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The *Degrees of Success*® podcast now brings University of Phoenix alumni stories to life through powerful mini-documentaries featuring graduates doing the incredible. From Brian Dickinson's Addy Award-winning Mount Everest climb to our newest film spotlighting MMA fighter and two-time entrepreneur Orlando Jimenez, these stories showcase what our alumni and legacy honorees can achieve.

Watch the full documentaries, explore more alumni stories, and subscribe on the *Degrees of Success*® YouTube channel.



Brian Dickinson

MBA, '03 | Author, U.S. Navy veteran,
Mt. Everest summiteer

Orlando Jimenez

MBA, '24 | Entrepreneur, MMA fighter,
Founder of Dos Bros Coffee

Fannie McClendon

WWII Veteran | Namesake of the UOPX Major
Fannie Griffin-McClendon Scholarship

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their stories



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UOPX

PRESIDENT CHRIS LYNNE

Dear Alum,

In 2026, University of Phoenix will celebrate its 50th anniversary. This milestone reflects half a century of commitment to provide adult learners with flexible, career-relevant education. From our founding in 1976 to today, we have built a legacy shaped by access, relevance and impact. That legacy continues through our alumni, our skills-mapped curriculum and our alliances with more than 2,500 employers who help connect learning to opportunity and drive workforce innovation.

This issue of *Alumni Chronicles Magazine* explores the idea of legacy: how it begins, how it grows and how it inspires others. One of the most exciting expressions of that legacy is a new recognition initiative: the UOPX® Alumni Luminaries.

We launched the UOPX Alumni Luminaries program to honor graduates whose achievements exemplify excellence in the categories of Community Leadership, Industry Leadership, and Entrepreneurship. Seventy-six honorees are selected each year by a panel of University leaders, led by Provost and Chief Academic Officer John Woods, PhD. These extraordinary alumni are leading with purpose, shaping their fields and creating meaningful change that extends beyond their organizations and communities.

Each Luminary receives a digital badge specific to their category, a congratulatory gift and recognition across University platforms. This is an annual honor, and nominations for future cohorts are now open. To nominate yourself or someone you know, visit phoenix.edu/alumni/luminaries/nominate.

As we look toward the next 50 years, we remain focused on supporting our students and alumni with tools to grow, lead and give back, empowering the next generation of changemakers and lifelong learners.

Warm regards,

Chris Lynne

President, University of Phoenix

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08

On the Job

CEO Janet Walsh reflects on how a love of horses inspired a career in leadership.



11

Meet Our Alumni

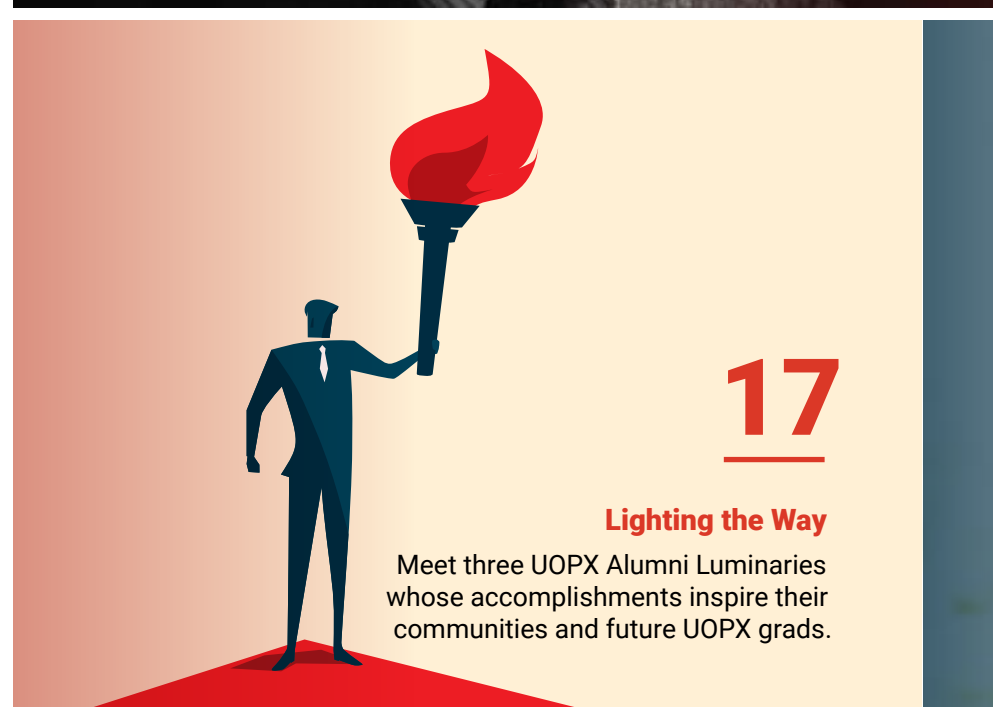
For the Johnsons, school ties are just as powerful as family ties.



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The Rise of a Phoenix

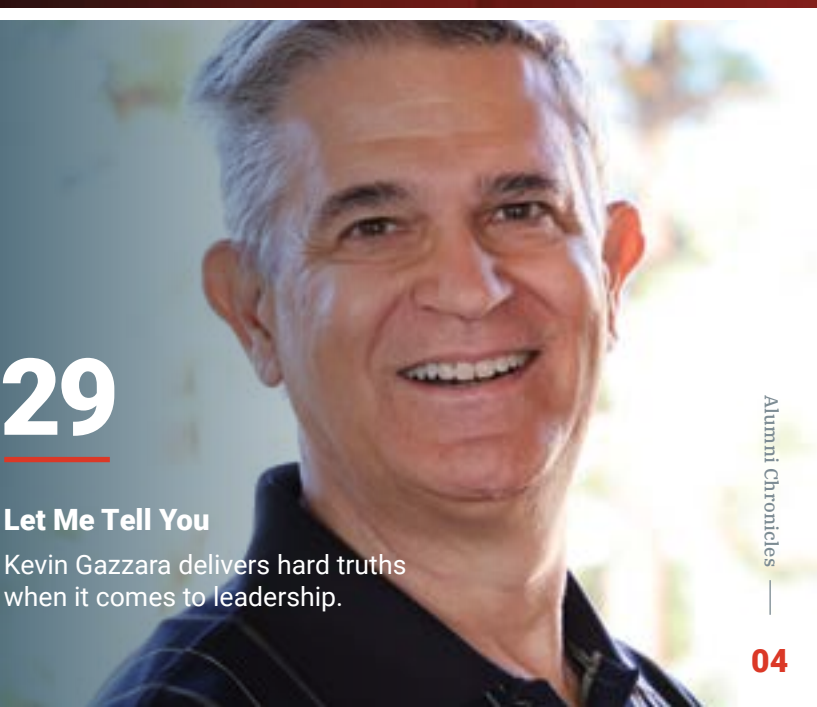
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Let Me Tell You

Kevin Gazzara delivers hard truths when it comes to leadership.

