



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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E Awards celebrate hospitality industry and top tourism professionals

LEE COUNTY, Fla. – The Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau (VCB) held its 22nd Annual Elaine McLaughlin Outstanding Hospitality Service Awards today to honor tourism professionals and their extraordinary customer service and dedication.

The “E Awards” ceremony, held at the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa in Bonita Springs, included more than 700 guests.

Presented by the VCB and The News-Press Media Group, the E Awards recognize Lee County’s hospitality industry employees for going above and beyond to take care of visitors.

Residents, visitors and colleagues wrote 751 nominations for 553 individual nominees. Awards were presented in seven categories:

- Accommodations
- Best Tourism Boss
- Attractions
- Restaurants
- Transportation
- Good Samaritan
- Other services/Businesses

The Honor of Distinction award goes to the overall nominee who best represents the spirit of hospitality in Lee County.

Selected for their exemplary service, here are the top winners and excerpts from their nominations:

Honor of Distinction:

Anne Marie Copelin, Marriott Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa

From the nomination: This nominee makes a difference in the lives of her colleagues and guests alike. A story was shared with us about a guest at the resort whose son had gone missing. This nominee remained calm, gathered a team, and began the search for the young child. After a long 20 minutes, he was located and reunited with his mother who was extremely grateful to our Honor of Distinction winner.

Accommodations:

Allison Wood, Holiday Inn Express & Suites Fort Myers Airport

From the nomination: Thousands of travelers experienced canceled flights due to a variety of factors. The situation became a scary one for us as I am a single mom and disabled veteran, and being in such a situation with my two young boys was terrifying. We contacted the hotel's toll-free number and were erroneously advised there was a vacancy at this particular location. I am a retired military officer and I have not seen that kind of fast, calm action since I was deployed overseas in combat. As a former commander I would tell my troops that we only truly know we are professionals when we are under pressure and tested. My nominee is a true professional in customer service. She went above and beyond, and she literally saved us that night.

Best Tourism Boss (first winner):

Yvonne Ellerbee, Lovers Key Resort

From the nomination: She never fails to jump in and help any department when needed. She will get her hands dirty by helping housekeeping clean rooms or fold laundry, hands on with checking in guests in the guest services department, and guests always love to see her helping maintenance by skimming the pool in 6-inch heels.

Best Tourism Boss (second winner):

Bill Waichulis, Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina

From the nomination: He fosters a culture and work environment that makes you want to get up and go to work and encourages employees with monthly luncheons, reward programs and an annual awards gala. He also has an open-door policy and invites one person from every department to attend a monthly meeting and share concerns, ideas and opportunities.

Attractions:

Kaitlyn D'Alessandro, Casa Ybel Resort

From the nomination: You can always count on above and beyond customer service. She is creative, engaging, friendly and problem-solving, and she's great with customers of all ages.

Restaurants:

Kyle Kuhn, The Island Cow

From the nomination: He had a party of 10 people who were celebrating their son's departure to the military and this nominee, being an Air Force disabled veteran, took a very personal interest in this boy's future. He rang the bell and announced this boy's achievements and what

his future was going to hold. All our patrons and staff of more than 100 people stood up and applauded. The whole place was emotional as was my nominee, who had a hard time finishing his speech. As the night was coming to an end, the family was so gracious and very moved by the nominee's recognition for their brave son.

Transportation:

Diane Phillips, Lee County Port Authority

From the nomination: Each and every day she works to reunite the traveling public with their lost items. This nominee can often be seen on a mission in RSW to track down a lost item – always with a smile. She takes care of each individual that enters her office with patience and kindness no matter if their lost item is a trinket or an heirloom.

Good Samaritan:

Michael O'Connell, Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa

From the nomination: This nominee assists one of our employees, Fred, who has hearing and speech impairments. It is not what he does during the time the employee is at work, but what this nominee does outside of his area of responsibility. Our nominee assists Fred with errands, takes him to dinner once a week and helps drive him places. He offers his time, and many times also funds, to look after the employee, and never asks for anything in return.

Other Services/Businesses:

Clare Harris, Billy's Bike Rentals

From the nomination: As I was walking my bike on the Sanibel Causeway, my nominee generously stopped and asked me if I was OK. After seeing my flattened tires, she loaded me and my bike into her truck and took me to the bike shop. I told her that I had no money with me, and she insisted on repairing my tires nonetheless – which she did excellently. She clearly went above and beyond when it came to helping me.

For a complete list of winners, [click here](#). For more information on the individual stories of the above-mentioned award recipients, please visit EAwards.org.

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Fort Myers - Islands, Beaches and Neighborhoods include: Sanibel Island, Captiva Island, Fort Myers Beach, Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, Estero, Cape Coral, Pine Island, Matlacha, Boca Grande & Outer Islands, North Fort Myers, Alva, Buckingham and Lehigh Acres. For more information, go to visitfortmyers.com.

Editor's note: Five images attached in links below, please credit Lee County VCB

E Awards photo 1 caption: Tamara Pigott, Lee County VCB executive director, congratulates Alexis Marino of Tarpon Bay Explorers for her honorable mention in the Attractions category as Elaine McLaughlin and Robert Wells III look on at the 22nd Annual E Awards.

E Awards photo 2 caption: Tamara Pigott, Lee County VCB executive director, congratulates Gabriela Bellorin of Days Inn by Wyndham Fort Myers Springs Resort for her honorable mention in the Accommodations category as Elaine McLaughlin and Robert Wells III look on at the 22nd Annual E Awards.

E Awards photo 3 caption: Amy Speckman, Kaitlyn D'Alessandro and Eli White of Casa Ybel Resort. D'Alessandro won the Attractions category's top award at the 22nd Annual E Awards.

E Awards photo 4 caption: Sade Griffin, Yevonne Ellerbee and Sassity Mobley of Lovers Key Resort. Ellerbee won the Best Tourism Boss award at the 22nd Annual E Awards.

E Awards photo 5 caption: Elaine McLaughlin and Robert Wells III congratulate Michael O'Connell of Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa for winning the Good Samaritan award at the 22nd Annual E Awards.