One of her most significant achievements was championing legislation in 2000 that established the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.

“This was terrific legislation, and I’m extremely proud of it and the process,” Bono says. “It was a great coming together to address the concerns and hopes of the many people involved ... of not being partisan, but pragmatic.”

Like Bono, LEE APPEL turned to service to help cope with a difficult time in her life: when she and her husband separated. “I became a docent nearly 20 years ago,” she recalls of volunteering at the then-Palm Springs Desert Museum. “It saved my life. And it’s the most wonderful, satisfying thing I’ve done, except for raising my daughters. I could never pay for the education I’ve received and the experience of interacting with children and adults, teaching them about art and artists — it’s so fulfilling.”

Appel’s passion led her to become president of the museum’s Docent Council, then president of the Women’s Committee in 1998. She was asked to join the board of trustees and, last year, took office as president of the board as the museum completed a major transition, eliminating its natural science component to focus exclusively on art. It is now the Palm Springs Art Museum. “It was a hard decision, but it was time for us to do what we did,” she says of the museum’s refined identity. “It was the practical thing to do, since the [Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians] are building a gorgeous, \$40 million cultural museum that will be filled with natural science and Native American history. We had to look to the future.”

PATTI GRIBOW, president of Women Leaders Forum, is passionate about empowering women, especially young women. In the mid-1990s, when she was director of development at Palm Valley School — and when her own daughter was an adolescent — Gribow read *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. It hit a nerve.

“Teenage girls are susceptible to becoming what magazines project, and it’s important that they know it’s not just about their bodies, but their brains,” she says.

With Patricia Crone, head of the school, Gribow co-founded The Ophelia Project of the Coachella Valley, a mentoring program for teen girls. She also founded the Strictly Speakers bureau.

“That and the Ophelia Project brought me to where I am today with the Women Leaders Forum,” she says. “We want to help groom women to reach their full potential. To mentor and be mentored by successful women — we all have something to learn from each other. I’m confident that someday we’ll see one of the young women we mentor become a senator, governor, president, or CEO of a Fortune 500 company.”

t's hard to miss the diminutive GLORIA GREER. Conversations With Gloria Greer airs seven days a week on Time Warner Cable 10, her coverage of the Coachella Valley social scene appears monthly in Palm Springs Life, and she attends more parties than a garden-variety Kennedy. When Benjamin Netanyahu and Walter Cronkite came to the desert, they spoke to Greer — as did scores of other movie stars and moguls. A Palm Desert resident since 1962, Greer has contributed to Newsweek, Town and Country, and Daily Variety. But her most important work permeates her private life. When one of her twin daughters was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, Greer founded ACT for MS, which provides financial aid, medical supplies, and adaptive physical therapy for local multiple sclerosis patients. In the five years since its inception, ACT for MS has raised more than \$300,000 to support these services and to contribute to medical research. It's easy to pigeonhole Greer as a society journalist, but her own service demonstrates that her commitment to the community runs deeper than her words.

A former actress (Being There, Black Sheep Squadron), DENISE DUBARRY HAY knows a hit when she sees it. In 1990, she parlayed her entertainment-industry experience into what's widely regarded as the first infomercial — a TV advertising format that she has perfected through her company Thane International Inc., the global direct-response marketing company she co-founded with her husband, Billy Hay. As vice chairman, she helped develop a variety of brands — including California Beauty, Orbitrek elliptical glider, Klear Action Tooth Whitening Light, and Klear Action Acne Treatment — and gained formidable expertise in product development, production, and Internet marketing.

Dubarry Hay offers her business acumen to the greater good as a member of the boards of the Annenberg Center for Health Sciences, the Palm Springs International Film Festival, Palm Springs Women in Film, and Marywood Palm Valley School.

You have to wonder when JUDY VOSSLER has time for the day-to-day operations she oversees as vice president of Landmark Golf Co. in Indio. She touches every part of the business — human resources, customer service, marketing, and community relations — and finds time to serve on the boards of the Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs International Film Festival, Boys & Girls Club of Coachella Valley, John F. Kennedy Memorial Foundation, La Quinta Historical Society, and Indio Chamber of Commerce.

Vossler made her first enduring mark on the Coachella Valley as general manager of the historic La Quinta Hotel. She was integral to the remodel and expansion of the property, which evolved from a 76-room winter hotel to a 640-room, year-round destination and convention resort.

Today, she chairs the Hospitality Industry & Business Council for the Palm Springs Desert Resorts Convention & Visitors Authority.

KAREN SAUSMAN, president and CEO of The Living Desert, put the attraction on the map as a world-class institution in conservation and interpretation of worldwide desert ecosystems. She became the first woman to serve on the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums board, serving as chairwoman of its Ethics Committee, and is also the new president of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

A former teacher, Sausman had just taken a job in 1970 at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, Ariz., when a group of Coachella Valley community leaders, including Philip Boyd, asked her to help design and develop the nature center that would introduce residents and visitors to desert plants and animals.

