

# ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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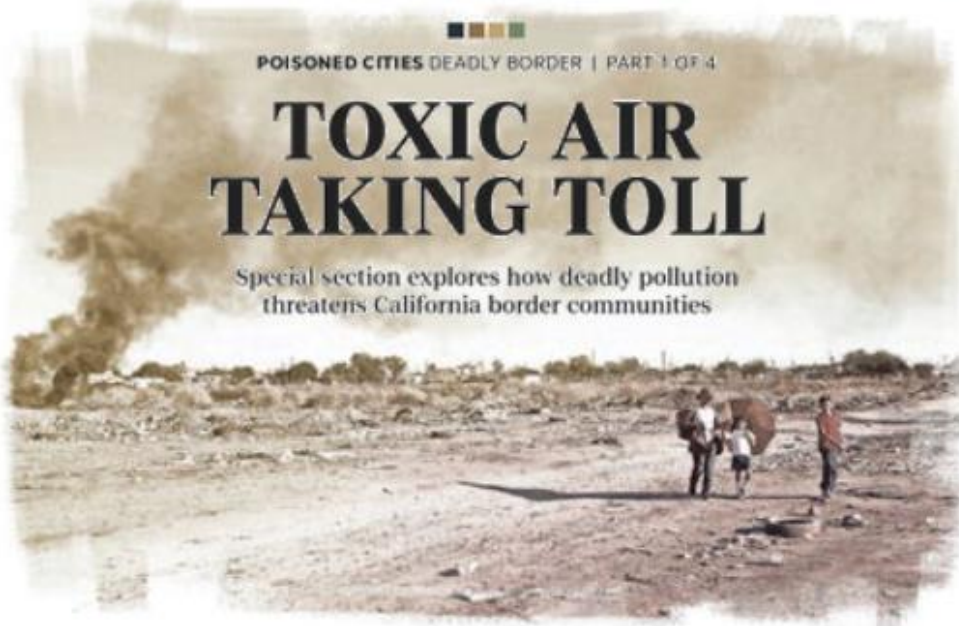
PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



POISONED CITIES DEADLY BORDER | PART 1 OF 4

## TOXIC AIR TAKING TOLL

Special section explores how deadly pollution threatens California border communities



The air in Mexicali is so polluted, it's killing people. • It drifts across the border into California, carrying poisonous particles from factories that produce inexpensive goods sold in U.S. markets. • The air is some of the worst in the Americas. It leads to high rates of asthma in children, sickens adults with respiratory ailments and is blamed for as many as 300 premature deaths a year. • Polluters face weak oversight, lax enforcement and small fines. Regulatory agencies are underfunded. The state environmental agency operates just four air quality monitors for a city with 180 factories spread out over 50 square miles. • "What worries me is that people see it as something normal," said Diana Gabelela Arangure, an educator and activist. "But it's not normal for the children to be getting sick constantly." **See Section 5**

Video and more online at [environment.azcentral.com](http://environment.azcentral.com)

Read the complete series, including video, photo galleries, virtual reality and interactive graphics.

A woman walks two children home from school through a lot where trash is burning in Mexicali, Baja California, on Nov. 16, 2017. JOE MEYER/THE DESERT SUN, USA TODAY NETWORK PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

## Valley kids get place to play and learn after school

Walden E. Johnson Arizona Republic  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Armando Avelino had to pause several times during his conversation with an ICAN visitor to answer the urgent questions of the kids there to take part in the after-school programs the organization offers.

OK, in most cases, the kids just wanted to say hi, but making contact with a trusted mentor like Avelino or other staff at ICAN can seem like an urgent matter to a

child. ICAN, formerly called Improving Chandler Area Neighborhoods, is a non-profit organization that has been providing free educational and other positive after-school programs for children since 1991.

Avelino, 33, can relate to the kids he looks after now because he grew up at ICAN. He started attending activities at the center, just south of downtown Chandler, when he was 3. He initially came because his older brother, Alex, did. The activities, friends and mem-

bers there became so important to him that he joined the staff after he graduated from high school.

