

Summer 2026

# NEWS FROM THE VA'AKI

Official Newsletter of the S'edav Va'aki Museum Volunteers



## From the Desk of the Volunteer Program Specialist

BY Amereece Sterba

Happy Summer, Everyone! We have had a very busy Spring here at SVM. March was full of 13 school groups; we hosted our first Harmony Fundraising Event; we had the Volunteer Appreciation Dinner, Ancient Technology Day, International Museum Day, and a Museum Store remodel. We attended two Earth Day outreach events. All of which would not have been possible without our wonderful Volunteers.

Plans for the Summer are already underway; the good news is we will stay open this summer. Page 3 of the newsletter has an update on our summer hours. We have quite a few outreaches planned for this summer and are looking for Volunteers to help out. You do not need to be an Engagement Guide to help with these outreaches; the Education Team will cross-train anyone who would like the opportunity to go out into our communities and represent S'edav Va'aki Museum. Please reach out to Amereece or Adriana for more information.



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# FROM THE DESK OF THE DIRECTOR

BY NICOLE ARMSTRONG-BEST

Hello everyone:

I want to start with gratitude for all you do for us. We just celebrated National Volunteer Month and recognized all of you at our Volunteer Appreciation Dinner. But we also celebrated our Volunteer of the Year, Donna VanNess, and our excellent volunteer Jeff Ross and teen volunteer Marcus Vera at the Citywide Volunteer Impact Awards dinner. I also would like to take a moment to thank the SVM Foundation Board members – who are also all volunteers. They not only support event planning and coordination for the Indian Market and now also the Harmony: Balancing Past and Present – An Indigenous Sonoran Desert Experience but also run the Museum Store (and staff it); secure sponsorships and grants; and manage all the financial transactions needed to support all of this. Much of this work goes unnoticed in the background but is vital. So a huge shout out to Marissa Sotomayor, Sunday Eiselt, Katie Shields, Vicky Baldwin, Reylynne Williams and Carmen Guerrero. There are vacancies on the Board, and I encourage you to consider joining them – especially if you have financial and/or fundraising background!

We will be open to the public this summer. However, we will have reduced hours in July and August, as the temperatures are brutal, and we want our visitors to be safe. Operating hours will be 9 am – 2 pm, with Sunday also being closed. Thank you to everyone who can continue to volunteer in the summer – our visitation may be slow, but our work is not!



## Resource Corner

**Ancestral O’Odham: Akimel O’Odham Cultural Traditions and the Archaeological Record.** By Chris Loendorf and Barnaby Lewis  
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313273085> Ancestral O’Odham Akimel o’Odham cultural traditions and the archaeological record

**Centuries of Decline During the Hohokam Classic Period at Pueblo Grande** Edited by David Abbott  
<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/centuries-of-decline-during-the-hohokam-classic-period-at-pueblo-grande>

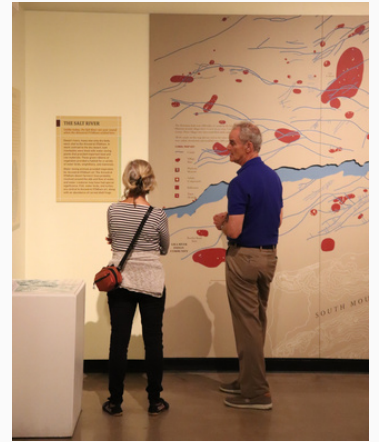
**Chaco and Hohokam: Prehistorical Regional Systems in the American Southwest** Edited by Patricia Crown  
<https://www.unmpress.com/9780933452763/chaco-and-hohokam/#:~:text=Synthesizing%20data%20and%20current%20thought%20about%20the%20regional,the%20most%20sophisticated%20cultures%20of%20the%20prehistoric%20Southwest.>



## What's New in the Volunteer Program - VPC

### Summer Hours

As the weather heats up, visitors to the Museum slow down. On July 1st, 2026, the Museum will be switching to Summer Hours through August. The Museum will be open from 9 am to 2 pm on Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. The Museum will be closed to the public on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. For Museum Store, Front Desk Ambassadors, and Engagement Guides, your shifts in VicNet will change. Please let Amereece know if you have any questions regarding this. You will also receive an email with more details.