SUSAN FORD BALES, the daughter of former President Gerald and Betty Ford, has spent most of her life in the public eye. She has spoken throughout the country about her experiences as an adolescent in the White House during turbulent times — but is widely recognized as a speaker on substance abuse and an advocate for breast cancer awareness.

Bales, who has been a spokeswoman for the renowned Betty Ford Center, experienced firsthand the effects of substance abuse on the family during her mother's battle against addiction to alcohol and painkillers. She also witnessed her mother's private war against breast cancer. As a high-risk candidate herself, Bales emphasizes the importance of early detection in her numerous speeches to medical organizations, women's groups, and hospitals.

Once an educator, always an educator. So it is with PHYLLIS JEAN WASHINGTON, owner of Maison Felice et Jardin on El Paseo in Palm Desert. An elementary schoolteacher from Montana (her main home), Washington set out on a career in interior design, opening P.J.'s Interiors and putting her knowledge to work for corporate offices, yachts, private aircraft, and prestigious homes.

Meanwhile, she traveled the world with her husband Dennis, who owns a 38,000-employee construction company, and developed a passion for collecting antique furniture and books — the genesis of Maison Felice, which specializes in 18th and 19th century antique furniture and decorative accessories. "Our Style de Vive Lecture Series is always an interesting challenge," she

says. “It’s rewarding to bring talented and learned people to share their knowledge and opinions with those who want to keep on learning.”

Style and elegance seem to come naturally to DENISE ROBERGÉ. Her architecturally dramatic art gallery, jewelry store, and Augusta Restaurant — all in Robergé Plaza — anchor the east end of prestigious El Paseo and set a sophisticated standard in Palm Desert. The plaza, which also includes a spacious sculpture garden, draws people for gallery exhibitions, trunk shows, and fine dining, as well as a variety of charity parties and events, such as the popular Day of the Dead. She also hosts elite groups of leaders — including the College of the Desert Presidents Circle — at her home in Rancho Mirage. Robergé thinks first-class all the way, and her vision and energy have helped define today’s El Paseo shopping district.

board member of the American Association of Community Colleges, MARIA C. SHEEHAN has had a massive impact on post-secondary education in the Coachella Valley. As superintendent and president of the Desert Community College District, she is responsible for projecting and executing a vision for College of the Desert, the valley’s only two-year institution. Since her appointment in 2001, the college has developed an education master plan and a facilities master plan and successfully campaigned for a \$346.5 million COD funding bond measure.

A founding member of the California Community College Latina Leadership Network and a board member of the National Community College Hispanic Council, Sheehan has turned her focus to international relations — building faculty exchange programs and bringing more foreign students to the Palm Desert campus.

Palm Springs native BARBARA GONZALES LYONS was 21 years old in 1975, when she became the first write-in candidate elected to the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Tribal Council. Her leadership on managing tribal business on local, state, and federal levels and as a representative for the Indian Health Program gained her tribal chairmanship in 1982. She stepped down in 1984 to raise her growing family.

Meanwhile, she continued her involvement with the tribe’s development authority and Cultural Committee and eventually became a designated tribal representative for the Southern California Association of Governments, as well as an advisory board member for the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.

In theater circles, ISABEL BARNETT has gone the distance. She won a Tony Award for her role in the Broadway musical *Guys and Dolls* and now serves as the first woman chair of the Board of

Trustees of the McCallum Theatre. The Julliard-educated New Yorker played opposite the late Howard Keel in the London production of Oklahoma! and retired from the stage in 1958 to raise her family. She works closely with her husband Larry, former president of Music Corp. of America, supporting the arts at Ohio State University by establishing a graduate program in arts policy and administration (the first of its kind in the United States) and raising money for the ALS Association to fund research into Lou Gehrig's disease. She is also on the Palm Springs Air Museum's gala committee.

The young and the elderly all have a friend in PEGGY CRAVENS, whose philanthropic efforts range from the College of the Desert Foundation to the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center and ACT for MS. The common thread is promoting education — whether that means teaching the arts or raising awareness of a particular illness.

In the past year, she helped revive the Virginia Waring International Piano Competition, co-chairing its Black & White Ball. Cravens is also devoted to issues regarding the frail elderly, an interest that stems from nearly nine years of personal experience with her mother and her first husband, investment banker Irving Koerner (both were residents at Carlotta Good Samaritan Health Care Center until they died). Cravens, remarried to retired Time and Life photojournalist Donald Cravens, chaired Carlotta's advisory board.

Unavailable for the photo shoot were women leaders Trina Turk, Leonore Annenberg, Betty Ford, Alexandra Sheldon, and Maria Shriver.