



Zambelli
FIREWORKS

Mary Bernaski
2014 IFEA/Zambelli Fireworks
Volunteer of the Year Award Winner
Nominated by BorderFest Association and Festival of Lights
Hidalgo, TX

The IFEA and Zambelli Fireworks are pleased to announce Mary Bernaski from Borderfest and Festival of Lights in Hidalgo, TX as the recipient of the 2014 IFEA/Zambelli Fireworks Volunteer of the Year Award.

Mary Bernaski, a "Winter Texan" and "Volunteer Extraordinaire" came to Hidalgo in 1986 to square dance for the kick-off of BorderFest and receive her International Pin. She did not know then that she would soon find herself knee deep in volunteering for BorderFest, Hidalgo's Festival of Lights, community Schools, the Chamber of Commerce and anything else that needed a hard working volunteer, including serving as a narrator and volunteer for Festival of lights for 20 years and serving on the official BorderFest Committee for 25 years, first as co-chair and then chair of the International Square Dance Jubilee. Mary certainly is not ready to slow down, regardless of the fact she is 93 years young.



When Mary and her husband first came to Hidalgo they were here for 3 to 4 months. But as she became more involved she stayed 4 to 5 months and then 6 months and before long she was staying 8 months out of the year. And even though Mary is considered a semi-permanent resident, she has a genuine passion for the community, leading the charge in getting thousands of Winter Texans involved in BorderFest and Festival of Lights as well as leading the "Hot Peppers," a top-notch volunteer club of Winter Texans. Not only this, but she also helped to add a new dimension to Festival of Lights when the Santa House was built by serving as Mrs. Claus each December.

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, from helping to design, repair and build parade floats to sewing hundreds of "Hot Pepper" vests each year. With each year of BorderFest, a new country is celebrated. Mary designs and makes new costumes every year for mascots Pepper and Cha Cha Rita including Cha Cha Rita's wedding dress a few years ago! She even makes her own Mrs. Claus dresses! Mary has saved BorderFest thousands of dollars every year.

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, drawing more than 2,000 square dancers. The Jubilee continued to grow steadily until 2009, when the concern of border violence across the river in Mexico threatened to keep the square dancers from dancing in Mexico. Mary did everything she could 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.

Mary met with tourism authorities in Mexico and the BorderFest Committee, making 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. