

# AHWATUKEE FOOTHILLS NEWS

www.ahwatukee.com

Wednesday, June 16, 2021

@AhwatukeeFN | @AhwatukeeFN

## OVERCOMING GRIEF



P. 27

## NEW LOCAL RESTAURANT



P. 31

## BETTER PRE-SEASON



P. 36

## FUN EXPERIENCE



P. 39

# Kyrene superintendent charts path to normalcy

BY PAUL MARYNIAK  
AFN Executive Editor

She began her job on Jan. 1 at the peak of COVID-19's winter spike and has guided Kyrene School District as it inches toward normal.

But as she prepares for her first full school year at the district's helm, Superintendent Laura Toenjes knows the road to normal is fraught with challenges

Along with her finance team led by Chief Financial Officer Chris Hermann, Toenjes is walking a fiscal tightrope as the district balances the implications of an operating budget shortfall with its goal of maximizing services to more than 13,000 kids.



SUPERINTENDENT LAURA TOENJES

She and another team led by Assistant Superintendent Dr. Susie Ostmeier are studying

the results of this spring's AZMerit tests as Toenjes and Assistant Superintendent Mark Knight determine what might have to be done in the 2021-22 school year to address learning loss from the months of disruptions inflicted by the pandemic.

Then there are the current uncertainties of state funding created by the budget impasse in the state Legislature as well as the long-term financial implications of a chronic enrollment decline that has been exacerbated by COVID-19.

Atop all this, there's the question that looms large in some parents' minds for the coming year: what will the district do about facemasks?

Despite those challenges, Toenjes remains

SEE TOENJES PAGE 12

# On Father's Day, this dad eyeing new heights

BY DAVID M. BROWN  
AFN Contributor

On Father's Day, Ahwatukee resident Michael Ellenby will be training to climb Mount Elbrus in Russia.

Of course, he'll also be enjoying June 20 with his family - including daughter Jayde, 22, who graduated from Arizona State University a year ago with two bachelor's degrees in supply chain and business management. Today, she's a supply chain specialist with Shea Homes in San Diego.

An Ahwatukee resident since 2017, Ellenby has completed multiple Grand Canyon hikes,

including a one-day rim-to-river-return in May.

He has twice climbed Africa's tallest peak, 19,341-foot Mt. Kilimanjaro; reached the Nepal Everest Base Camp at 17,598 feet; and attempted 22,841-foot Aconcagua, the tallest summit in the Americas.

SEE DAD PAGE 16

On Father's Day, Michael Ellenby of Ahwatukee will be preparing for a mountain climbing adventure in Russia. He has climbed to the Nepal base camp of Mount Everest, but isn't interested in going any higher at that mighty summit. (Courtesy of Michael Ellenby)



## Enroll Your Child in Kyrene Kindergarten

**KyreneSchoolDistrict**

www.kyrene.org/kindergarten #discoverkyrene

LEARN
 LEAD
 ACHIEVE

## DAD FROM PAGE 1

"Hiking brings me to my happy place, and I appreciate the peace and discipline it brings me," Ellenby explained. "By travelling to the highest peaks, I see so much beauty, and rub shoulders with people who share my love for the outdoors.

"And, I am active in the environment, I become part of the scenery, rather than just passively taking photos from a tour bus."

At 18,510 feet in the Caucasus Mountains, Mount Elbrus is Europe's highest peak. He plans to challenge that summit during a 12-day trip in September with K2 Adventure Travel, based in Scottsdale.

The trip is part of his goal to ascend as many of the world's Seven Summits as possible.

But Mt. Everest isn't on the list.

"That place kills a lot of people," he said, "and I have a lot of respect for the mountains."

Living near South Mountain is propitious.

"You can find me most days hiking there before or after work," Ellenby said. "I have a specialized coach who helps me work through some chronic back issues. Apparently, I'm not 35 years old anymore and my back in particular is complaining."

Ahwatukee, he said, has perfectly met his varying lifestyle needs.

"It is quiet and very family oriented. I often bump into friends and neighbors at the supermarket, church, out hiking or at one of our great cafes," he explained.

When his daughter was living in the Valley, Jayde often accompanied him on hikes and other outings.