New^{at} the U

Catch up on the new and notable happenings from UOPX.

By Elizabeth Exline

Photography courtesy of DfilmK Productions.



The TEDxMallardCreek team in Charlotte. Left to right: Wyona Eaton, Andrea Phillips, Janice DaCosta and Schwanna Jenkins.

Talk of the Town

University of Phoenix is all about lifelong learning, and Janice DaCosta (BSB/GM, 2014) is here for it. In fact, she's making sure everyone can be here for it. In November 2025, this president of the Charlotte alumni chapter launched TEDxMallardCreek, which brought together 14 speakers and more than 130 attendees. The title, "Threads That Shape Tomorrow," captured the event's diverse voices and perspectives, which covered such topics as anxiety, health equity and epilepsy, among others.

The seeds of TEDxMallardCreek were planted when DaCosta attended a different TEDx event

in Charlotte. "I'm into literature and learning," she says with a smile. "There were so many aha moments." Her friend remarked that DaCosta could build out such an event, and while DaCosta initially scoffed, her natural ambition, curiosity and planning skills eventually stepped in so that she replied, "Why not?"

Leveraging the talents of fellow UOPX alumni, including members of the Charlotte alumni chapter, DaCosta built a sold-out event that honors a personal commitment to intellectual growth that is shared by her alma mater.

→ **Learn More:** tedxmallardcreek.com

WATCH. LEARN. REPEAT.

What do AI, overspending and looking for a job all have in common? They are just some of the topics covered in UOPX's suite of on-demand webinars. Available to the general public, each webinar features practical insights and information on topics like personal finance, going back to school as an adult and the career landscape.

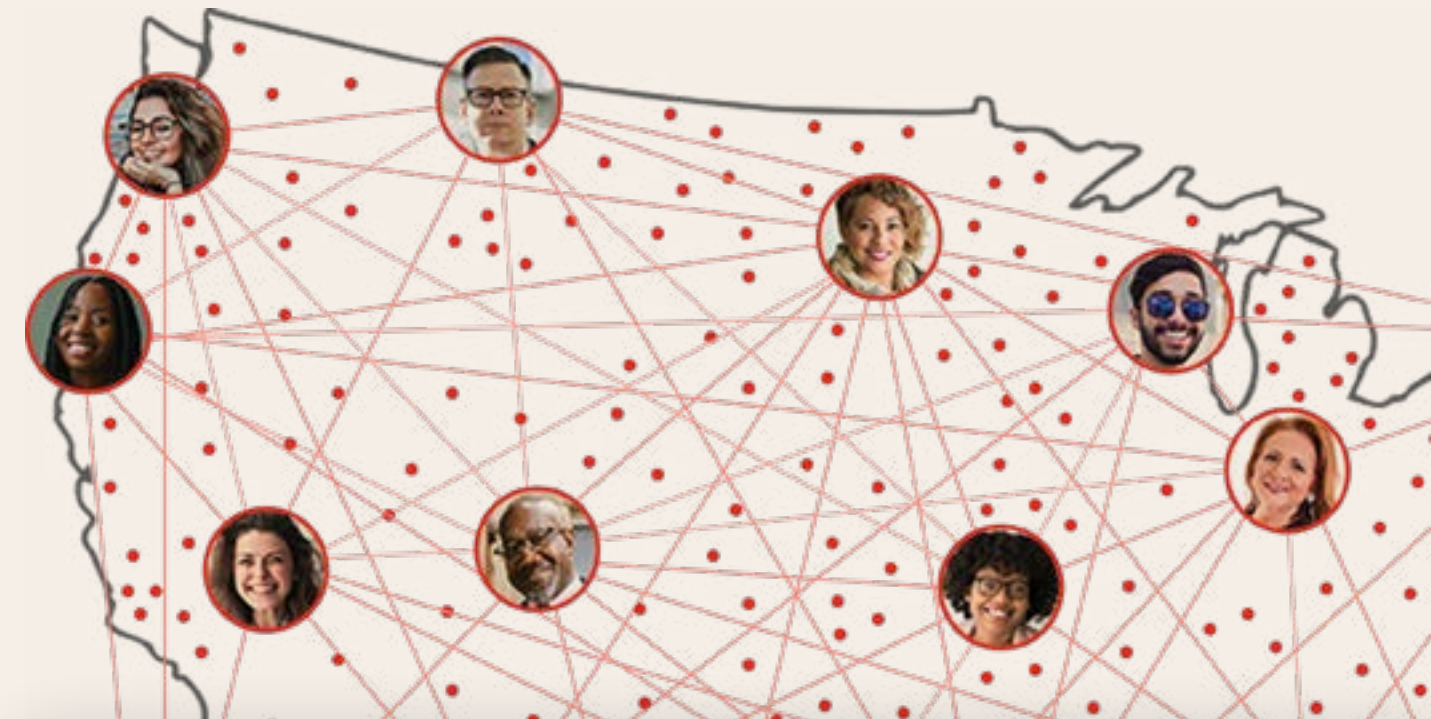
→ **Press play:** phoenix.edu/events/webinars

DON'T FORGET TO RSVP

There's a reason why alumni flock to UOPX homecomings. Actually, there are lots of reasons. Designed as a way for alumni to connect with one another over memorable events and experiences, each homecoming celebration is big, festive and full of fun surprises. This season is no exception. In addition to time-tested favorites like baseball

games and boat cruises, homecoming locales may include amusement parks, immersive art experiences and museums. Fourteen events are scheduled from April through August, including opportunities in new locations.

→ **Reserve your spot:** phoenix.edu/alumni/homecoming.html



KEEP IN TOUCH!

