



FUERZA LOCAL

2023

BUSINESS ACCELERATOR IMPACT REPORT



WELCOME LETTER

Local First's approach to leading economic development in Arizona revolves around a diverse and inclusive Arizona economy- one in which every family can participate. By diversifying Arizona's local business offerings, we keep more money recirculating locally which enables families to have more opportunity to advance economically and build generational wealth.

Arizona must focus on people-driven strategies that enable all Arizonans to be successful. We are building economic resilience by growing entrepreneurs at every stage, and deepening Arizona's economy by growing successful small and mid-sized businesses, which are equally as important as advanced manufacturing and technology firms. Every small business supports a family and every family counts.

Local First has continued to distribute millions of dollars in small business relief aid, along with thousands of hours of small business technical assistance in English and Spanish. Our growing coalition of small businesses is the voice of Arizona.

We graduated 126 Latino entrepreneurs through our Fuerza Local Business Accelerator in 2023 and will graduate 142 more in 2024. Since 2013, Fuerza Local graduates have created hundreds of new businesses and jobs.

Welcome to the future of Arizona! Join us in celebrating entrepreneurship by supporting these outstanding small businesses.



Kimber Lanning - CEO, Local First Arizona

JOIN US IN BEING PART OF THE SOLUTION.

Local First continues to generate forward-thinking solutions for the state's largest economic challenges.

As you will see in our 2023 Fuerza Local Impact Report, the methodology to overcoming our most critical societal issues is baked into our inter-connected programs. Whether you're passionate about the climate crisis, food access, racial equity or rural community development, we want to engage with you for the future of our communities.

Arizona can and should lead the nation in economic resiliency. Together, we are shaping a more inclusive economy as we build with intentional inclusivity. Every Arizonan has a role to play, and every dollar spent with locally owned businesses has a positive impact on Arizona's economy.



ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT



Fuerza Local is aimed at under-resourced, Spanish preferred micro-entrepreneurs who have started or are thinking of starting a business, but who would benefit from six months of developing business acumen in the classroom. Developing entrepreneurs is an important part of any economic development strategy and here at Local First, we make entrepreneurship our priority. Local ownership that meets the basic needs of all people drives our economy, provides a diverse array of goods and services, builds local wealth and social capital, functions in harmony with our ecosystem, and encourages healthy communities.

It is our belief that such an economy cannot be fully realized if people are excluded from full and fair participation. Our business accelerators are designed to shape and uphold opportunities for anyone with tenacity and grit to start their own business and grow it into a successful enterprise.

Fuerza Local teaches empowerment through improved credit scores and a deeper understanding of how to access capital and invest it wisely. Most importantly we are creating a web of business professionals and mentors to support and collaborate with our graduates.

Please read more about Fuerza Local and the outstanding enterprises our graduates represent. Buying from one of them not only keeps money recirculating in the local economy; it's an investment in their whole family and neighborhood, which truly creates opportunity for all.



Launched in 2013, the Fuerza Local Business Accelerator was a direct response to the influx of predatory lenders that target low-income, Spanish-preferred Latinos who often lack financial literacy and access to capital. Over the past ten years, the six-month cohort-based program has graduated 1100+ micro-entrepreneurs who have learned marketing essentials, business planning, and cash flow management while gaining critically important financial literacy and building a credit history.

In our most recent survey of a sample 200 graduates of the program have generated \$24,187,500.00 for the local economy.

In 2023, the Fuerza Local Business Accelerator graduated 126 micro-entrepreneurs who wasted no time putting their knowledge to work with 90% of these graduates opening a checking account for the first time in their lives. And despite all the challenges of 2023, 73% of the graduates reported expanding their business last year with 35% hiring new employees, 13% buying company vehicles, and 8% opening a new location while the remaining 22% expanded with new products or services.

SECURING SCHOOL CONTRACTS TO GROW THE BUSINESS



MARIA LUZ PACHECO
MAJESTIC LUX STUDIO
19TH GENERATION
FALL 2022

When Maria Luz Pacheco Canales started her photography business Majestic Lux Studio a few years ago, she went in with a passion for taking photos on film.

Everything else about being a business owner she had to learn. When she saw an ad for Fuerza Local, she immediately submitted an application.

"I had no idea that you had to register the business, get insurance, nothing about business structure," she said. "The program opened many doors for me in the sense that now I have a contract with 17 schools, taking head shots of the students and faculty. My photos are going to be used on the schools' websites. Now the schools see me like a serious, professional business."

A business that began, in part, out of necessity to meet the scheduling needs of her seven children, has blossomed into one that now has employees, a healthy Instagram following and ongoing projects.

