



NEWS RELEASE

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Hospitality industry honors top tourism professionals

Record-breaking number of nominees celebrated for extraordinary guest service

LEE COUNTY, Fla. – The Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau held its 19th annual Elaine McLaughlin Outstanding Hospitality Service Awards today to acknowledge tourism professionals and their extraordinary customer service and dedication.

The “E Awards” ceremony, held at The Westin Cape Coral Resort at Marina Village in Cape Coral, included more than 700 guests. Presented by the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau (VCB) and The News-Press Media Group, the “E Awards” is a collaboration with local businesses to encourage customer service that makes a difference.

Residents and visitors wrote more than 1,000 nominations recognizing the dedication and generosity of frontline employees. Nomination criteria included service satisfaction, leadership, work ethic, job knowledge, performance skills, familiarity with the destination and assistance during an emergency.

Selected for their exemplary service, here are the top winners:

Accommodations:

Heather Patterson, Residence Inn by Marriott

Heather offered support to a guest who had a brother suffering from liver failure in an area hospital. She knew the guest was distraught and asked what was wrong. The guest collapsed from grief into her arms. Heather offered encouragement and shared that her family had gone through something similar. The nominator wrote: “Not only did she and her family offer verbal support for us during this time, but something else extremely surprising happened during our visit. As we were all in the room with my brother, we had a surprise visit. My nominee, her family member and a few friends from a local support group showed up with flowers, cards and support. My brother has NEVER seen love and support like this before. He was overcome with emotion. It has been a long, hard recovery for my brother, but he IS on the road to recovery. He has been OK since our experience with my nominee and friends and I owe her so much more than I am able to give her. Not only is she an exceptional employee to have on your team, but she’s an excellent soul. There are not too many of those left.”

Attractions:**Matt Hetrick, Southern Instinct Charters**

Matt found out about a woman from Michigan battling cancer who wished to see a Sanibel sunset. He dropped what he was doing to take her and her daughter out on his boat for a sunset. That is not his only good deed. His boat is equipped to take wheelchairs. Matt works with the Freedom Waters Foundation, an organization that offers boating opportunities and marine-related experiences for those with disabilities, special needs, at-risk youth and veterans.

Recently, he took out a 95-year old WWII fighter pilot for the last boat trip of his life. Matt volunteers with Valerie's House, an organization that brings counseling and hope to children who have lost a parent. On Christmas Eve, he joined the Florida Highway Patrol for its annual Christmas event and gifted four young boys with an all-day fishing trip. The boys had lost their father when a drunken driver slammed into his car. Matt also surprised them with brand-new fishing rods, as fishing was something the boys had done with their father.

The nominator wrote, "My nominee has a heart of gold and has compassion for those who need love most. He is madly in love with Southwest Florida and feels blessed to share its beauty from the helm of his boat. He simply says, 'I know what being on the water does for someone.' "

Restaurants:**Kevin Tully, Outrigger Beach Resort**

Kevin, who was also a 2014 nominee, is a star. As a nominator from Ohio shared, "He is an exceptional bartender/server, and is quick, efficient and always smiling... He manages to stay positive while dealing with impatient customers under a harried work atmosphere. In spite of waiting on dozens of customers, he manages to keep brief conversations going so no one feels slighted. When the pace slows a bit, he takes the time to get to know people." He helped one nominator by collecting tabs for the Ronald McDonald House. He dropped off soup for an ailing mother of a customer. He makes people feel special. "It's the feeling he imparts that draws people in and makes them want to visit this restaurant, just to see him, their buddy," a nominator wrote.

Transportation:**Teresa Jimenez, Lee County Port Authority****John Rush, Swissport USA Inc/ Spirit Airlines****Chris Styles, Lee County Port Authority**

These three nominees helped a desperate passenger by working together. A traveler from Lima, Peru, arrived in Fort Lauderdale to learn that her mother was having emergency surgery in Peru. After getting some misinformation, she arrived in Fort Myers to take a flight back to Peru. In the meantime, her family in Peru had to find \$600 for her, which they wired to her to purchase an Air Canada ticket but she didn't have the right credit card and other paperwork to enter Canada. One of the nominees determined that she needed to go back to Fort Lauderdale and catch Spirit Airlines back to Peru. The costs were mounting and time was ticking. A nominee offered to put her up for the night. Another nominee found a return flight to Lima out of Fort Lauderdale that departed in three hours. The third nominee helped pay the cab fare at his own personal expense. The nominator stated: "The world needs more people like them."