Want to stay in the loop on networking events, recognition opportunities, homecoming details and all things alumni? Then make sure we know how to reach you. Scan the code to update your contact info.





UOPX alumna Erica McCray is surprised with the prestigious Milken Educator Award.

In Her Own Words

UOPX alumna and elementary school principal Erica McCray (MAED/TED-E, 2012) experienced what might be the surprise of a lifetime when she attended a schoolwide assembly in December 2025. As the principal of the school, she was prepared to celebrate her students during the event. But once there, she discovered it was her, not the students, who was being celebrated: She received the Milken Educator Award and an unrestricted \$25,000 cash prize.

McCray approaches leadership in education using project-based learning, encouraging teachers to use real-time student data for managing instruction and overseeing progress. Only 30 educators receive the Milken honor each year. Here, she shares the role her own education played in helping others, how parents and educators alike can support students and what advice she'd give to aspiring educators.

What drew you to education as a profession?

I believed in the power of schools and the ability to shape a child's future. Helping students and teachers grow and reach their full potential is what inspires me every day.

How did your master's degree in education prepare you for your career journey?

My master's degree strengthened my understanding of instructional practices, literacy development and student support. It taught me how to use data intentionally and gave me the leadership foundation I have relied on as a teacher, literacy coach and now principal.


Which accomplishments do you feel best qualified you for the Milken Educator Award?

My commitment to fostering a student-centered, data-driven school culture is what I believe best qualified me for the Milken award. I have prioritized improving academic outcomes, supporting teachers through coaching and implementing systems that provide the tools we need to respond to student needs quickly and effectively.

What advice would you give to aspiring educators?

Teach with your heart, stay adaptable and embrace learning every day. Most importantly, never forget that the work you do truly matters.

What is one thing educators and parents can do to support academic success?

Educators can take the time to understand their students and tailor instruction to meet their individual needs. Parents can read with their children and engage in daily conversations. These small, consistent interactions have a big impact on both literacy and a child's confidence. 

Watch McCray accept her award:



ON THE JOB

Janet Walsh Takes the Reins of Leadership

By Shannon Sharpe

UOPX Alumni Luminary Dr. Janet Walsh has built a career guiding companies as they expand around the world — and it's all because of a horse.

Photography by Michael Paras



UOPX alumna Janet Walsh with her horse Scotty in New York state.

When asked how she found success, Dr. Janet Walsh (DBA, 2016) has an unexpected answer. "It's very simple," says the president and CEO of the international consulting firm Birchtree Global. "Ever since I was 3 years old, all I wanted was a horse."

As she grew up, Walsh came to realize that such a huge purchase required financial success, so she set aside dreams of being an archaeologist to instead study economics and Japanese. "I had spent a high school semester abroad in El Salvador and was interested in trade between Japan and Central America," she explains. "I thought, 'This sounds important. This will earn me enough money to buy a horse.'"

Early Leadership Lessons

While Walsh's career would evolve to founding her global advisory company — the firm provides legal, tax, HR and strategic infrastructure for companies expanding across borders — it was an on-campus food-service job where she first

developed her leadership skills. This experience led to a postgraduation job with a food-service operation. "I ran parties of 4,000 people with no problem," she says. "Every day in that job, I planned menus, scheduled orders and directed the staff. Those types of responsibilities were natural to me."

Establishing herself as a leader at such a young age gave her confidence. More importantly, it gave her the ability to achieve her dream — one year after she graduated from college, Walsh bought a horse.

As she moved up in her career (going on to work at a bank and then in upper management HR at several international corporations), she learned that leadership isn't just about authority. It takes good judgment, empathy and the ability to stay calm when chaos hits. It also means understanding that no matter where people are on the career ladder, they bring a skill set.

"When I was starting out, I looked at my managers as people who knew everything,"

Walsh notes. “I eventually learned not to assume competence. Verify. Bring your own expertise and data to the table, and prove your point with evidence, not emotion. That’s how you earn respect.”

It was a conversation over dinner in Shanghai that stirred Walsh’s leap to entrepreneurship. Her companions — women leaders in their respective industries — were lamenting the lack of independent global business advisory services. “It made sense to be an agnostic provider of global market entry services,” Walsh says. “I could bring the best and the brightest employees to focus on a particular company strategy, rather than the company having to adapt to what their supplier could provide.”

Since that initial inkling, she has grown her company into a global powerhouse, which provides boots-on-the-ground strategy in 87 countries and all 50 states. Always looking for the next opportunity, she later founded a subsidiary, Birchtree Performance HR, which focuses on increasing financial performance through human-capital analytics and AI.

Leaders Build Knowledge and Community

“Experience and expertise were important,” Walsh says about her success. “So was continuing my education through attaining my MBA and then my DBA.” It was in pursuit of her doctorate that she turned to University of Phoenix. “It offered the degree I wanted, but I could do it online as opposed to spending time commuting to a campus,” she says.

That advantage served her well: It allowed her to dedicate more time to building her company. And it is from this vantage point that she now values similar qualities in other leaders. “I want to work with folks who bring a set of skills to the table that I don’t have and who are willing to share their knowledge,” she says.

She emphasizes that being kind and a team player is just as important. “I look for people who are thoughtful and have a sense of humor,” she says. “I want to work with someone who brings cookies or doughnuts to their employees. It’s important to acknowledge people who are doing a great job and show you appreciate them.”

How Leaders Negotiate

Life, as the saying goes, is about compromise and, often — as Walsh can testify — so is business. But if you need to compromise, she says, don’t do it without knowing all the facts. “Before you make a decision, bring together the best minds you have who’ve worked through similar situations in the

The UOPX Alumni Luminaries program recognizes 76 exceptional alumni each year for their professional and philanthropic accomplishments.

past,” she says. “Information is the key to making the best decision you can.”

There are some situations, however, where negotiation is a nonstarter. “You don’t compromise your personal or company values,” Walsh says firmly, as they are the foundation everything else rests upon.

Recognizing the values of others is just as important as knowing your own, she notes. That ability is especially important when overseeing an international company whose job is to guide corporations through global expansion. “If I hear, ‘That’s not how we do it here,’ I don’t get angry,” Walsh says. “I ask why they think that way. Understanding people’s context is the first step in building relationships.”

Good Leaders Never Give Up

“I’ve had a great opportunity to work with a number of well-known executives,” notes Walsh, who was named a UOPX Alumni Luminary in 2025 for her accomplishments in business. This experience


helped her recognize a common thread among successful leaders: perseverance.