"I know all the (staff) positions, I know what they do and how they do it," Avelino said. "I'm here early in the morning, asking if anyone needs help, even if it's cleaning. I'm here four hours early. I want them to know I'm not here just to get paid. I want to give back as much as I can."

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**INSIDE**  
**2018**  
HOLIDAY  
COOKIE  
GUIDE

**USA TODAY**  
**John Kelly resigns as Trump's chief of staff**  
Kelly is leaving the post after internal tensions increasingly spilled into public view recently. [18](#)

**FREE ADMISSION!**  
**FOOD CITY**  
THE ORIGINAL  
**Tamale**  
2018  
**FESTIVAL**

morning in an effort to be more observant of the "leave no trace" hiking philosophy. And they're adding that any decorations for the tree be only biodegradable ornaments. Some people have objected to the tree, saying that it encourages litter from ornaments falling off and people leaving things.

"I'll give up every day with the help of quite a few volunteers," Cressy said.

#### Not everyone liked the tree

Last year the tree was removed from the mountain trails by what Cressy described as a "stink." There have also been issues with the weather Phoenix of-

top of Camelback Mountain on Saturday. PHOTOS BY NATHAN J. FISH/THE REPUBLIC

icials would allow the tree to be them.

When asked why they would go to so much trouble to keep the tradition alive, Cressy said it was an effort to help spread the Christmas spirit.

"People look forward to it. It's a tradition and it's lots of fun," he said. "It puts people in the Christmas spirit, which can be hard to do in the desert."

#### Pictures with Camelback Santa

From 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on weekends, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, Cressy puts on his Santa suit and greets people who make it to the top of the mountain. He hands out candy canes or coal (depending on whether the person is on the naughty or nice list) to those who want it.

"I hand out 4,000 or 7,000 candy canes each year," he said. "On Christmas Day, the line to get a picture taken with Santa is sometimes 60 or 70 people long."

The tree on the mountain predates Cressy's arrival in Arizona in 2010. He said he came across it while hiking Camelback one day and it helped him through

making it to the top."

#### Thinking of hiking Camelback?

This is a serious hike. Don't attempt it if you're unaccustomed to hiking steep, uneven terrain. Every year many people have to be rescued because they become injured or dehydrated. A few people die.

The route from the Echo Canyon trailhead features an elevation gain of about 1,300 feet over 1.2 miles. Signs at the beginning of the trail rate it as "extremely difficult." Wear sturdy shoes and carry plenty of water, even if it's not hot out. For more Arizona hiking tips, check out this story.

## ICAN

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Avellina said one of the most rewarding parts of the job is helping kids who might be shy or isolated come out of their shells. While he was talking about that, he passed to let a small boy know he would help him find his friends later. "I like seeing them get past that first step or opening that first door," Avellina said. "Most of these kids are willing to go further. I want to give them a boost if they're trying to do something and help them reach a little higher."

The late Henry Salinas founded ICAN in 1991 with a goal of providing free, out-of-school-hours programs for children in his Chandler neighborhood.

His earliest activities were held at elementary and junior-high schools, and in 1997 ICAN opened its first stand-alone facility in a small building at the corner of Chicago and Washington streets.

The organization's reach and impact grew and along the way gained national accreditation for its educational offerings. ICAN outgrew its modest building and, after years of fundraising, in 2002 moved into a brand-new location at 650 E. Maricopa St., near Foley Memorial Park.

The 21,000-square-foot building includes a large kitchen, classroom and meeting space, a computer lab, a gym and an outdoor area. Salinas was able to serve about 25 kids per day when he founded ICAN. The current center and staff serve about 250 kids per day.

The core mission of ICAN remains the same, CEO Shelby Pedersen said. Funds such as a Season for Sharing grant go toward educational programs, feeding hungry kids and helping them develop life skills, she said.

ICAN estimates that 80 percent of the kids it serves come from families living at or below the poverty level.

"If you were to walk around today, you'd see those monies put to work helping kids with homework and helping to feed them — they get a free snack and dinner every day," Pedersen said.

"(Tuesdays and Thursdays) specifically it's helping with our STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) projects that we do. You'll see the kids involved in activities all over that spectrum. Science projects all the way to more technology-driven activities. We have partners who help us provide tech training to the kids."