### Marc's Fairwell

Many of you have met Marc-Pierre, our current AmeriCorps Vista member. Marc has spent the past year here at SVM overseeing the Teen Volunteer Program. Sadly, Marc's time with SVM is coming to a close; his last day will be June 15th. He will be moving on to bigger and better things, taking everything he has learned here at SVM with him. During his time at SVM, Marc assisted the Education Team in developing educational programs. He revamped the Cholla Buds Pen Pal program, created cypher puzzles for guests, and helped develop a version of Detective Archaeology that can be taken into classrooms. On behalf of everyone at SVM, we wanted to thank Marc for all his hard work. We will miss him, but hopefully, he will be able to return as a volunteer. The next time you see Marc, please wish him well on his next big adventure.



## Harmony: Balancing Past and Present - An Indigenous Sonoran Desert Experience

Our inaugural event was a tremendous success! With a lot of hard work, and frantic planning, we were able to host 134 attendees and presented them with unique and frankly the most delicious food I've tasted in a long time, from 6 different chefs. This was a fundraiser, so how did we do?

### INCOME

Cash Sponsorships: 11 sponsors equaling \$20,500

In-Kind Sponsorships: 5 sponsors equaling \$7,000

Tickets sales: \$13,925

Live Auction experiences: \$2,450

Silent Auction: \$4,200

Cash Ask for Exhibit Cases: \$25,500 (with one more large possible donation to come).

EXPENSES: \$15,500

As you can see, from a fundraising perspective, the event was also a smashing success! This was not possible without the hard work of the planning committee. Huge kudos to Carmen Guerrero, Jeffrey Lazos-Ferns, Brandy Button and Shirley Lowman. Thank you also to Demetrius Lester, Sunday Eiselt and Reylynne Williams from the Foundation, who supported the financial and permitting issues. And last, but certainly not least, the staff and volunteers who worked to ensure that everything ran smoothly – from having enough ice, to breaking tents down at 9:30pm!

Join us next year, when we do it again!

**SATURDAY, APRIL 3, 2027**

## Birthday Shout Outs!

Some of our Volunteers have recently had a Birthday. We would like to wish the following Volunteers a Happy Birthday!

Dick Smith  
Suzanne Casey  
Lucille Gradillas  
Emma Carr  
Maura Cordova  
Sylvia Lee  
Diane Sanders

Please note: We do not include anyone in this list who has not given permission to post about their Birthday.





# SVM Volunteers at Harmony





## Exhibits Update

We have a busy and exciting summer ahead of us. There will be a lot of changes to the galleries over the next few months. Su:dagi (Rekindling Our Connections) will be deinstalled starting in early June. We will then fully close off that portion of the permanent gallery to allow us to begin work on some of the permanent gallery renovations, more on that in a little bit. S'edav Va'aki and the O'Odham will stay open. Parched will remain open until mid July. We will then keep the gallery roll gate closed while we work to install the next changing exhibit, Indigenous Identities. This is another modern art exhibition that will feature 10 indigenous artists. We will have public programming throughout the year to tie in to this exhibit, similar to Parched. The gallery will soft open to visitors in September, but we won't have our big shindig for it until October. In January, we will close the permanent gallery briefly to finish installation of a third of the new permanent gallery exhibit, Into Himdag. S'edav Va'aki and the O'Odham will reopen in a new configuration as well to use more of the space and give visitors a fuller experience until the rest of Into Himdag can be installed. This will be a long, multi-year process, and we are excited to see all the changes taking place. Never a dull day at the Museum!!

INDIGENOUS  
INDIGENOUS  
IDENTITIES  
IDENTITIES



## Mudslinger Update

The Mudslingers at S'edav Va'aki Museum continue their efforts to stabilize the Va'aki (platform mound) from the effects of erosion, weather and the damage from the rainy fall season of 2025. Much of the areas of major damage have been stabilized, but many areas remain that require backfilling to the protective fill layer that surrounds most of the mound. With coming projections for an above average monsoon season, this work is vital in keeping the original structures of the mound safe and stable.

Our volunteer numbers saw a big increase from previous years, with multiple work days seeing 15+ volunteers working together to move material and throw some mud. This is necessary for a structure that took an entire community to construct and maintain and very encouraging to us here at the Museum. Our thanks go out to all the volunteers that contribute to this effort, and we look forward to the coming work this year in helping to complete the repairs needed to preserve this piece of the regions cultural heritage.





## Education Update

### **Word Reflections**

Have you noticed the interactive activity tucked into the corner beside the canal map? Take a look and you will find a small white podium with a pile of cut-out words on blue paper. Big words, small words, and even parts of words. What is that all about?