Perhaps the best example of this, she says, goes back to her love of horses. “Breaking a horse is a challenge,” she says. “It weighs 1,300 pounds. It’s going to do what it wants. But if you give it some carrots it might let it pet you. You need to build up trust until it lets you ride it. It’s about perseverance.”

While Walsh has established herself as a well-respected businessperson, her career also led her back to her childhood dream of being an archaeologist, all thanks to that horse she purchased. “We were riding and he stopped,” she says. “I looked down to see arrowheads. I jumped off and thought, ‘What have we discovered?’ It turned out to be an archaeological site.”

Jumping into amateur archaeology, she gained membership in The Explorers Club, a multidisciplinary science society, for which she later chaired its ethics and governance committee and now serves as management committee chair. Recently she learned she had been awarded the

Edward C. Sweeney Medal by the organization for her contributions.

“So, see?” she says with a laugh. “I owe my dedication and career to a horse.” 

How to Learn Leadership

Looking to develop your leadership skills? University of Phoenix’s undergraduate Certificate in Leadership and Management offers foundational knowledge for aspiring business leaders.

Learn more: phoenix.edu/online-business-certificates/leadership-management.html

A FAMILY THAT FLOCKS TOGETHER

By Elizabeth Exline



Julie Johnson (right) catches up with her son, Elliot, and daughter-in-law, Nicole, both fellow Phoenixes.

What do you do when you find yourself divorced with six kids, a shared debt of a quarter million dollars and a high school diploma as your only prospect of moving forward? If you're Julie Johnson (AAHA, 2006; BSHA, 2009), you work hard. And then you work harder.

Photography by Margarita Toler

'My Husband Wanted a Baseball Team'

Seventy years old and recently retired, Johnson exudes a certain equanimity when reflecting on her life. Some experiences have been extraordinary, like the fact that four out of five of her sons pursued careers in professional baseball, one in the Major Leagues. Some experiences have been extremely relatable, like having to start over after divorce.

Throughout it all, she has brought a bootstrap mentality that would make her pioneer forebears proud. (She is a fourth-generation resident of Thatcher, a small Arizona town her ancestors helped found.)

While divorce brought relief and freedom, it also came with substantial challenges. "I went from a very large salary, because we owned six businesses, to ... [being a single parent] with six kids," Johnson says. "I had to find a job, and I was a high school graduate."

Tellingly — and perhaps characteristically — of Johnson, she didn't just find a job. She found several, and she wasn't too proud for any of them. She started as a carhop at a drive-thru burger chain and took on other odd jobs until her friend recommended a part-time role at a regional hospital in Safford, Arizona.

"I went from a very large salary, because we owned six businesses, to **BEING A SINGLE PARENT** with six kids. I had to find a job, and I was a high school graduate."

Johnson got married when she was 17 and moved to Indiana for a year with her husband. She says it was at about that time that he decided they wouldn't be going to college. Johnson ruefully notes that, upon this matrimonial mandate, she forewent the scholarships she'd been offered at two state universities for piano performance.

Instead, she and her husband returned to Thatcher and started managing a restaurant. The years passed, the babies came and their entrepreneurial success grew. "My husband wanted a baseball team," Johnson says smiling, and nearly got it: They had five sons and a daughter. But after nearly 20 years, the marriage soured, and Johnson felt she needed to get out both for her safety and that of her children.

This was the beginning of a transformation for Johnson, although she didn't know it then. Not only would that role become a gateway to a career, but it would also open up a pathway to education for herself and her family.

Don't Get Mad. Get Even.

Johnson's third son and fourth child, Elliot Johnson (AAFB, 2012; CERT/FINP, 2016; BSB/FP, 2016), admires his mother's work ethic. "After years of being passed over for promotions due to lack of education, she rolled her up sleeves and did the work and removed the objection," he says.

A former MLB player and currently the global sports and entertainment director for Morgan

Stanley, Elliot likely got his own work ethic from his mom. He points out that she held down multiple jobs while pursuing first her associate degree and then her bachelor's degree. She cleaned houses. She kept books.

"I'd usually get about three hours of sleep," Johnson recalls with a laugh.

When she was a supervisor in the admitting department at the hospital, Johnson resolved to ask for a raise. Her colleague encouraged her, noting that he'd received a raise without even asking for one.

"When I asked, [do] you know what the CFO said to me? He said, 'You don't even have any education. I can go down to [a big box store] and find anybody to do what you do.'"

Johnson didn't get dejected. She got mad. This, she thought, was one more reason to "remove the objection," as Elliot put it. Another reason was that she had her eye on a fellowship opportunity through one of her associations. To be eligible for that, she had to have a bachelor's degree.

"It does take bravery to go back to school when you're 50 years old," she says emphatically. Johnson had good reasons to be brave.

A Family of Phoenixes


Johnson, CBCS, CHAM, FAHM, MAOM, completed both her associate and bachelor's degrees through UOPX. She went on to earn her master's degree at another institution, which gave her perspective on what she liked about UOPX and what she can

do as a faculty member in the College of Health Professions to help students like her. (She joined the UOPX faculty in 2013.) What surprised her the most about going to school was that she actually enjoyed it. She liked learning, she liked becoming more competent and she liked growing as an individual.

Johnson wasn't the only one affected by her return to higher education. All her children have gone on to pursue higher education. Her daughter, Lisa, recently completed her master's degree in nursing through UOPX, Johnson says. Elliot went to UOPX while playing baseball professionally. Johnson has been there every step of the way, whether reading her daughter's papers or counseling Elliot on how to manage school and baseball at the same time.

The result is that Johnson and her children — and even her daughter-in-law — are now a family of Phoenixes. And while Johnson has retired from the hospital, she continues to work with UOPX as an instructor. One of her biggest accomplishments has been co-creating a technology course on electronic health records. "It was the most work I've ever done in my life," she says. "It just expanded my world tremendously."

Yet hard work has never been seen as an obstacle to this family. From her pioneer forebears to her children's career aspirations to her rise from the ashes of her marriage, Johnson has proved that hard work is actually an opportunity.

"Even if it's not easy, our family has no problem achieving and embracing any challenge," Elliot observes. "It's who we are as a family." 