She's the first to admit that launching a business, taking an accelerator course, raising kids and studying for her citizenship test was incredibly challenging and exhausting but worth it.

Anyone in a similar situation should take advantage of what Fuerza Local has to offer, Pacheco Canales said. "When you love what you do, it doesn't feel like work," she said. "It's tiring and everything, but there is nothing better than seeing my clients happy and creating that smile."



1,424*

**TOTAL JOBS CREATED BY FUERZA LOCAL
ACCELERATOR GRADUATES**

*GRADUATES STILL REPORTING

GRADUATES SALES INCREASED IN 2023 OVER 2022
(SAMPLE OF 200 GRADUATES ONLY)

\$1,779,506

GRADUATES SALES IN 2023
(SAMPLE OF 200 GRADUATES ONLY)

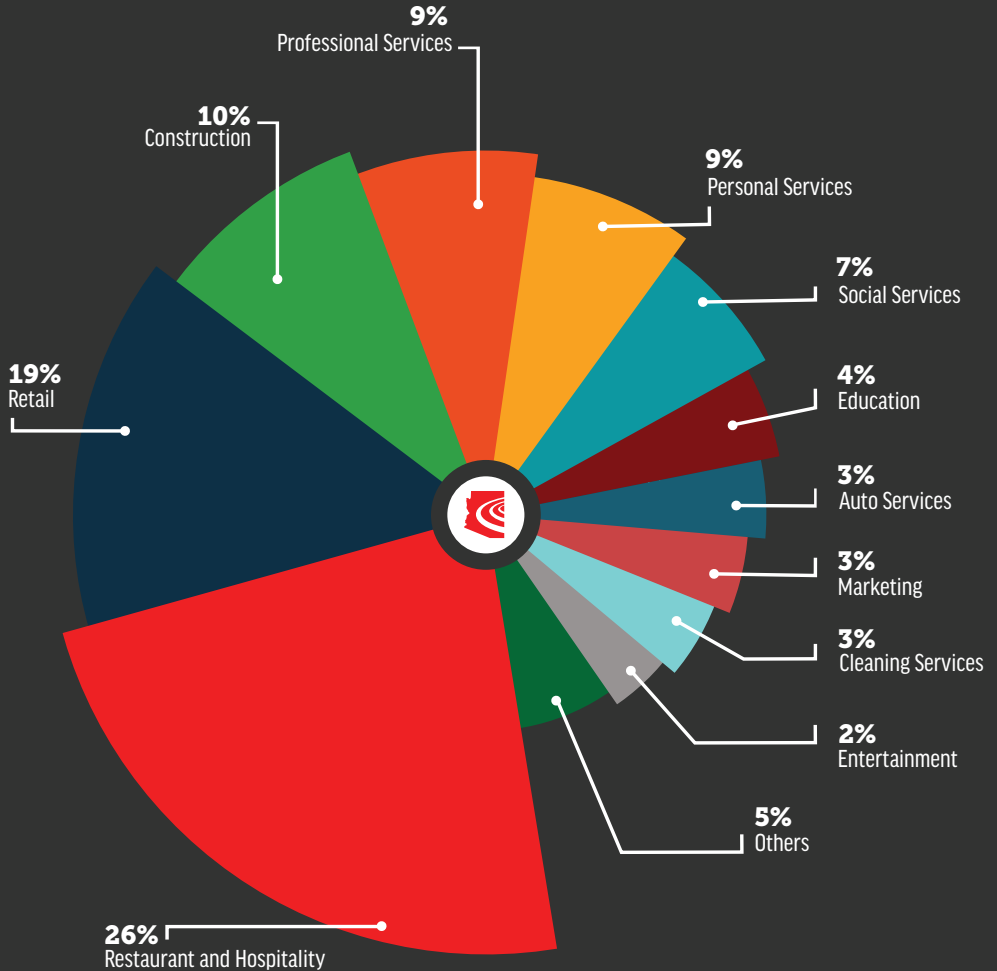
\$24,187,500



FUERZA LOCAL ARIZONA

ACELERADOR DE NEGOCIOS

BUSINESSES BY INDUSTRY



RUBY LOPEZ
WOOD PLAY ALL DAY
20TH GENERATION
SPRING 2023

Ruby Lopez was inspired to start her Montessori playground rental business, Wood Play All Day, after watching her children play and appreciating how they learn.

A mother of three, she has always had an appreciation for learning, and the more she studied, the more she realized that learning takes a variety of forms. "When my daughter comes home, I'm asking her what she did and how she did it because I want to learn," Lopez said of the Montessori way.

