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CAREER & WORKPLACE

# Inside the List: Phoenix's minority business owners weather economic storm, as they always have



Eric Walker, CEO of Next Step Agency, and other minority business owners are moving the needle on inclusion and diversity. Walker says it's important to help mentor the next generation of minority entrepreneurs.

JIM POULIN | PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL

## COMPANIES WITH AND ANDY BLYE – EDITORIAL INTERNS, PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL IN THIS ARTICLE

### Arizona Solar Concepts LLC

*For executives and owners at the largest minority-owned businesses in the Phoenix region, this year has been challenging professionally and personally.*

Renewables & Environment  
Revenue Employees

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*In the weeks following George Floyd's death at the hands of the Minneapolis police May 25, the local business owners saw demonstrations around the Valley about police violence and racial inequality. This death of another unarmed black man has since sparked much-overdue conversations about race in both the workplace and American society.*

Phoenix, AZ  
Human Resources  
\$6.3M Revenue  
200 Employees

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*In survey responses accompanying the creation of this week's Business Journals list, minority business owners talked about their visibility in the community, what progress needs to be made, and what brings them hope.*

Phoenix, AZ  
Broadcast Media  
\$2M Revenue  
20 Employees

*Recruiting theme that came through in responses is this is not a new conversation for minorities. Diversity and inclusion are ideas for white people to embrace since people of color have lived with racial inequities their entire lives. The experience of running a business cannot be separated from life as a person of color in Arizona; the two are intertwined. Here's what the business owners had to say.*

### What are you doing at your company to facilitate these conversations and create a more inclusive workplace?

“From day one at my company it’s been an uphill battle being a black-owned company in Arizona, a ‘red’ state. I have employed an average of 12 to 15 freelancers several times a year that are not minorities.

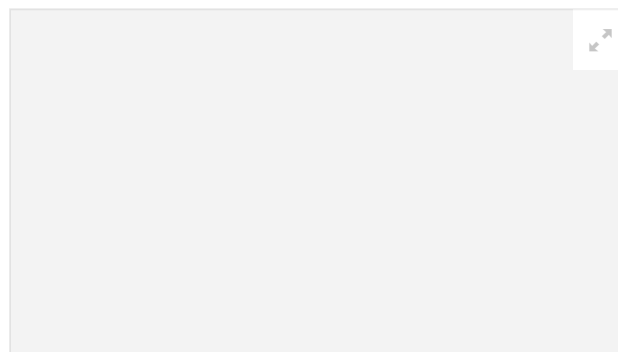
Hopefully they learned working with me that they would look at a different side of life,” said Steven Rideau, owner of RAVP Events & Rental Services.



Steven Rideau

PROVIDED BY STEVEN RIDEAU

“At Nativa, we have always prided ourselves on being culturally diverse. But, thinking deeper, are we doing enough to support the Black community?” asked Eric Diaz, CEO of Nativa Inc. “We do not want to simply be vocal, but show the measures we are taking as a small company with very big goals towards being a part of the change.”

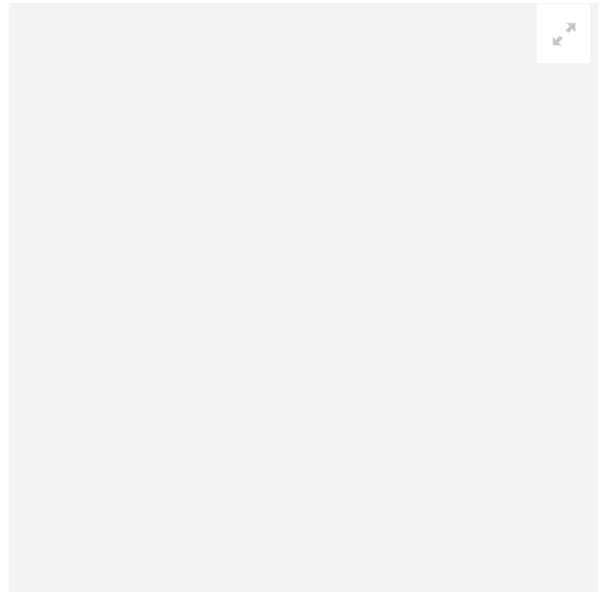


Eric Diaz

PROVIDED BY ERIC DIAZ

Nativa and its sister companies O.Y.E and RockinPost have started an initiative to ensure their workplaces become more diverse in the coming years. The initiative includes new goals to support black vendors and a more robust internship recruiting program.

“In the coming months we have planned to offer educational support to our employees on how to identify negative racial perceptions and unconscious biases within ourselves,” said Norah Silva, founder of Arizona Solar Concepts. “By raising our self-awareness, we hope to be a better version of ourselves.”