HE SAID ★ SHE SAID

What is your best UOPX memory? The Johnson family weighs in on supportive instructors and teaching styles.

"I had an instructor whose online teaching style I mirror today. She'd put in things that she wanted us to know that were not in the curriculum but were related. She'd put in these different subjects to think about, and I thought, 'I love this. I love having something to research and answer the questions.' And I definitely felt like she really cared when I was thinking about becoming faculty [which would require a master's degree]. She and I actually had a conversation. It was over several weeks we spoke about becoming faculty and what it would take."

- Julie Johnson

"I had a teacher who decided to take an extra step and went out of his way to help me. He praised my background and encouraged me to find ways [to] leverage my MLB credentials in a way that would benefit my future clientele and my family. He was 100% correct, and I continue to be grateful for his advice even when he didn't have to provide it to me."

- Elliot Johnson

"My most memorable experience as a UOPX student was completing my head-to-toe physical assessment check-off on campus. This pass/fail examination required both verbal explanation and precise demonstration of clinical skills. In the days leading up to the assessment, I rehearsed so intensely that I found myself performing the steps in my sleep. The stress was very real — yet so was the pride I felt when I not only passed but earned a perfect score. That moment served as a powerful reminder that hard work, preparation and dedication yield meaningful results. It remains one of the most validating experiences of my academic career."

- Lisa Johnson Bury



Rooting and Reaching

How Alumni Leaders Ignite Connections

By Elizabeth Exline



Opici M. Becton-Richmond, MEEd
(BSHS/M, 2014)
President-Elect, Raleigh

Encouraging Engagement

What has been the biggest learning curve for you as a leader?

Learning to trust the timing and the process. I am a visionary spirit. I see the potential in people, places and possibilities. But leadership has taught me to move with patience, to honor collaboration and to allow others to shine in their strengths. I've learned to balance inspiration with structure and to create space for everyone's voice.

What legacy would you like to leave with the chapter?

I want our chapter to be a place where people feel seen, valued and uplifted. A space where we lead with kindness, joy, integrity and genuine support. My hope is that alumni walk away feeling rooted in connection and inspired to pour back into their communities.

Why should others consider joining or leading a chapter?

We are better when we grow together. Alumni chapters offer a community where your journey is understood, your talents are celebrated and your voice matters. Joining opens doors to friendships, mentorship, learning and service. Leading allows you to help shape a network that nurtures others. It's an opportunity to give and receive, to support and be supported, to know that there is always room for you at the table.

Take the Next Step

When you take on a leadership role with your local alumni chapter, you do more than enhance your resumé. (Although there's that too.) You grow your network and elevate your strategic skills. Most importantly, you influence rising graduates on their professional and life journeys. Find out how you can step in — and step forward. phoenix.edu/leader-form

Driven to Give Back

What has been the biggest learning curve for you as a leader?

Leading others through change. I've learned how important it is to provide clarity, reassurance and consistency when transitioning, and to model resilience so the team feels supported.

Looking ahead, what are you most excited about for your chapter?

I am most excited about the future of the chapter and our positive engagement in the community. I have noticed that our leadership team members display such passionate and unselfish hearts where they are willing to make a difference in the communities we serve.

What legacy would you like to leave with the chapter?

I hope my work leaves a legacy of stronger community connection. I want alumni to feel valued, supported and engaged, and to know they are part of a network that continues long after graduation. I want the alumni to feel that their involvement with the chapter is rewarding.

Building Community Connections

What was the catalyst for you to lead an alumni chapter?

The catalyst was a desire to pay it forward. My passion and drive in leadership have allowed me to focus on building and supporting the community while bringing future graduates and fellow alumni together. My desire is to see the Phoenix alumni chapter thrive.

Why should others consider joining or leading a chapter?

The importance of being affiliated with the University of Phoenix Alumni Association offers networking opportunities, social and educational events, mentorship programs and lifelong friendships. Alumni who consider becoming a leader will have an opportunity to enhance their leadership skills and make an impact in the community.

Looking ahead, what are you most excited about for your chapter?

Having a lifelong connection to the University. Once a graduate walks across the stage, it's not the end of the road. The Alumni Association is an extension of a vibrant road to new opportunities.

Correction

In the Alumni Chapter Spotlight of the Fall 2025 issue (Issue 7), the vice president of the Augusta alumni chapter was incorrectly identified as Lelia Gardner. Her name is Lela Heath. We regret the error.



Linda F. Forge
(BSHCS, 2005;
MBA, 2007)
President, Atlanta



Bianca Sanders, PsyM
(MBA, 2014)
VP of Community Affairs,
Phoenix

LIGHTING THE WAY



Celebrating three UOPX Alumni Luminaries who earned their degrees in different decades and are making an impact.

By Shannon Sharpe

If David Dodge (BSB/M-39, 1999) knows anything, it's that life rarely goes as planned. He also knows that real leadership requires making education a priority, even when the timing is far from perfect. He learned that not as a teenager headed straight to a four-year university, but as a working father in his early 40s.

“I Wasn't the Smartest Guy on the Block”

Dodge grew up on a 2,000-acre ranch in California's San Luis Obispo County, a childhood defined by work and self-reliance. For years, he assumed college had little value. “We'd have visitors who were very well educated but couldn't turn a wrench,” he says. “I thought, ‘I don't want to be like that guy.’”

In his early 20s, Dodge changed his line of thought and began taking community college classes in Southern California, but life pulled hard in the other direction. He married, welcomed two children, lost his father-in-law and then faced his wife Gwen's leukemia diagnosis. “Our priorities were family first and everything else second,” he says.

He continued taking classes when he could, but his job in construction management became his full-time focus. Over 17 years, he worked his way up yet hit a ceiling. A hiring manager spelled it out: Applications without degrees “don't even get looked at.” That was Dodge's breaking point. “Enough is enough,” he said he told himself. “I'm going to get my degree.”

When Dodge enrolled at University of Phoenix, the world widened. “I found out I wasn't the smartest guy on the block,” he says. “I realized there are different ways to look at and approach things.” The University's team-based learning model sharpened his leadership instincts, taught him to work with various personalities and pushed him past what he thought he knew. “It took me out of the ‘fake it till you make it’ mindset and propelled me forward.”