Joining Fuerza Local allowed Lopez to advance even more. She wasn't sure how to go about starting a business, but the program put her on the right path, she said. "I thought it was a good idea to take this course because we were starting from scratch. We didn't know what we were getting into," Lopez said. "We wanted to do things on the right foot, and this was a good guide for those who are starting from scratch to learn step by step how to do things right."

From the importance of organization to the development of a business plan to short- and long-term goal setting, Lopez said she came away from the experience with an invaluable set of tools that have helped her develop and grow her business.

Even though she was a beginner, Lopez can see how the program could help business owners at any point in their journey. "This is a program where they will guide you from the beginning to the last, and any questions you have, they are available to answer them," she said. "Fuerza Local has helped me a lot, and can help anyone take their business to the next level."



**A SOLID FOUNDATION TO ENABLE
LEARNING THROUGH PLAY**

BECOMING PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER

FROM GRADUATES TO ADVOCATES

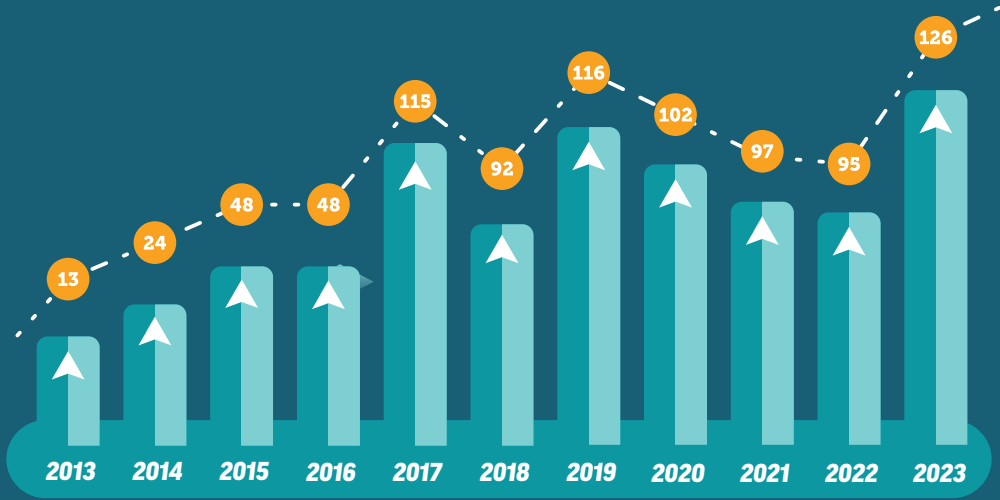
Once participants complete the program, and save \$1,000 in a savings account, they are celebrated at a community graduation ceremony that highlights each of their accomplishments. Each business graduate receives a \$1,000 matching grant from our Foundation, as well as a business membership to Local First Arizona.

Through their membership, each business becomes part of a community of more than 3,000 local business members across the state, giving them the opportunity to build and sustain strong relationships with like-minded business owners.



Fuerza Local graduates also have access to webinars, seminars, and exclusive members-only opportunities and technical assistance, which allows them to continue their education and develop their skills and knowledge.

GRADUATES BY YEAR



IN 2023:

126 BUSINESSES
ENTERED INTO THE
FUERZA LOCAL PROGRAM

90%

OF PARTICIPANTS OPENED A CHECKING ACCOUNT **FOR THE FIRST TIME** WITH A LOCAL BANK OR CREDIT UNION IN 2023

48%

OF ALL GRADUATES OPTED TO GO WITH A LOCAL BANK OR CREDIT UNION

OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND BUILDING A NETWORK



LUPITA FUENTES / GERARDO INIGUEZ
SEGURIDAD LATINA
15TH GENERATION
FALL 2020

When Gerardo Iniguez started Seguridad Latina, he put in untold hours of sweat equity trying to make connections that he thought would help his security system business grow. As the owner of a Spanish-language business looking to serve Arizona's Spanish-speaking population, he would walk neighborhoods, ring doorbells and leave business cards to spread the word about the services he offered.

His partner, Lupita Fuentes, hoped to grow the business by making connections in a different way. She attended Fuerza Local Acelerador de Negocios, a Spanish-language business accelerator that helps entrepreneurs develop or expand their business capabilities. "I was one of the people who told her, 'Don't waste your time on that. It's better to focus on the business,'" Gerardo Iniguez said. "I was wrong."