Other Services/Businesses:**Veronica Martorelli, Bailey's General Store**

Veronica makes her customers feel special. A customer wanted a specific cleaning product and Veronica asked for her name and number to call when it came in. Veronica called her and when she arrived at Bailey's, Veronica gave her the cleanser she had at home because the product was no longer available. She also gave another customer a new mug when the mug she bought was not dishwasher safe. She showed someone a repair kit to fix glasses and then made the repair. As one nominator wrote, "I look forward to my yearly visits because I know she will be there to take care of our problems. I hope her managers know what a gem they have."

Good Samaritan:**Ronnie Wood, Lee County Sheriff's Office**

Ronnie helped the same person not once but twice. An employee of Best Western Waterfront rides his bike 10 miles to and from work. When the employee stopped at a local store, someone stole his bike. Ronnie heard his story and gave him his bike. A couple of weeks later, this same employee got hit by a car. He was not hurt but the bike he had received as a gift was in bad shape. Ronnie heard about the accident and bought him a new bike. The nominator wrote: "My nominee went out of his way to help when he didn't have to and deserves to be recognized for doing more than needed. He was not responsible or obligated to give his personal bicycle, or even show up to help with the second incident. But he did it with an open heart and my employee will not forget."

Best Tourism Boss:**Angie Millican, Homewood Suites by Hilton at the Bell Tower Shops**

Angie is a 2013 and 2014 E Award nominee and beloved by her staff. Many times, even when the hotel is at full capacity, if an employee needs a room for an emergency, she will make room for that employee. She is a great example of a patient, kind and caring leader. She is the "go-to" person for everything. Angie knows how to listen and always finds a way to make people feel confident that things will get better or will be resolved. She empowers her staff to help guests in the best way needed. The nominator wrote, "I will never leave my job because of my nominee, who treats us like family and with respect. When you look up the word 'phenomenal,' my nominee fits that definition perfectly."

Honor of Distinction Winner:**Sean Adams, Lee County Port Authority Police**

Sean has a knack for helping those in need. Recently, a German national who spoke almost no English needed help at a ticket counter. Sean stepped in to help. Once he understood that the man was developmentally delayed, he took more than three hours trying to get him assistance with local programs. Sean learned the traveler flew from Germany to Portugal to Newark and was supposed to end in Miami. His baggage made it to Miami with essential medication. Sean worked with the airline to try to get his luggage delivered locally. The man's mental condition deteriorated and Sean realized he needed medical attention. A few days later Sean followed up with the airline about the man's luggage and attempted to follow up with the hospital. A few days after that, an Orange County Sheriff's deputy inquired about the German traveler. The man's daughter was searching for him after she learned her father had mistakenly flown to Florida. Sean contacted the daughter and brought her up to date. On her behalf, he contacted the

local hospitals and mental care facilities to try locating the father. When he was unsuccessful on his own, he contacted the Lee County Sheriff's Office and they agreed to help. They located the man at a local mental health facility. He helped the daughter get a hotel and offered to meet her and her family to help them reunite with her father. As a final kind act, Sean met the family and the father on his day off at the airport to see them off to Germany.

But that's not his only good deed. He also helped a couple on their way to the airport fix a flat tire. First, he took the husband to the terminal so he wouldn't miss his flight. Then he returned to help the wife with the tire and found the spare unusable. He removed the tire, put it in his car, drove to the gas station to fill it with air, brought it back, and put it on. He followed her to the gas station to make sure the tire was safe. About 20 minutes later, he called the nominee to make sure she got home safely. She wrote: "I was so grateful to have someone like this employee to help me, and not only did he help, I learned how to change a flat tire, too. You have a great employee and we wanted to make sure he was recognized for a job well done."

For more summaries on the individual stories of the above-mentioned award recipients, visit www.EAwards.org.