



### **C. Nomination Questions**

#### **1. Explain your volunteer's significant depth of involvement.**

Mary Bernaski, a "Winter Texan", and "Volunteer Extraordinaire" came to the Hidalgo in 1986 to square dance for the kick-off of BorderFest and receive her International Pin not knowing that she would soon find herself knee deep in volunteering for BorderFest, Hidalgo's Festival of Lights, the Schools, the Chamber of Commerce and anything else she was asked or could find to do, including being asked to serve on the official BorderFest Committee. She has served 25 years first as co-chair and then chair of the International Square Dance Jubilee for BorderFest and 20 plus years as a narrator and volunteer for Festival of Lights and is certainly not ready to slow down regardless of the fact she is 93 years young.

Even though Mary is a semi-permanent resident (8 months in Hidalgo) she has a genuine passion for the community. She has led the charge in getting thousands of Winter Texans involved in BorderFest and Festival of Lights as well as attending sporting events to support the youth at the schools, volunteering to teach children read in the schools, and becoming "Hot Peppers", a top-notch volunteer club of Winter Texans and five years ago helped us add a new dimension to Festival of Lights when we built the Santa House. She is now serving as Mrs. Claus each December.

#### **2. Show Specific examples of your volunteers' roles and responsibilities.**

During the planning period for BorderFest and Festival of Lights Mary can be found serving as an ambassador for both events handing out brochures, inviting everyone she comes in contact with to the events, personally going to square dances across the Valley inviting dancers to the Jubilee, making small quilts to wrap around bears for BorderFest Mascot "Pepper" to deliver to children in hospitals, repairing floats at the last minute, helping build the Hidalgo Youth Choir Float, designing, making or repairing costumes for Pepper or Pepper's girlfriend (now wife), BorderFest's Mascots, assembling BorderFest Curriculum Guides for the schools, helping with the youth during the school field trips to BorderFest, making hundreds of vests (200 each year are needed) for the "Hot Peppers", just to name a few things. For Festival of Lights she started out 20 years ago as a narrator on the trains and trolleys quickly becoming the favorite one and until she became Mrs. Claus she moved into the Santa House with Santa and the thousands of visitors for their pictures with Santa and Mrs. Claus. When Santa goes back to the North Pole she returns to narrating. She is there every single night in December (30 nights). When narrating she is on the trolley from 6 pm to 11 pm sharing the Christmas Spirit, a little about Hidalgo's history and all about the more than 3 million lights and 500 plus displays bringing smiles to hundreds of thousands of visitors over the years. She also sets up the 200 plus miniature Christmas Village houses and accessories to the Christmas Village in the Pumphouse Museum.

Volunteers like Mary Bernaski are hard to find. A day never goes by in the eight months she is in the valley that she is not working on a BorderFest or Festival of Lights project. She loves the community and she loves to help which led her to serving as one of the main spokespersons in the City of Hidalgo's All American City competition held in Atlanta in 2004. Cutting out magazine and newspapers for BorderFest and Festival of Lights, working on marketing award books, serving as a Hot Pepper Greeter at State Farm Arena for more than 100 events throughout the eight months she is here, and attending workshops and training to expand her knowledge is how she keeps busy when not working on the festivals. Her roles and responsibilities have no parameters. Because of her contagious spirit and dedication she never meets a stranger and she believes in giving everyone she meets a hug.

**3. Describe how your volunteer has provided significant enthusiasm, organizational assistance and specific expertise.**

Mary was a floral designer before she and her husband retired and came to Hidalgo from New York. She is creative and can do absolutely anything she puts her mind to. Helping repair floats and even designing and helping build them is one of her many accomplishments. Sewing is another talent. She has made hundreds of Hot Pepper vests over the last 20 years and has designed and made all of the costumes for BorderFest Mascots Pepper and Cha Cha Rita including her wedding dress saving BorderFest thousands of dollars every year. BorderFest celebrates a different country each year so new wardrobes are needed every year for both mascots. She even makes her own Mrs. Claus dresses.

Her work with the Hot Peppers and the International Square Dance Jubilee has required Mary to travel across the Rio Grande Valley from Brownsville to Rio Grande City and all cities in between to organize and promote the Jubilee that drew more than 2,000 square dancers as it continued to grow steadily until 2009. It was then when the concern of border violence across the river in Mexico threatened to keep the square dancers from dancing in Mexico that Mary had to find a way to keep that from happening. No is not a word in her vocabulary when it comes to Hidalgo festivals. Her enthusiasm, interest and personal satisfaction in helping is one of her many attributes.

**4. Explain how your volunteer has shown initiative and leadership in his or her efforts.**

When the International Square Dance Jubilee was threatened to end because of the concern for border violence in Mexico she set out to make sure that would not happen. Meeting with the tourism authorities in Mexico and the BorderFest Committee she made it her mission to reach out to more than 200 RV Parks and Square Dance groups across the Rio Grande Valley to assure them that the International Square Dance Jubilee would continue. The first year of the troubled time the dance took place in the middle of the International Bridge and it was much smaller. So immediately after that event Mary set out to make sure it got back on track and with continued efforts mostly on her part working with all the Square Dance Callers and dancers all across the entire Rio Grande Valley and with Mexico it

has now moved back to the City Hall Plaza in Reynosa Mexico and more than 500 dancers are back enjoying the International activity following the ABRAZO (Friendship Embrace with Mexico) in the middle of the International Bridge on opening day of BorderFest.

