



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**April 25, 2022**

**CONTACTS:** Jackie Parker, Miriam Dotson 239-338-3500

## **Fort Myers - Islands, Beaches and Neighborhoods celebrates nationally recognized Guests First Program**

**LEE COUNTY, Fla. (U.S.A.)** –There are more than 1,000 reasons to celebrate tourism at the Lee County Travel Rally from 4 to 7 p.m. Tuesday, May 3, at Lakes Park in Fort Myers.

The destination will be rolling out the red carpet to honor its Certified Guest Service Professionals (CGSP) as it celebrates achieving more than 1,000 certifications.

For seven years, the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute (AHLEI) has been an integral part of the program's success story, as the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau (VCB) partnered with AHLEI to include its Guest Service Gold program and CGSP certification within Guests First.

All CGSP graduates are invited to attend and honor their commitment to tourism in a special VIP Experience area with activities that include a special gift, sweet treats, a photo booth, video testimonials from the honorees and more. For information and registration, visit [leevcb.com](http://leevcb.com).

“The Guests First program is indicative of the level of commitment this destination has made to providing excellence in customer service in our community. Without the top-notch customer service for which this destination has become known, our guests will not return,” said Tamara Pigott, VCB executive director, acknowledging the destination's accomplishment.

“Knowing how to make every guest's visit enjoyable and memorable contributes to an experience that encourages repeat business, increases new visitors and boosts visitor spending.”

### **Milestones and distinctions**

Fort Myers' Islands, Beaches and Neighborhoods is the first and only destination in the U.S. that has achieved the distinction of being named a certified Guest Service Destination. This means that visitors and residents know they will experience a high level of service whether in a restaurant, local attraction or staying in area accommodations.

In 2012, Harvard named Guests First as one of 111 Bright Ideas in Government. The Bright Ideas initiative serves to complement the Innovations in American Government Awards program by shining a light on noteworthy and promising government programs and practices.

Nicole King-Smith, Ph.D, CHT, CGSP, Lee County hospitality & tourism training manager, says that achieving more than 1,000 CGSPs is especially significant as it was accomplished during a global pandemic and a workforce shortage.

“With one in five local jobs tied to tourism, there is a need to fill those positions with people who possess guest service skills,” said King-Smith. “Tourism in the Fort Myers area supported 69,174 local jobs in 2021, generating \$1.8 billion in wages and salaries.

“While the Guest First classes are free, the exam fee is covered by the participant or their employer. The local chapter of the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association has generously agreed to cover the fee for those who are unemployed and unable to pay.”

### **Graduate testimonials**

Pete Corradino, owner of Everglades Day Safari says that since graduating from the Guests First program a few years ago, he has changed the way he thinks about operational procedures. He points specifically to the pandemic as a challenge where he was able to use the skills he learned in the Guests First program.

Fran Peters, owner of Island Vacations of Sanibel, a Certified Guests Service Property, says “Guests First has helped my employees be more understanding with guests. It has instilled in them the ability to change bad days into good days by listening, empathizing, and offering solutions,” she said. “They have learned that I’m not the only one who can do that as the owner; we all can.”

Mary Rose, Director, Talent and Culture for Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina, calls Guests First an important tool for investing in their associate’s professional development. “Our associates are proud to achieve the CGSP designation. People who go through the Guests First training have the vision that this is my profession, it’s my career. The certification proves that they take their job seriously.”

For details on participation in the Guests First Program, visit [guestsfirst.com](https://www.guestsfirst.com)

### **Showing our appreciation**

For our community, Travel Rally is a chance to show our appreciation and support to the industry and its employees who have worked so hard during this incredibly busy 2022 season. Local residents and tourism employees, are invited to visit Travel Fair exhibitors, watch tourism races and visit the Kids' Korner. Bring your families for lots of free activities including food, music and prize giveaways. Check details and registration at [www.visitfortmyers.com/lee-vcb/events/2022-lee-county-travel-rally](https://www.visitfortmyers.com/lee-vcb/events/2022-lee-county-travel-rally)

*Editor's note: Fort Myers and surrounding areas includes Fort Myers Beach, Sanibel & Captiva islands, Boca Grande & Outer Islands, Pine Island, Matlacha, Cape Coral, North Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, Estero, Alva, Buckingham and Lehigh Acres. For media assistance, [VisitFortMyers.com/media-central](http://VisitFortMyers.com/media-central)*