In addition to academic pursuits, ICAN programs offer kids a chance to learn life skills that their schools and parents might not have time to focus on. The methods and lessons vary depending on the age of the child.

"At a kindergarten level, we might work on sharing, how to pick good friends and how to know when somebody has your best interest at heart," Pedersen said.

"All the way up to junior high and high school where it's real heavy on decisions and making quality choices. We all know at that age it's difficult to make good choices. We provide a place to vent concerns or to talk with a trusted staff member to help you navigate something like that."

Among those trusted staff members are young adults who grew up attending ICAN programs, such as Avellina and Lavanghon Ballesteros.

Like Avellina, Ballesteros began coming to ICAN as a child. He said his mother moved to Chandler with him and his



Dawlen Ransom (left), 8, and Cesar Mendosa, 10, play basketball with Armando Avellina, a program specialist at ICAN, at an after-school program in Chandler on Nov. 20, 2018. MICHAEL CHOI/THE REPUBLIC



Armando Avellina, a program specialist, works with kids at ICAN, an after-school program in Chandler on Nov. 20, 2018. MICHAEL CHOI/THE REPUBLIC

siblings after she divorced. They searched for an after-school program and picked ICAN because there was no charge for the services.

Ballesteros said he was hesitant at first, but he wanted to ICAN because of a chance to play sports and take the edge off his hunger.

"Growing up, I had older brothers and we played sports all day, every day," said Ballesteros, 19. "And (ICAN) would provide us with food. That was impressive to me. In a single-parent household, it's hard to feed everybody enough, so I thought that was pretty amazing."

He began to find other interests at ICAN and began to make connections with staff. When he was in high school, Ballesteros became a youth trainer with ICAN, providing support to the staff members in classrooms. But the trainer program was only for high-school students, so Ballesteros thought he would have to move on after he graduated.

"I was confused because ICAN was the only thing I had," he said. "But my

previous manager, he offered me a position. He was like, 'You're such a great staff member, you work your butt off and have a passion for these kids, now I'm on staff. That's pretty insane. I love it.'"

He said his mother leaves him sometimes, reminding him of how much he missed going to ICAN at first.

"Back then I was like, man, this is stupid, but she said I had to go to see if I would like it," he said. "Now I work here and she laughs about that."

He loves challenging the kids to learn something new. He also appreciates the life lessons that are part of the curriculum.

"As a kid I was super shy," Ballesteros said. "Coming to ICAN opened me up. I really appreciate that, so I'm trying to give back as much as I can."

Ballesteros is attending Chandler-Gilbert Community College, working on both an associate degree and a bachelor's degree in a partnership between that school and Northern Arizona Uni-

#### How to donate to Season for Sharing

There are five ways to donate:

- 1 Fill out the online form at [sharing.seasonforsharing.com](http://sharing.seasonforsharing.com).
- 2 Use the coupon on Page 4A of The Arizona Republic and mail donations to P.O. Box 29250, Phoenix, AZ 85038-9250.
- 3 Text "sharing" to 91-999 and click on the link in the text message.
- 4 Click on the "donate" button at [facebook.com/seasonforsharing](http://facebook.com/seasonforsharing).
- 5 Shop at Dig It Gardens, 3015 N. 16th St., Phoenix. It will donate 2 percent of sales each weekend during the campaign. For more information, visit [digita.com](http://digita.com).

#### Who is helped

Last year, 152 agencies received \$2.2 million. Since 1993, more than \$54 million has been distributed.

#### Where the money goes

It all stays in Arizona. One hundred percent of your donations and the matching funds go directly to non-profit agencies in the state. All overhead and fundraising costs are paid by The Arizona Republic. [azcentral.com](http://azcentral.com)

#### How your dollars help

The Gannett Foundation and the Nine Mason Fullam Charitable Trust will multiply your donation by matching your gift 50 cents on the dollar up to \$600,000.

After getting a degree in public administration, he hopes to continue working with ICAN.

"I think Lavanghon wants the CEO job," Pedersen said. "That's awesome. Once he finishes college and works his way up the organization, maybe he will do it. What a cool story that would be to tell. I'd love that."