Look a little closer at the words piled up. The words are all about water. The significance of water, especially in a desert, is highlighted in S'edav Va'aki Museum's exhibits and along the trail. Water was important for the Ancestral O'odham and remains important to us today.

Why are these water words here? What are you supposed to do with them? There is a small sign explaining the activity, but truth be told visitors rarely take time to read it. Instead, they “play” with the words – they combine them to form sentence fragments; they arrange them in groups; they start conversations with others about them, and they even glance at them and walk away. These interactions have been observed with 3<sup>rd</sup> graders on field trips, with multigenerational family groups, and with individuals visiting on their own. Once again what is this all about?

It is an experiment. Would visitors be drawn on their own to a simple low-tech exhibit element? Would they interact with it? Would they try and figure it out? Our exhibits, our tours, our activities are about sharing information and providing facts. This interactive provides visitors with a moment to pause and reflect about water. We provide guests with opportunities to absorb knowledge, view different perspectives, but what about an opportunity to stop, take a breath, and possibly send a message to the next person.

The goal of this interactive isn't to record the number of guests that engage or measure the length of time spent. It's about creating a space of reflection about water. It's about trying a different approach. It's about observing, listening, and learning from our visitors. It's about embracing opportunities for meaningful interactions.



## Education Update

### **School Field Trip Fun**

The 2025-2026 school season is just about over and what a year it has been. S'edav Va'aki Museum volunteers and staff presented a fun and engaging experience for over 2,600 students and teachers. We hosted 43 schools onsite; 76% of these were title 1 schools. Title 1 schools are federally funded public schools with a high percentage of children from low-income families.

This year I was blown away by some of the interactive moments with our young visitors. One student was very upset to hear that the Ancestral O'odham didn't have cows and therefore didn't have cheese. Other students were impressed with the Obsidian core in the exhibit case which we learned is the same type of black rock referenced in the Minecraft video game and movie. Another staff member was put on the spot and asked to explain what an acid was when they mentioned that Ancestral O'odham used acid from the cactus fruit to etch the surface of some shells. However, the most iconic reaction occurred when a volunteer at the artifact cart touch station held up the hafted  $\frac{3}{4}$  grooved axe and the lobby erupted with young voices exclaiming - Oh! Wow! Cool!

Thank you to all the volunteers for helping make our school group field trips and outreaches a tremendous success! We couldn't have done it without you. Next school tour season we will be incorporating a few new twists for our school presentations. Over the summer we will fine tune the details and hope to share engaging new approaches with our field trip volunteers. Thank you and we look forward to having your help next year.



# Thank You

## Volunteers Make SVM Great!

By Amereece

We had a wonderful Volunteer Appreciation Dinner in April. We decorated gourds and spent the evening eating wonderful food, listening to Museum Staff share their gratitude for SVM's Volunteers, and catching up with each other. We thank all of you for everything that you do here at S'edav Va'aki Museum. Your support makes this museum amazing.

Donna Van Ness won the S'edav Va'aki Museum's Volunteer of the Year Award for all her amazing work, not only in the Garden but with the Education Team, helping with the school groups.

This year, both Jeff Ross (Engagement Guide) and Marcus Vera (Teen Volunteer) received the 2026 Impact Volunteer Award from the City of Phoenix's Volunteer Program. In late April, Jeff, Marcus, Amereece, Nicole, and Marc-Pierre attended a dinner where Jeff and Marcus received their awards.

Shirley Lowman also organized the live and silent auction during the Harmony Gala in early April. Shirley's efforts helped raise over \$25,000, which will be used to purchase cases in the next phase of the Main Gallery remodel.



**VOLUNTEERS  
NEEDED**

# IMPORTANT VOLUNTEER DATES

**June**

**Su:Dagi Exhibit closes to Public**

**New Lighting System installed in the Galleries**

**July**

**New Lighting System installed in the Galleries**

**End of Month Parched Exhibit Closes to the Public**

**August**

**Installation of Indigenous Identities Exhibit**

**September**

**Indigenous Identities Exhibit soft opening**

**September 25<sup>th</sup> - Welcome Back/Orientation Breakfast**

**October**

**October 8<sup>th</sup> - Indigenous Identities Exhibit Formal opening**

**October 16<sup>th</sup> - Volunteer Lunch**