Mary knows BorderFest from the inside out. She never misses a committee meeting. She is the one we call on to personally take care of VIP guests at BorderFest because of her leadership and dedication. She takes the time to make sure they have the opportunity to see and learn everything they can about the event right down to getting them a ride in the Weinermobile or on a float with her during the parades every year. When BorderFest mascots Pepper and Cha Cha Rita visit children in hospitals they need something to take with them. Mary came up with the idea that Teddy Bears wrapped in a quilt would be an appropriate item so she made the commitment to make the quilts for all the bears and did just that. Because of her unique design and creativity when someone has an idea but not the way to execute it she usually has the answer and the innovation and initiative to make it happen.

**5. Tell how your volunteer has exemplified his or her dependability.**

When Mary and her husband first came to Hidalgo they were here for 3 to 4 months. But as she got involved it became 4 to 5 months and then 6 months and before long it became 8 months out of the year. Her work with BorderFest and Festival of Lights is truly year round because when she is not in Hidalgo she is working on vests or other sewing projects and recruiting volunteers and encouraging everyone she comes in contact with to come to the Rio Grande Valley...more specifically to Hidalgo to experience the events and to consider moving here upon their retirement. And yes she has been immensely successful with those efforts.

Festival of Lights is a 31 day event in December. Mrs. Claus is here from December 1<sup>st</sup> through December 23<sup>rd</sup> with Santa. They see thousands of children and their families for pictures each night and on the night of the Christmas Posada Santa and Mrs. Claus greet and help distribute almost 10,000 toys to needy children before picture time. When Santa is not able to be there she is still in the Santa house and takes pictures with the children and families. Then on the 26<sup>th</sup> Mary takes her talents to the trolleys where she narrates the trolley tours through the lights from 6 pm till 11 pm through Dec. 30<sup>th</sup>. She knows the history of the event and the city so during other times in the year she volunteers at the Pumphouse Museum for historic tours as well. When she goes out to the RV Parks to recruit volunteers and square dancers they have all begun to recognize her as Mrs. Claus so we now have a "mascot" of sorts for Festival of Lights. There is absolutely nothing that Mary would not do to help make BorderFest or Festival of Lights a success

**6. Describe your volunteer's positive attitude.**

Kellogg's' Tony the Tiger has always said it right. "Volunteers are Greaaaaat"! Mary's positive attitude is exactly that...Greaaaaat. And the Energizer Bunny never stops. We call Mary our Energizer Bunny. She is the cheerleader for both festivals, the City of Hidalgo and State Farm Arena. Volunteers look up to her and strive to emulate her. She is a take charge person and always gets the job done. She is the first one to arrive every day and usually the last one to leave making sure that absolutely everyone had a great time and will be back the next day or for the next event.

**7. Describe how your volunteer has made a difference to the festival or event. What impact has your volunteer had on your festival/event? What void would there be without him or her as a volunteer?**

It is difficult to pin point everything Mary has done to make a difference and impact because there are so many. First it has to be financial. She has saved us thousands of dollars on costumes, vests and float repair. She was instrumental in building the International Square Dance Jubilee to the huge success it has been for more than 25 years and to keeping it afloat during the trying times in Mexico. She has continually built the volunteer force with her constant recruiting. When we built the Santa House 5 years ago she was the natural for Mrs. Claus. Festival of Lights has become the place for families to take their Christmas pictures and thousands upon thousands come as part of their Christmas tradition to get their pictures made. Many come just for pictures with her.

Mary Bernaski is a natural with a heart of gold and a passion for helping and that is hard to replace. It would mean finding a new seamstress, creative designer, Square Dance Jubilee organizer, volunteer recruiter, a spokesperson for BorderFest and Festival of Lights, a State Farm Arena BorderFest Hot Pepper Greeter for 100 plus events, a trained leader, teacher, narrator, Mrs. Claus and "Volunteer Extraordinaire". A task we never want to have to do.

D. Additional information:

a. Photograph





b. Local Media

|                       |                |  |              |            |
|-----------------------|----------------|--|--------------|------------|
| Progress Times        | Jim Brunson    | <a href="mailto:jim@progresstimes.net">jim@progresstimes.net</a>       | 956-585-4893 | News Paper |
| The Monitor           | Amy Smith      | <a href="mailto:asmith@themonitor.com">asmith@themonitor.com</a>       | 956-683-4400 | News Paper |
| Valley Town Crier     | Pedro Perez IV | <a href="mailto:pdero@valeytowncrier.com">pdero@valeytowncrier.com</a> | 956-225-5288 | News Paper |
| KGBT TV Action 4 News | Kimberly Wyatt | <a href="mailto:kwyatt@valleycentral.com">kwyatt@valleycentral.com</a> | 956-366-4444 | Television |