

Rotary Club of Oro Valley Helps Edge High School Reduce Student Drop-Out Rate

\$8,000 in proceeds from the Rotary's 2023 "Taste of Oro Valley" will enable the alternative public high school to help students graduate.

Oro Valley, Arizona, September 26, 2023 – The [Rotary Club of Oro Valley](#) has awarded [Edge High School](#) \$8,000 from the proceeds raised at the Club's 2023 "Taste of Oro Valley" event last April. With the 2021 high school drop-out rates in Arizona at 23% and 29% in Pima County,¹ Edge fills a critical need in Tucson's drop-out crisis by helping students overcome the socio-economic, skill-gap, housing insecurity and mental health barriers that prevent them from getting a high school diploma.

Edge High School was established in 1985 by a grant from Pima County Adult Education. Today, Edge is a Cognia accredited, tuition free, public charter high school, with two campuses in the greater Tucson area. Edge stands for **E**ducational **G**roup **E**ffort, which represents the school's unique philosophy that all students can learn and reach their full potential by understanding the whole student and their specific needs.

Edge serves Pima County students between the ages of 14 – 22, of which 71% live in poverty, 8% are homeless and 18% have disabilities. These issues and other systemic barriers in many traditional schools, such as bullying/shaming, gender discrimination, and lack of mental health awareness, can keep students from thriving.

Edge provides an inclusive school community through a flexible self-paced learning and small class size model that delivers 1-on-1 instruction via multi-tiered support systems. These include providing students with skill-gap identification and remediation, a robust Emotional Intelligence curriculum, licensed social workers on staff, and volunteer behavioral health partners to connect interested students to free therapy. Edge also opens pathways to vocational experiences and life skills training through collaborative partnerships with other local non-profit agencies. In addition, a flexible shorter school day enables working students to finish high school.

This comprehensive educational "safety net" enables students of all skill levels — those who are challenged by traditional schooling and those who are not challenged enough — to regain their voice, recover school credits, earn a high school diploma and, ultimately, move on to a better future. Over the past three years, Edge has seen success with their students in their 5/6-year graduation rate, which is above state levels. In addition:

- 51% of Edge graduates are enrolled in community colleges
- 13% are enrolled in 4-year universities
- 21% are enrolled in vocational schools or vocational programming
- 3% have enlisted in the military
- 12% have found employment

Edge students also give back to the community by volunteering for 15 hours of community service per year and a day of service once a year.

According to Brittany Battle, Edge Board President, "Edge's unique approach to education helps students genuinely feel seen and heard in a way that is authentic to them by removing systemic barriers to learning and helping them experience joy in the classroom." In 2012, Brittany was hired by Edge as a part-time art teacher and found a real passion for teaching youth. Her work as a teacher with Edge has since evolved into her becoming a board member in 2017 and then president in 2022.

¹ [Southern Arizona High School Graduation Rates](#), MAP, 2021.



Steve Witthoef (far right in dark blue Rotary shirt), Edge Board of Directors Vice President and former President of the Rotary Club of Oro Valley, presents an \$8,000 check to Edge High School from the 2023 Taste of Oro Valley proceeds.

Steve Witthoef, former President of the Rotary Club of Oro Valley, was introduced to Edge via the Social Venture Partners (SVP) 2022 Fast Pitch process, where Rob Pecharich, Edge Executive Director and District Principal, delivered a 3-minute presentation on the work that Edge was doing for students in Tucson.

Steve said, “After visiting Edge’s Northwest Campus, I was impressed with the teachers and their commitment and passion for their students.” As a result, Witthoef joined Edge’s Board of Directors in 2022 as their Vice President. According to Witthoef, “Edge is so much more than the alternative of getting a GED. It helps marginalized students gain critical learning and behavioral skills and become better integrated into their communities, which is why the Rotary Club of Oro Valley is adopting Edge as one of its service programs.”

Principal Pecharich said, “The funds from the Rotary Club of Oro Valley, along with other potential private donations, will contribute toward increasing the school’s professional staff, provide free winter and summer school, enable off-campus enrichment such as attending the U. of Arizona Sky School, and fund college scholarships.”

Pecharich also added that he wanted to provide Edge students with new, enriching experiences such as visiting a college campus or going to an art museum — something that not all Edge students would normally do on their own.

For more information about how you can support Edge High School’s mission, go to: <https://edgehighschool.org/>.

###

SIDE BAR STORY: Edge High School Success Story



Zia Pearson at Edge High School graduation in 2016 and today at Edge as a Social Studies teacher.

Edge High School Graduate Becomes School's Social Studies Teacher

Early in her schooling, Edge graduate Zia Pearson knew that she wanted to serve her community. By returning to Edge High School Northwest this year as a Social Studies teacher, Zia is making her dream come true.

Zia's path from student to teacher was not so straightforward. Prior to attending Edge High School's Himmel Park campus as a junior, she attended different types of schools including private charter, public and home schooling. In her freshman year, her mother went back to work and got her teacher's degree and Zia returned to public school. She did very well there as an honor roll student and as a member of the swim team. However, she felt like she was away from her family too much and was not volunteering in the community as she had wanted. In her sophomore year, she opted to stay home and do online schooling, which was not a good fit for her learning style, and she fell behind in her credits. This was devastating to Zia, who was an accelerated learner and dreamed of attending the University of Arizona.

At that time, Zia's mother was a Special Ed teaching assistant at Edge and felt that the school's alternative approach to learning would be a good fit for Zia and her brother. According to Zia, "It was awesome! I didn't know that a public school could be like that — it felt like home."

Zia thrived with Edge's small class size, individual student development and responsibility, and its emphasis on community through student service hours. She graduated from Edge's Himmel Park campus in 2016 and in 2021 she earned her BA in Political Science from the University of Arizona. There she received the following recognitions:

- Nominated by the U of A to the National Society of Leadership and Success.
- Recognized by the U of A's College of Social and Behavioral Sciences for Highest Academic Distinction.

- Awarded the School of Government and Public Policy Certificate of Excellence for Outstanding Academic Achievements.

Initially, Zia didn't know if she would be a teacher or what form serving her community would take. She was always interested in political science and international affairs, so that was her emphasis when gaining her bachelor's degree. She came back to Edge High School because she understood its mission and had seen Rob Pecharich, Edge Executive Director and District Principal, and her teachers practice it when she was a student. In addition, after Zia's graduation from Edge, her mother became a math teacher at Edge's Himmel Park campus.

Now as a social studies teacher at Edge's Northwest Campus, Zia is developing lessons in community service. For example, she is giving her students the opportunity to better understand the homeless situation in Tucson. And she is currently preparing a lesson plan on 9/11, which will be a new learning experience for her students given that they were not even born when it happened over 20 years ago.

Zia is also sensitive to the delicate balance of Edge students' special needs, where some may be homeless or otherwise insecure in their living situation. Zia knows how school can be an escape for many students and a window into a bigger world where there is so much they can do and learn. According to Zia, "In many cases, students don't have control over their home lives, but at Edge they have a safe place with the support that gives them control over their education and the footing that enables them to make choices for themselves as adults." She credits her Edge teachers and principal for providing her with the opportunity to give her students the same encouragement and support that she received.

Said Zia, "I am really grateful to be back in a place that has brought me so much joy!"

###

Rotary Contact:

Jane Shurtleff
Rotary Club of Oro Valley
Club Service Director
janeshurtleff@gmail.com
978-314-0127



Edge High School Contact:

Rob Pecharich
Executive Director & District Principal
Edge High School
robp@edgehighschool.org
(520) 881-1389