That shift led to a fast rise, with Dodge spending the last 15 years of his career as a vice president at the manufacturer McKeon Door Company. When hiring his staff, education became a top priority. “If you've got enough courage to complete a degree, I can work with you,” he says. “It shows loyalty and drive.”

Today, being named a Luminary carries weight for him. It isn't just a distinction — it's a chance to inspire others. “I want people to know how my degree changed my life,” he says. “I would like my light to shine on other people.”



Hannah Hurckes

“Creativity Without Structure Takes You Only So Far”

Hannah Hurckes (BSAAC, 2024) didn't set out to found and run a supply-chain logistics company. Her plan was to be an interior designer. “I wanted to pursue my creative side,” she says, “but I quickly realized that creativity without structure takes you only so far.”

Landing a job as a payroll analyst at a logistics company satisfied the other side of her brain. “I've always had an affinity for numbers,” Hurckes says. With her brother already working in the trucking industry, she saw an opportunity to immerse herself in the world of freight, dispatch and nonstop movement of goods. “I love puzzles,” she says. “In logistics, creative problem-solving happens daily.”

Rising rapidly in her career, Hurckes founded Boss Lady Logistics in 2016, coordinating trucking routes for national retailers. “I was still in the process of getting my accounting degree from University of Phoenix when I founded my company,” she says. “Once I finished that, it was pretty evident that I needed more because I'm a lifelong learner.”

She had the drive but was short on time. “When I started at UOPX, I had just given birth to my second son,” says Hurckes, who now has three

children. She was in her early 20s, managing a full-time job and raising young children. She doesn't sugarcoat the challenge. “I wasn't just working 40 hours a week on my business,” she says. “I was also working an additional 15 to 20 hours a week in school.” But balancing everything gave her the leadership skills she uses today. “I learned about managing time, working with people and accountability,” she explains.

For her, being named a Luminary is meaningful not because of the spotlight but because of what it represents. “It's a chance to show other women your dreams don't have to wait,” she says. She's also learned to not beat herself up if all doesn't go to plan. “Progress over perfection,” she says. “Success isn't about having everything figured out. It's about showing up and leading with purpose.”



David Dodge



LUMINARIES

FAST FACTS

The UOPX Alumni Luminaries program honors 76 alumni each year for extraordinary achievements.

Categories of Recognition

- Industry Leadership: Having an innovative and measurable professional impact.
- Entrepreneurship: Leading successful ventures as a founder or business builder.
- Community Leadership: Improving communities through service or advocacy.

FAQs

What are the UOPX Alumni Luminaries?

It's an elite group of 76 graduates honored each year for their contributions in one of three categories. Honorees receive a gift, digital badges, recognition on the UOPX website and potential opportunities for further collaboration.

What if I'm nominated but not selected?

You will be eligible again next year.

Can honorees be inducted again?

Honorees may be nominated again, but there's no guarantee they'll be selected a second time.

Do honorees have any obligations?

None. They receive the honor and credentials with no obligation to promote, engage or join additional events or collaborative opportunities.



Jorean Henderson

“When You Run Tough Stores and Still Win, That Means Something

Jorean Henderson's (AAFB, 2011; BSB/M, 2013; MBA, 2015) story starts the way a lot of great American stories do: in a kitchen. At age 12, the now owner of the mobile food business Momo's Cajun Eatz was washing pots and mopping floors at a soul food restaurant in New Orleans. By high school, he was working nights at a bakery as a pot washer, which really meant he was learning to mix dough and build cakes after hours. "I didn't have the experience, but I wanted to learn," he says.

Henderson was learning the ins and outs of the hospitality industry, although he assumed he'd follow his mom and aunt into healthcare. In high school, he interned with a nurse anesthetist at the local VA hospital. But once he got to college, he knew it wasn't his path. He dropped out, regrouped and followed a cousin's tip that a travel plaza was hiring. That small decision cracked open the door that would become his career.

Henderson applied for a manager position, and within six months he was running his own unit. As his career evolved, he moved from Louisiana to Missouri to Alabama with his now wife. Each new position was the opportunity to learn skills ranging from franchising to multi-unit operations. "You have to learn and you have to manage people," he says. "It's not easy." But it clicked.

There was, however, one question that followed Henderson to every job: Where did he go to school? He got tired of having no answer. With a full-time leadership schedule that ruled out a traditional classroom, he enrolled at University of Phoenix. "It was really

convenient," he says. "You still had deadlines, but I didn't have to physically be on campus." The financial courses reshaped the way he operated and taught him to read P&Ls with confidence. "I learned that you can't just know your numbers," he says. "You need to understand those numbers."

Over two decades, Henderson ran restaurants in tough markets, trained team members who rose into leadership and worked his way into director-level operations. He earned major recognition for strong performance in some of the hardest neighborhoods a restaurant can operate in, he says. "When you run tough stores and still win, that means something."

His combination of experience and education led to his founding Momo's Cajun Eatz. For all of his success, the legacy Henderson cares about comes down to people. As his career grew, he was able to help others grow their own. "The better they did, the better I did," he says. "Show up, lift others and keep moving."

NOMINATE A LUMINARY



Know an alum who's leading the way in business, entrepreneurship or philanthropy? We want to know more!

Nominate a Luminary today:
phoenix.edu/alumni/luminaries/nominate.html

The Rise of a Phoenix

A lot can change in half a century. As UOPX celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, we look back at the events and milestones that gave the University its wings.

In the 1970s, higher education wasn't built for working adults. Class schedules were rigid. Adult learners often needed six to 10 years just to earn a bachelor's degree. Against this backdrop (and against steep odds), University of Phoenix founder John Sperling had a revolutionary idea: What if he created a University for working adults in which interactive, small-group instruction could replace impersonal, mass lectures — all during hours that actually worked for students?

Here's a 50-year timeline of how his dream took flight.

“ If imitation is the best form of flattery, Sperling should be pleased. Today, most educational institutions offer programs tailored to adult higher education.”

- Future magazine, Spring 2006

1976

1977

John Sperling establishes University of Phoenix to provide educational opportunities for working adults. It follows his efforts in California, where he had been faculty at San Jose State University and researched adult education and professional development.

The first class is held with eight students in a small classroom.

1978

1983

Since 1978, University of Phoenix has been accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (hlcommission.org). In 2022–2023, the University's accreditation was continued for another 10-year period.

Enrollment in the growing University soars to more than 2,600 students.



