



## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 Caloosa Sound Convention Center & Amphitheater in downtown Fort Myers included more than 400 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 627 nominations for 467 individual nominees. Awards were presented in seven categories:

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

A new category, the Masked Hero award, recognizes a tourism employee who provided selfless acts of support for visitors and residents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Honor of Distinction award goes to the overall nominee who exemplifies the best in customer service and spotlights the hospitality professionals who love their jobs, love the destination but, more importantly, love people.

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

**Other Services/Businesses:**

**Christopher Comer, Tree West**

The nominator writes: “My friend and I were involved in a bike accident one morning while heading east on Sanibel Captiva Road. A passing car had come a little too close to us and we went down avoiding it. I wound up in the road and my friend Bill was off to the side. A driver was headed the other way, saw the accident and stopped. He assessed my friend and noticed he needed stitches in his arm. He was a super nice guy and took the time to take my friend and his bike to the medical center. That was out of his way, but really helpful to us as I’m not sure Bill could have ridden his bike in the shape he was in. Bill got eight stitches in his arm and is going to be fine. Both bikes are OK, too!”

**Restaurants:**

**Jennifer Kleckner, Casa Bacardi**

The nominator writes: “On Dec. 31, I left my cell phone at this restaurant charging. We called the following morning and, lo and behold, our server answered the phone. She had been trying to track me down. She immediately asked if she could mail it or bring it somewhere to make sure it got back to me. My phone also included my license and two credit cards. We happened to have a friend flying to Boston that afternoon and, even though she was not working that day, she happily drove my phone to the airport for our friend to pick up. She didn’t ask for anything in return and I am so grateful for her kindness! It was a nice way to start 2021.”

**Transportation:**

**Jennis Phillips and Sherry Kletschka, Transportation Security Administration**

The nominator writes: “I was on my way through security when an elderly couple was in the middle of their screening and the woman was informed she would need an additional pat-down. The woman followed the officer’s instructions and as she began her pat-down the officer stood up and discreetly changed her gloves and began to speak to the older woman in a soft manner. The woman had an accident on herself... I saw the officer holding the woman’s hands with another officer leading her into the restroom. The first officer directed the husband on where he would be able to get a change of clothes for his wife. The two female officers went into the restroom to assist the woman. It reminds me of how kind you should always be with one another because you never know what another person is going through.”

**Good Samaritan:**

**Officer Jacob Brunick, Lee County Port Authority Police Department**

The nominator writes: “On Feb. 14, 2020, I flew to Fort Myers to visit my parents for the long weekend. I was expecting my dad to be there waiting to pick me up, but he didn’t answer when I called. As I frantically searched for him and tried to call him over and over, I heard my name being paged over the loudspeaker. I knew something was really wrong ... This was one of the hardest hours of my life as I waited for news and I would have been alone during it if it hadn’t

been for my nominee being there. I will always remember his kindness in the midst of my shock and grief ... upon finding out that my dad had passed away while my plane was landing in Fort Myers. I know that what this officer had to do that night was probably not part of his normal job. While that night will probably always be the worst night of my life, I will always be thankful that this person was working.”

**Attractions:**

**Jake Graddy, Holiday Water Sports**

A nominator writes: “Graddy turned an emergency into ‘the best day ever,’ according to our son Mason. Our family was at the beach and wet sand being thrown around wound up packed in our son’s eye socket. After many unsuccessful attempts to flush it out and search for an eye wash station, we stumbled upon Graddy. He quickly took Mason to a fresh water hose. What was so exceptional was the way he spoke to our 6 year old. Graddy was calming, inviting and comforting. There were no tears as Graddy gently worked to flush as much sand as he could from Mason’s eye, being sure to encourage him and ensure his comfort along the way. Our nominee made him comfortable enough that the 40-minute trip to the nearest immediate care. He even sent Mason off with a new mask and a fresh pair of sunglasses. The doctor said it was only by a miracle that he did not have damage to his eye.”

**Accommodations:**

**Jessica Mazza, Holiday Inn Edison at Midtown**

This particular property provided temporary shelter for homeless people. A nominator writes: “Mazza was available 24/7 throughout the pandemic to ensure these guests received the best experience, treating everyone with dignity and respect, exactly what you would expect from a hospitality professional. The people served in this program faced many challenges and Mazza’s team was patient, committed and passionate.”

Since July 2020, Mazza and her team have provided over 170 hotel rooms and three meals a day to 300 guests. In Mazza and her team offered banquet room space, at no charge, for a job fair.

A nominator writes: “I cannot imagine what this has done for their business. As you can imagine, there were not many hotels or motels interested in partnering with us, however she her team stepped up to the challenge to offer this service to their community knowing this may not be great for their image. Her selfless actions are what made this project successful.”

**Masked Hero:**

**JoAnn Elardo, Wicked Dolphin Rum Distillery**

As the world was shutting down, and no one knew what to expect during this unprecedented pandemic, JoAnn Elardo and her team at Wicked Dolphin Rum Distillery in Cape Coral rose to the challenge. In March 2020, she received a call from our local hospital system stating their urgent need for sanitizer supplies. She planned and retooled her company’s equipment, switching gears from producing rum to manufacturing hand and surface sanitizer.

She and her team were able to provide our community with 10,000 free bottles of sanitizer.

**Tourism Boss:**

**Jeff Webb, Hampton Inn & Suites by Hilton Fort Myers-Colonial**

Jeff Webb, the area general manager of three Hilton properties, was nominated for his love and support of his staff, encouraging professional development and for coaching team members and assisting them with advancing their career.

Webb's employees agree that they are lucky to have him. He understands that family comes first and always has a smile on his face.

**Honor of Distinction:**

**Marina Bloetz, South Seas Island Resort**

Six-time nominee, Marina Bloetz, with South Seas Island Resort, personally cared for a family as they dealt with a child involved in a near-drowning accident. She assisted the family at the hospital until they were able to take the child home. To this day, the family can't say enough about our Honor of Distinction winner.

For more information on the individual stories of the above-mentioned award recipients, please visit [EAwards](#).