He started Seguridad Latina after working for a different security company and watching as Spanish-speaking clients accepted contracts that weren't fair or transparent as a result of a language barrier. He didn't realize Fuerza Local could help until he and Fuentes engaged with the program. "If I had known about Fuerza Local when we started, we would not have had so many setbacks and problems on our path," Fuentes said. "I loved the idea that we were local and supporting each other and that for me was a very good thing and was my biggest motivation."

The program helped the couple network with other businesses, provided lessons about best business practices and gave them confidence as business owners aiming to serve an underserved client base. In addition, Fuerza Local was free, a nice perk for entrepreneurs who are constantly reinvesting in their businesses. For Gerardo Iniguez, the Fuerza Local accelerator also showed him that the Arizona business community values Hispanic entrepreneurs so much, it invests in their professional development. "Everything is possible," Fuentes said. "Even though I had already been running the business for years when I entered the business accelerator, I learned and continue to learn every day, every time I go to a meeting or some other event. You always gain knowledge, so you always must be sharing and participating because there is always something different to learn."



73%

**OF 2023 GRADUATES EXPANDED
THEIR BUSINESS**

35%

HIRED NEW EMPLOYEES

13%

BOUGHT COMPANY VEHICLES

8%

**OPENED A
NEW LOCATION**

22%

**EXPANDED WITH NEW
PRODUCTS OR SERVICES**

18%

**OF GRADUATES ARE NOW REGISTERED AS
VENDORS WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

JOIN THE MOVEMENT

While much was accomplished in 2023, none of it would have been possible without the contributions and support of community members like yourself. And, there is much to be done in 2024.

Will you join us in our mission to build equitable systems for Arizona's local businesses and communities that create a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable Arizona economy?



Become a Member: localfirstaz.com/coalition-member

Leave a Legacy: localfirstaz.com/legacy

Donate: localfirstaz.com/donate



MARIA Y DAMIAN RODRIGUEZ
SONORA GRANITE
19TH GENERATION
FALL 2022

Damian and Maria Rodriguez started Sonora Granite, a company that installs granite countertops, because they knew Damian could do the work. He had proven it to Maria's former employer when he fixed a countertop that had fallen at a restaurant.

They just weren't very well-versed on the administrative side of business ownership, which is why Maria researched Fuerza Local after seeing an ad for it on TV one evening. "My husband didn't know that we had applied for it and when everything was ready, I told him 'We're going and that's it!'" she said. "As a woman, we want our family to have a better life."

Once in the program, Damian and Maria learned about licensing with the Registrar of Contractors and gained a better understanding of how social media networks could grow their business. "It has helped me a lot," Damian said. "It motivates and inspires you."

Since graduating from Fuerza Local, Maria and Damian have pivoted their business from working with clients through a contractor to working with clients directly, which is a more profitable route.

The couple credits hard work and access to the valuable resources offered through Fuerza Local for getting them to where they are today. "Having patience is important," Damian said. "It's thanks to Fuerza Local that we are doing this."

BUILDING A FUTURE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION



1,020



**TOTAL NUMBER OF GRADUATES
FROM THE PROGRAM 2013-2023**

**ACCUMULATING 3,090
VOLUNTEERS HOURS**

83%

**NUMBER OF FUERZA LOCAL BUSINESS
OWNERS WHO DID BUSINESS WITH
OTHER FUERZA LOCAL GRADUATES**

60%

**OF GRADUATES CONTRIBUTE
TO LOCAL NONPROFITS
AND CHARITIES**



CELEBRATING

1M

1 MILLION DOLLARS
IN SCHOLARSHIPS

LOCAL FIRST INVESTED IN HISPANIC BUSINESSES IN ARIZONA





**FROM BAKER TO SUCCESSFUL
BUSINESS OWNER**

ANILU VICENTE
SHUNKA'S CREATIONS
3RD GENERATION / RURAL
SPRING 2023

YouTube was the most influential instructor for Anilu Vicente, who had dreamed of becoming a cake decorator and pastry chef since she was in elementary school.

"The pastry business captured not only my heart, but also my soul," Vicente said, explaining how she had always wanted to use cakes to create unique memories for people.

The biggest challenge of being self-taught, she said, was navigating a language barrier. It made finding resources more difficult. "I learned through trial and error and with a lot of frustration for not having a guide of what to do," she said. "The good thing is that I have always been positive, and I have had my wife and friend by my side who encouraged me to take risks and go in search of my dreams."

Part of Vicente's search included enrolling in Fuerza Local. There, language was not a barrier. While continuing to hone her skills as a cake decorator, she acquired valuable business skills, most notably related to billing. "One of my biggest mistakes was that I didn't know how to calculate costs," Vicente said. "I only charged for my ingredients but not my labor because I thought that was how it should be."