1989

1996

The University is an early adopter of online education and begins with a pilot of an online class. UOPX will go on to become a pioneer of distance learning technology — and create a more flexible path for adult learners to pursue a college degree.

University of Phoenix instructors have an average of 29.4 years of professional experience. This means current faculty began their careers around 1996 — bringing decades of experience and leadership to today's UOPX classrooms.

1998

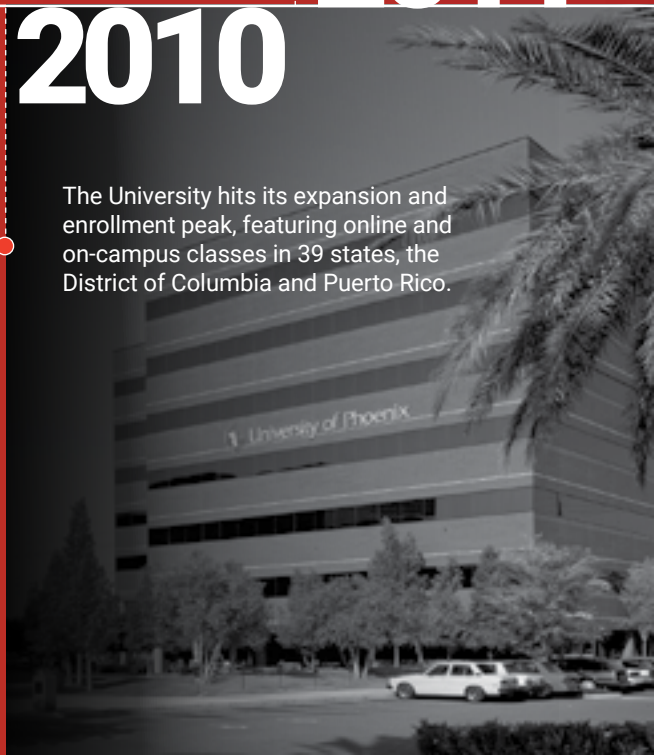
University of Phoenix launches its doctoral program with the Doctor of Management in Organizational Leadership. Today, the University offers five doctoral programs.

2010

The University hits its expansion and enrollment peak, featuring online and on-campus classes in 39 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

The University establishes the importance of credit mobility, applying more than 12 million transfer credits over a five-year period.

2011



University of Phoenix graduates its

1 millionth alum.

UOPX introduces its Career Services for Life® commitment, designed to support students from day one until day done. Active students and graduates gain lifetime access to career coaching, tools and resources to help them pursue their goals.

UOPX introduces competency-based education: classes where students can leverage their professional experience to focus on learning new skills after demonstrating their knowledge of others. This offers an expedited pathway to education for self-motivated and highly disciplined students with extensive work experience.

To keep a pulse on career perceptions, the inaugural Career Optimism Index® study is released under the umbrella of the new University of Phoenix Career Institute®. Employer perceptions have since been added to this annual study, providing a comprehensive look at the disconnects, insights and solutions for American workers.

In October 2024, the University completes the planned and approved teach-out and closure of all ground campuses with the exception of the Phoenix Campus location. This enables UOPX to serve working adults in their preferred online format.

2018

2020

2020

2020

2021

2023

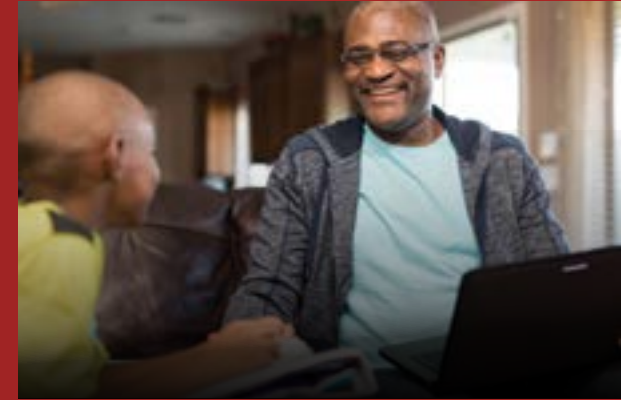
2024

2025

When the COVID-19 pandemic changes education almost overnight, University of Phoenix helps lead the way. Positioned with deep knowledge of how to deliver education online, the University supports several thousand local campus students in the shift to online school in a matter of days. Additionally, University leaders lead free, virtual learning courses and webinars for teachers in K-12 and higher education.

Following an institution-wide shift to skills-aligned learning that started several years earlier, 100% of the University's associate, bachelor's and master's degree programs open for new enrollment are aligned to career-relevant workplace skills.

The University continues to prioritize career readiness through skills-aligned undergraduate and master's degree programs as well as digital badges that allow students to showcase their learning.



STAY IN THE GAME:

How Online Universities Can Retain Students



Online — and nontraditional — students are growing in numbers, but they also have lower rates of retention. What can schools, and students, do about it?

By Megan McMorris

While student retention is a concern for any university, it's of particular interest for online schools. Research has shown that graduation rates are lower for online students and for nontraditional students in general. ("Nontraditional" is defined here as students older than 24 who are financially independent.)

What can schools do about it? Quite a lot, according to the recent University of Phoenix study "Retaining Non-Traditional Online Students: Bridging the Gap Between Transformative Research and Real-World Practice."

"Our study contributed insights from first-year, nontraditional online students on how online higher education institutions may increase retention by developing support systems tailored to their needs," says Danielle R. Kish, EdD, MSP, MBA. Kish conducted the study with her colleagues Louise Underdahl, PhD, and Pamayla E. Darbyshire, DHA.

While there's no one-size-fits-all solution to improving student retention, the research Kish and her colleagues conducted points in a certain direction. Namely, preparation, support and mutual commitment on the part of the institution and the students themselves. During a time when online education is growing like never before, here's what everyone can do to improve retention rates.

The Rise of Online Education

Online higher education has been around for decades, but its popularity is relatively new.

"COVID brought online education to the forefront, making it more popular even for traditional students," says Kish. "It brought recognition about what it can do for people, especially nontraditional students, and it opened a new door for universities to bring people in."

When schools' physical doors started reopening post-pandemic, an interesting thing happened: Many students opted to stay online. According to the ninth annual "Changing Landscape of Online Education" report from Inside Higher Ed, nearly half of surveyed campus chief technology or information officers said enrollment in online courses was "outpacing enrollment growth in on-campus programs" where they work.

