

From diversity to disease detection: Rosa Inchausti's leadership earns her a coveted ATHENA nod

By Barbi Walker-Walsh



When it comes to unexpected announcements, no one was more surprised to hear than Tempe City Manager Rosa Inchausti.

Inchausti has been selected as a finalist for the prestigious 2024 ATHENA Award, recognizing what selection committee members recognized as "her exceptional leadership, mentorship and community contributions."

Said Inchausti:

"I wasn't even expecting the call, so I was shocked, humbled and very much appreciative."

ATHENA awards, presented by the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, highlight women's significant contributions in the Valley.

They honor those who have achieved notable success in their fields and who serve as role models for others.

This year marks the 37th anniversary of the awards, with winners to be announced at a ceremony on Oct. 24.

A longtime public-agency innovator, Inchausti has been making waves in Tempe for over three decades.

She's racked up an impressive list of "firsts," including Tempe's first female city manager and bilingual marriage and family therapist.

As the city's first diversity director, she authored Tempe's related guidelines and collaborated with the City Council to pass the state's first-ever city-chartered anti-discrimination ordinance. As the first strategic management director, she implemented a system linking the city's budget directly to critical goals.

Her leadership as deputy city manager was also

pivotal in reducing opiate use in Tempe.

However, one of her most impactful contributions was pioneering wastewater science to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inchausti spearheaded Tempe's collaboration with Arizona State University professor Rolf Halden to identify COVID-19 hotspots through wastewater analysis, a method that has since become an international model for detecting infectious diseases.

"(It is) probably one of the highlights of my career here," Inchausti said. "It was such a scary time for all of us, but working with the CDC was a game changer."

The partnership allowed Tempe to pinpoint geographic hotspots, providing critical early warnings.

"I vividly remember being in Arkansas with my sister, visiting family, when Dr. Amy from the CDC called. She wanted to talk about adopting our technology. The CDC had been looking into sewer surveillance and saw Tempe as a potential test site."

Inchausti's efforts brought national attention to Tempe and secured a \$1 million grant from the CDC to develop the project further.

"This project allowed the CDC to fund Tempe and mentor other cities nationwide on the partnership with ASU, tool development, and collaboration with the city's water department," she said, which highlights her forward-thinking leadership.

The values and resilience she learned from her mother are at the heart of her commitment to public service.

"One of the strongest women in my life was my mother. She was an immigrant who left Cuba

during the communist takeover," Inchausti said. Inchausti added that her mother talked about the power the government had on people's lives, which led to her daughter's desire to work in the public sector. Her mother's experience left an indelible mark on her, she said, shaping her commitment to help make a difference in people's lives.

Growing up in a household of Cuban exiles who sought freedom from oppression, Inchausti's first language was Spanish. English was seldom spoken, even after the family relocated from Miami to Los Angeles during her childhood.

She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Loyola Marymount University and a master's in counseling education from Northern Arizona University.

Inchausti began her career with Tempe as a bilingual marriage therapist in the Social Services Office before transitioning to a role focused on diversity.

Knowing where you come from and maintaining that while moving forward are vital elements in Inchausti's leadership style.

Reflecting on her career, Inchausti emphasizes preserving Tempe's essence while planning for its future.

"I'm lucky to have been a resident for 30 years and raise my own kids here," she said.

"My kids tease me that I always say the brand for Tempe should be 'big city amenities, small-town feel.'"

"As the city continues to grow, we need to stay agile and flexible, yet always return to the soul and DNA of Tempe, ensuring it remains accessible and connected to its residents."