"I connect with her daily whenever possible from the climbs, and I know she loves the photos, the stories and the example I set for her," he said.

As a father, he also knows she worries – and for good cause, as hiking and climbing, especially the world's highest mountains, is dangerous.

"I have ended up in the hospital and in a decompression chamber after a diving accident, and three years ago, I contracted swine flu in Africa and had to spend three days in hospital when I returned," he explained.

"But I know the risks and only take calculated risks. I won't go skydiving or ride a motorbike on the roads, for example: too risky."

Born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, Ellenby enjoyed camping, hiking and sailing with his father, Rob, as well as enjoying



Michael Ellenby and his daughter Jayde also have gone on adventures, like this horseback riding trip through Hawaii. (Courtesy of Michael Ellenby)

similar activities in the Boy Scouts.

"My dad built 13 dinghies and catamarans over the years, and we got very competitive at both state and national levels," he recalled.

After attending university for almost three years, Ellenby joined IBM as its first hire in the country, beginning a career in technology and sales. During this time, he did several shorter triathlons, but his knees couldn't go the distance, so he start-



Michael Ellenby's daughter Jayde, seen here when she graduated from high school, is now a supply chain manager in San Diego. (Courtesy of Michael Ellenby)

ed hiking.

For the next 11 years, he worked for IBM in Japan and Singapore, where he earned an MBA in international management from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

"I credit that program to my skills in understanding business drivers, but also the importance of respect for cross-cultural differences, which extends to a general respect for all people I work with," he said.

In 1998, IBM transferred him to Connecticut and relocated to Arizona in 2002.

His late wife Beth was a Minnesota native and was familiar with Arizona since she had completed an MBA at Thunderbird, now an ASU school.

"I had the chance for a relocation with a new position, and we chose Arizona due to its beauty, access to outdoors activities and friendliness of the residents," he explained.

Since March, Ellenby has been vice president of business development at Phoenix-based YellowBird, which matches certified Environmental, Health, and Safety professionals in the construction, manufacturing, insurance and oil/gas industries.

The company's services include risk assessments, OSHA incident investigation, OSHA mock audits, training, industrial hygiene services and site safety.

When Beth died in 2008, Jayde was 9.

"I always tell people that I am a sole parent, not a single parent," he said.

Committed to entrepreneurship and innovation, he has worked as vice president of sales and marketing for a number of

technology start-ups.

"It's a very challenging process, and definitely not for the faint of heart. However, when successful, it is the most amazing experience," he said.

A fine public speaker as well, he spoke to a group six years ago, on "What Works in the Mountains Also Works in Business."

He connected his climbing skills and business management. For his theme, he considered his worldwide adventures, many with Jayde, and combined these with the lessons he's learned for the last 30 years in his career.

What the two arenas share are characteristics such as a positive attitude and collaboration, Ellenby said.

"Life is a team sport. Business is a team sport. One cannot climb a mountain without teamwork," he explained. "My daughter is part of my team. As a sole father, it was important for me that she was part of the process of climbing these mountains. It's just the two of us, so she had to be in my team."

He participates with three Valley nonprofits: Adelante Health; SEED SPOT, supporting social entrepreneurs; and Hunkapi (Lakota, "we are all related"), which connects people with horses for therapeutic answers to attention deficit disorder, autism spectrum disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, emotional disorder, addiction disorder and PTSD.

In addition, Ellenby mentors at the ASU Entrepreneurship and Innovation Program and is an advisor to its Master of Science in Innovation and Venture Development program.

"At ASU I can work with students as they explore the ways to bring their ideas and businesses to life," he said. "It is really rewarding to help the teams avoid the pitfalls, and I do what I can to set them up for success."

Ellenby acknowledged that he's not a world-class summiteer.

"I'm just a dude. I'm not especially talented physically, I'm not super smart, but I have learned about success by setting really high goals, working hard, sticking to them and not quitting. It comes down to the people around you, and how hard you work. Talent is over-rated," he said.

"I don't like the cold, camping in snow is not fun but I love the hard work, the discipline of training, and the feeling of getting to the objective," he added, "but the main reason I climb mountains is not to get to the top." ■