

Airport guard wins top honors

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A security guard who de-stressed a visit to the airport for a woman with Alzheimer's disease won top honors Wednesday at the Elaine McLaughlin Outstanding Hospitality Service Awards.

Jennifer Wilson, airport police security guard at Southwest Florida International, drew a standing ovation from more than 350 people attending the gala at Harbor-side Event Center, downtown Fort Myers.

The awards program garnered 272 nominations from visitors, residents and colleagues, representing dozens of hospitality businesses throughout Lee County.

In addition to Wilson, high accolades went to: John Bradfield, Johnny Myers Discount Tires; Jose Cereceda, Carrabba's Italian Grill; Edward Brown, Standard Parking; Drs. P.J. Deitschel and Amber McNamara, Care and Rehabilitation of Wildlife; Barbara Prater, Edison & Ford Winter Estates; and Anthony Almeida, Inn at the Springs.

"You are the best of the best," said Tamara Pigott, deputy director, Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau.

Visitors to the international airport usually see Wilson curbside, directing passenger and vehicle traffic, and assisting visitors. One day, a woman's screams from inside the terminal sent her running to help.

The woman — recently released from the hospital and delusional — said her husband of 51 years was hurting her. The couple had come to the airport to pick up a family member who would help with the woman's care.

Wilson spoke quietly with her, and then seized on an unexpected opportunity: The older woman told strangers nearby the 40-year-old security guard was her long-time best friend.

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Jennifer Wilson, a security guard with the Lee County Port Authority Police Department, right, receives the 2009 Honor of Distinction "E" Award and a hug from Elaine McLaughlin on Wednesday.

SERVICE HIGHLIGHTS

From nominations in the Elaine McLaughlin Outstanding Hospitality Service Awards:

• Honor of Distinction

Jennifer Wilson, security guard, Lee County Port Authority Police: Calmed the fears of a woman with Alzheimer's disease, and continued to assist her and her husband of 51 years when they came to Southwest Florida International Airport to fetch a passenger.

• Other services/business

John Bradfield, Johnny Myers Discount Tires, Fort Myers: He has given away his products and services because the person was in real need.

• Restaurant

Jose Cereceda, Carrabba's Italian Grill, Bonita Springs: He took an ordinary dinner for a 9-year-old girl marking the end of her chemotherapy, and made it extraordinary for the entire family. Cereceda is a brother of Anita Cereceda, Fort Myers Beach merchant and former town mayor.

• Transportation

Edward Brown, Standard Parking, Southwest Florida International: After a flight arrived late at night, he personally searched every shuttle bus at the airport to find a passenger's

missing bag. No one knew what he'd done until the grateful customer wrote his boss.

• Good Samaritan

Drs. P.J. Deitschel and Amber McNamara, Care and Rehabilitation of Wildlife (CROW), Sanibel Island: These veterinarians display teamwork and dedication, doing everything from diagnosing sick animals to cleaning cages.

• Attractions

Barbara Prater, Edison & Ford Winter Estates, Fort Myers: She greets every visitor as if he or she were the first guest of the day, showing such kindnesses as helping a 13-year-old exchange a coconut postcard at the last minute, and offering elderly guests rides to their cars.

• Accommodations

Anthony Almeida, Inn at the Springs, Bonita Springs: Goes the extra mile, as exemplified by solving the dilemma of a guest who'd inadvertently taken the wrong jacket (and wallet inside the jacket pocket) from the overhead bin on an airplane. At the end of his workday, Almeida drove to Cape Coral to make the jacket-and-wallet switch, and then returned to the inn to deliver the guest's belongings.

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Wilson decided to keep things calm by playing along.

"I pretended to be her best friend of 50 years ago," Wilson said. "She felt safe with me, so I stayed with her." Wilson stayed with the couple until they and their passenger were safely in the car, heading home. This took about about three hours because of a flight delay.

"It was so rewarding," Wilson said of her experience. When she got home, she did some Internet research about Alzheimer's "in case a situation comes up like this again."

This is the ninth year for the program dubbed the "E" Awards. It is named after Elaine McLaughlin, former executive director of Lee's visitor bureau.

McLaughlin has a home on Pine Island, and since retiring from the VCB in 2000, has taken a position as assistant professor and director of strategic operations for the University of Florida's Tourism Crisis Management Institute.

The tourism bureau runs the awards program, which salutes employees and others who go beyond the call

of duty to make people feel valued and happy about being in Southwest Florida.

Sponsors are GullWing Beach Resort, Realmark Cape Harbour Vacation Rentals, DiamondHead Beach Resort, Pointe Estero Beach Resort, Capt. Tony's Great Getaway, The Veranda and Rib City Restaurants, Rumrunner's Restaurant, Key West Express, The News-Press and Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau.

Bureau leaders are bullish about raising the bar for customer service.

According to their research:

- Lee County attracts nearly 5 million visitors annually, with more than two million staying at hotels and other paid accommodations, and the rest visiting friends and family.

- Visitor spending directly supports more than 43,000 full-time-equivalent jobs in Lee County.

"You are pulling us through some very hard economic times," Lee County Commissioner Tammy Hall told the assembly Wednesday.