Fuerza Local showed her how to accurately value her hard work and talent, all at no cost to her.



Since 2003, Local First has passionately worked to build a diverse, inclusive and prosperous Arizona that is resilient, and celebratory of its diverse cultures.

FUERZA LOCAL ARIZONA

NIVEL EJECUTIVO

Launched in 2019, Nivel Ejecutivo is an advanced Spanish language business development program with 28 graduates to date. Nivel Ejecutivo, or 'next level executive' is an executive training program that provides rigorous entrepreneurial education to support business owners on their path to growth and success. It is designed to give business owners access to business knowledge, management skills, and relationships needed for their businesses to flourish in today's competitive marketplace.

The 6-month program includes 15 areas of focus taught by bilingual business professionals who are experts in their field. The curriculum was designed in partnership with a University in Mexico, UNAM.

SUPPORTIVE BUSINESS NETWORK

An additional strategy of Nivel Ejecutivo is creating a network of successful, growing businesses, across sectors, who can rely on each other for inspiration, information and referrals. Once connected, business owners have this revelation: "I don't have to figure it all out alone."

ACCESS TO CAPITAL & CONTRACTING

Nivel Ejecutivo provides opportunities to win contracts with government agencies and anchor institutions, and connects participants with public and private lenders to increase access to capital to grow their business.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS

Applicants must:

- lead a company registered in Arizona
 - have been in business at least 3 years
 - have at least 3 full-time employees on the payroll
- OR have total annual gross sales of at least \$300K
- Program tuition is \$500 per applicant





CESAR SALAS
CESAR GRAPHICS
2ND GENERATION NIVEL EJECUTIVO
FALL 2021

Local First Arizona marked two big milestones in 2023: The 20th anniversary of our founding, as well as the 10th anniversary of our Spanish-language business accelerator, Fuerza Local Acelerador de Negocios.

One of the early graduates of Fuerza Local was Cesar Salas. He opened his Phoenix print shop, Cesar Graphics, in 2008 and benefited from the business education that the accelerator provided.

A few years later, Salas wanted to advance further and signed up for Fuerza Local's Nivel Ejecutivo – a no-cost program offering education, development and a business support system for experienced business leaders. “I don't know how to delegate, and that's something I learned when I entered the executive-level program,” Salas said. “I know I still need to learn more, but I am applying what I learned day by day.”

By participating in the program and learning new skills – particularly networking – he said his business has grown by about 15%. And others have noticed. “People want to know more about the program and Fuerza Local,” he said. “I attend other groups and programs trying to network, but I never forget about Fuerza Local. It's something I will always promote.”

Overall, he said the course opened his mind, allowing him to learn how to implement certain practices that he knew he needed to instill in the business. “It's a guide on how to apply what you need to do but don't know how or where to start, so that you can grow your business, have more time, delegate and grow personally and professionally,” Salas said.

CELEBRATING MILESTONES FOR PROGRESS



LILIA MARTINEZ
LAS ISLITAS DE SAN BLAS
14TH GENERATION / SPRING 2020
2ND GENERATION NIVEL EJECUTIVO / FALL 2021

Lilia Martinez was a waitress and manager for 23 years before she made the leap to become an entrepreneur. She had watched owner after owner buy and sell the Mexican restaurant where she worked, causing uncertainty and sometimes loss of income for employees. So in 2018, when another proprietor left, she purchased the Phoenix business and took the reins of Las Islitas de San Blas herself. "I was very fond of the restaurant and loved what I did," Martinez said. "It was the opportunity that I had been waiting on for so many years. I no longer wanted to be an employee. I wanted to be my own boss and improve my financial situation."

Although the first years were difficult, Martinez soon found Fuerza Local and its executive training program, Nivel Ejecutivo. "I recommend that all entrepreneurs and business people seek advice and help before opening a business," she said. "It would have been easier if I had known about Fuerza Local (at the beginning) to avoid so many headaches."

Through the program, Martinez received expert advice on improving her business and didn't feel so alone, she said. Sales at Las Islitas de San Blas have grown 30%, she said. Fuerza Local and Nivel Ejecutivo are programs that "every business person should take," Martinez said. "I have grown enormously on a personal and professional level and opened my mind. In addition, it motivated me to set goals and achieve them, to manage my business better, to create alliances and to meet other businesspeople."

TAKING CHARGE: A NEW CHAPTER IN THE RESTAURANT'S HISTORY



THANK YOU TO OUR 2023 SPONSORS



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Thank you to these generous organizations, corporations and foundations that proudly supported the work of Fuerza Local in 2023. We could not do this work without their partnership!

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