Kish says the surge has given online education more credibility. "People used to have the impression that being online might be easier," she explains. "But now they are realizing that online education is just as rigorous as it is on campus."

Proactive Advising May Improve Retention

So, how might online institutions in higher education keep students engaged all the way through graduation? Kish says the secret is to be proactive about spotting — and preventing — issues before they arise. To do this, instructors might consider the following approaches:

- **Think outside the classroom.** Although instruction is in an online format, students likely still want to connect. "I've read about [instructors] doing Zoom office hours where, just as if they were in an office, students can pop in and chat," says Kish, endorsing the idea.
- **Learn to spot red flags.** "When you have a student who is typically an A student who all of a sudden gets a D halfway through the course, there's a chance to reach out and see what's going on," she says. "Or if you've noticed a student hasn't been in class, ask them if everything is OK and if they need anything. Opening the doors to communication can make all the difference."
- **Send a welcome note.** Show your students what they can expect by sending some kind of welcome message before the class begins, Kish suggests. "You don't have to send the whole syllabus ahead of time but set expectations of what the time commitment will be, or offer the reading assignments for the first week, or create a simple Zoom introduction video to preview the class."

How Students Can Influence Their Own Success

Schools and instructors form only part of the equation, Kish says. "Retention is a two-way street, and there's a student responsibility as well."

Kish would know. She took her first online class in 2006 and is a firm believer in its opportunities and challenges. Her tips for sticking it out to the end are:


- **Figure out the finances.** Perhaps one of the biggest deterrents to student retention is figuring out how to pay for education. "Having a solid plan for funding is important, yet studies continually show that students often don't understand all the options available," she says. "There are so many factors when it comes to financial aid, from loans to grants to scholarships to work tuition reimbursement." Take advantage of financial advising so you know what type of aid you might qualify for — and what you can expect to pay out of pocket.

- **Map out your week.** For nontraditional students who have other responsibilities, it's easy to see how "studying" can be the first to fly off the to-do list. That's when you need to get out the day planner and schedule study time. "Map out your workweek. Then add your other activities and any family obligations and figure out where your schooling is going to fit, and how you'll build those hours in," Kish suggests.

- **Take advantage of advisors.** "One of my greatest support systems in my doctoral program was my academic counselor," says Kish. "Just knowing that I had that person who was 100% behind me made the difference." Enlisting the support of an academic counselor — who can help with registration, academic planning and finding outside support — helps ensure that you'll find solutions before issues arise.

- **Reach out to your instructor.** Not feeling a class? It can be easy to silently leave the virtual room and never look back. Don't, Kish says. "If you're feeling lost or confused, don't just disappear, and don't be afraid to reach out for help," she says. "An online professor once told me, 'My door is always open, but no one walks through it.' [Instructors] want to help, [but] you need to ask."

- **Connect with your fellow students.** The biggest takeaway is to realize you're not living in a bubble when you're taking an online class, Kish says. That goes for academic counselors, your instructors and your fellow students. "You may not see their faces, but you can still have meaningful interactions just like you would on campus," she says. "After all, you already have that automatic connection. Here's someone who has the same homework assignments, and you're in a shared program, so they may be having the same issues as you are. I should know: I made lifelong friends in my classes with people I've never even met!"

While Kish acknowledges in her study that more research is needed, her work and that of her colleagues takes a promising step toward improving student retention. 

Read the study!



“People used to have the impression that being online might be easier, but now they are realizing that online education is just as rigorous as it is on campus.”



WHAT'S A NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT, ANYWAY?

When we speak of nontraditional students, what do we mean? It depends on the context.

Below are some criteria commonly used in various groupings.

- Age 24 or older
- Has family responsibilities such as children or elderly parents
- Attends school part time
- Has a full-time job
- Attends school online
- Is a military veteran
- Is a first-generation college student
- Commutes to school

let me tell you

By Elizabeth Exline



Replaceable? That's the Point

If there's one thing **Dr. Kevin Gazzara (DM, 2001)** knows about, it's developing leaders. For more than 25 years, he's honed his leadership development skills in a variety of roles: as an employee at a major tech company, as an independent consultant and as adjunct faculty at UOPX. But Gazzara foresaw none of this for himself. In fact, he once thought he'd be a musician.

Here, the senior partner at Magna Leadership Solutions and the founder of CoachSultants.com reflects on how disasters can become opportunities, how people should think about legacy and why leaders who make themselves replaceable are more valuable than they think.

Looking back, what was one blessing in disguise in your career?

In high school, music was my world. I studied drumming weekly with [a man named] Paul, the best drum instructor in Philadelphia and my mentor, friend and role model. He believed I could build a successful career as a professional musician and gave me the confidence to consider that path.

When Paul unexpectedly passed away at 52 from a heart attack, it shattered my world. In the moment, it felt catastrophic. But his loss forced me to step back and reexamine the life I wanted to build. I chose to pursue engineering school while continuing to play music on weekends to help fund my education. In hindsight, that painful turning point allowed me to create a powerful balance in my life.

What is the most overrated attitude when it comes to leadership?


The attitude of "only I can do it or fix it." That mindset often comes from ego and fear. It

diminishes the value of others, creates unnecessary bottlenecks and prevents the organization from growing. True leadership is measured not by how indispensable you are, but by how well things run when you're not present.

What about leadership resonates so strongly with you?

The best leaders don't just deliver results; they create more leaders. Many managers cling to a fixed mindset: "If I'm replaceable, I'm at risk." I've learned the opposite is true. When you invest in others, share decision-making and intentionally develop people to surpass you, you increase your value as a leader and as a strategic asset to the organization.

How do you encourage clients to think about legacy and leadership?

Legacy is the cumulative effect of how you show up for others over time. To build a meaningful legacy, I challenge leaders to adopt a servant leadership mindset. This often means giving of yourself at a deeper level, sharing credit, investing in people's development and making decisions that may benefit the organization long after you're gone. 

Work *smarter.* Career better.



YOUR CAREER PLAN

Get clear, personalized next steps

SKILLS PROFILE

All your career-relevant skills in one place

JOB EXPLORER

Search jobs that align with your skills

RESUMÉ GENERATOR

Create a professional resumé ready in minutes

IT'S GOOD TO BE A PHOENIX



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