Norah Silva

PROVIDED BY NORAH SILVA

**What progress does your industry need to make to better reflect and serve Arizona's diverse population?**

“I started this agency in 2006 because no other agencies in the region were really equipped to connect with the fast-growing multicultural markets of the U.S. Southwest,” said Lisa Urias, founder of Urias Communications. “Advertising agencies remain stuck in a pattern of ‘transcreation’ work instead of connecting with the sensibilities and stories of multicultural markets.”

“We need to narrow the social and racial disparity gap that currently exists with the population receiving the benefits of solar energy,” said Silva. “We need to be intentional about training solar experts who look like the community members we serve, who are bilingual, and who understand the challenges of the community.”

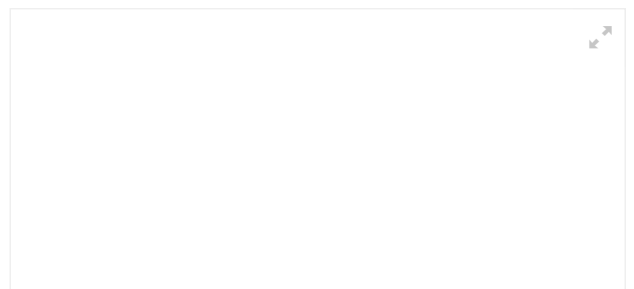
“African Americans make up only 5% of attorneys,” said Cary Lackey, owner of the Law Office of Cary L. Lackey PC. “These firms need to look at local law schools in their areas for qualified minority candidates rather than thinking that ‘the best’ candidates are in larger population centers with a greater percentage of African Americans in their population than Arizona.”

**How does your visibility as a minority business owner affect younger generations here in Arizona?**

“As the saying goes, ‘It’s all about who you know.’ Business owners can provide inspiration and open the door of opportunity to the next generation,” said Eric Walker, founder of the Next Step Agency, a management consulting company. “For underrepresented communities, this is more important now than ever. We can lead by example, provide a clear path for achievement and share tangible results that can help shape the next generation of business leaders.”

Nicole Bennett, owner of Perry Consulting, said that visibility lets younger people know what’s possible.

“It shows younger generations that they have the option to be an entrepreneur; children of color need to see all options available so they can truly believe that they can do anything,” she said.



Nicole Bennett

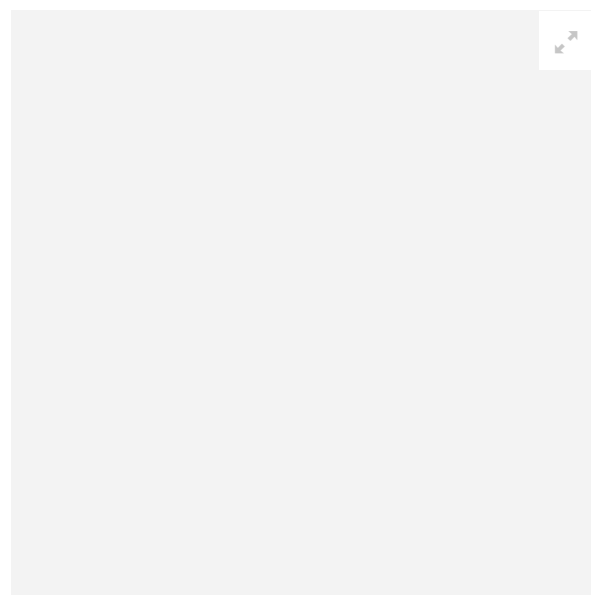
NICOLE BENNETT

**What has given you hope or resiliency in recent months?**

“Over the last several months, the ongoing support from the local community has been tremendous,” Walker said. “During a time when we have been physically distanced, there has been an overwhelming effort to connect and provide support to businesses. We received several messages that inspired, motivated and promoted a healthy attitude, offering encouragement through some long days. For us, this serves as a reminder that these challenges will bring us together to build a stronger business community for everyone.”

“Seeing the diversity among the protesters and how they are all fed up with police brutality and inequities in our legal system has been inspirational. I only hope that it carries over into November so effective change can occur politically,” Lackey said.

Tran Tran, founder and CEO of Axis Employment Services, said the community’s compassion has inspired her.



Tran Tran

PROVIDED BY TRAN TRAN

“Through these difficult times, I am touched by the generosity and compassion of my neighbors, coworkers and fellow business owners,” she said. “The beautiful chalk drawings on our sidewalk with inspirational messages of love and hope; the anonymous donations of groceries to a neighbor in need are all evidence that we will pull through this together and come out even stronger than before.”

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