

## Investing in Girls

An Interview with Anna Maria Chávez,  
Chief Executive Officer, Girl Scouts of the USA

**EDITORS' NOTE** A lifetime member of Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) and an award-winning community leader, Anna Maria Chávez developed the leadership skills growing up as a Girl Scout in Eloy, Arizona, that would propel her to the office of the chief executive of GSUSA. Chávez has held numerous posts in President Bill Clinton's administration, including Senior Policy Advisor to former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Rodney E. Slater.



Anna Maria Chávez

She later returned to her home state of Arizona to serve as Deputy Chief of Staff for urban relations and community development under then-Governor Janet Napolitano. She served as Chief Executive Officer of Girl Scouts of Southwest Texas and was later appointed to her current post in 2011. Chávez earned her bachelor's degree in American history from Yale University before pursuing a Juris Doctorate at the James E. Rogers College of Law at the University of Arizona. She has since been admitted to the Bar of the U.S. District Court for the District of Arizona, the Arizona Supreme Court, and the U.S. Supreme Court.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Girl Scouts of the USA ([girlscouts.org](http://girlscouts.org)) is 2.7 million strong – 2 million girls and 700,000 adult volunteers in 92 countries who believe girls can change the world. It began over 100 years ago with one woman, Girl Scouts' founder Juliette Gordon "Daisy" Low, who believed in the power of every girl. She organized the first Girl Scout troop on March 12, 1912, in Savannah, Georgia, and every year since, the organization has made her vision a reality, helping girls discover their strengths, passions, and talents. The Girl Scout mission is to build girls of courage, confidence, and character who make the world a better place.

### What led to your selection for this important role?

I had the opportunity to run a local Girl Scout Council in Southwest Texas and I wanted to continue my career of service and working for an organization that had this scaled legacy of being the largest organization of its kind in the world. I wanted to be part of something that was making a huge public policy impact on girls and families.

The Girl Scout Council allowed me to experiment with different types of programming for girls, and bring innovation to that local council. Within a few years, we were able to increase the reach of our Girl Scout Council and garner support.

Ultimately, I was chosen to lead the national organization because I had such a deep history with the movement.

### How do you define the value that Girl Scouts as an organization brings to young girls?

Since we have been around more than 100 years and are the largest organization dedicated to girls and their leadership, we have historical knowledge of what that work entails. Today, we have to bring a 21st century technology platform to our movement to aid girls in successfully moving into the high-paid e-commerce world they live in today and will live in going forward. This also impacts how we communicate with girls in the U.S. and in over 90 countries in the world.

We prepare young women, whether they're going to lead a corporation, be a leader in the U.S. government, or lead their homes, by helping them develop business management skills, learn how to work well with others, and be incredible, empathetic, and collaborative citizens of tomorrow. Girls, from a very young age, learn about these leadership roles, which they absorb and translate into their adult careers and lives, and pass on to their children who model those traits.

### How do you make sure that you remain relevant as an organization without losing the rich heritage?

Our history is our strength and the reason we really know girls. We have a long history of data around girls and what works well with them.

We embrace our legacy and history and we build upon it. I stand on the shoulders of women who came before me who made really difficult strategic decisions to ensure that our organization has continued our great work.

Our job now, as its current leaders, is to ensure we honor our legacy but leverage that strength to make sure we're relevant today in how we support our girls.

We are committed to always being a voice for girls and impressing upon elected officials, educators, and others that the need to invest in girls is not just the right thing to do but is critical to the viability of our country.

### How close is the coordination country to country for Girl Scouts?

Girl Scouts is often even more important to our girls overseas because, wherever they go, they can find other Girl Scouts who they can immediately connect to as part of the Girl Scouts family.

This is why we need to move quickly in using innovative technology to connect all of our Girl Scouts regardless of where they are.

### It would seem that opportunities for women are increasing, but there is still a long way to go. Is the correct dialogue taking place to move this forward?

We are starting to have those conversations. It is encouraging to see many more men talking about these issues from a business and a public policy perspective.

It has become clear that if we don't invest in our girls, we end up paying for it in the foster care system and through the correctional system.

Today, data is driving the dialogue. Women still earn just 77 cents on the dollar compared to men and they only share a tiny percentage of leadership roles in business and government. Also, for every dollar contributed in the U.S., less than 8 cents goes towards initiatives for women. We're going to have to make critical decisions on where we invest money to support women in the U.S.

### How important is it to keep girls who have been in Girl Scouts engaged throughout their lives?

We have about 59 million women alumnae in the U.S., so one in two American women is proud to say they wore the Girl Scouts uniform. The power of our organization is that, even at a very young age, we offer access to the largest girls' organization in the world and a global connection to other girls in a mass way. Girl Scouts alumnae have this very powerful networking tool, and an opportunity not only to stay connected to our beloved organization but also to maintain benefits.

### What have you found to be the key to effective leadership?

I've learned, in leading this organization, that I can't do it alone, nor should I want to do it alone. I enjoy that I can build a team that can take on complex business issues and create solutions in collaboration with many organizations across the country. My motto is, "Get your team, Get your dream." When we get the team, it amplifies opportunities and successes. ●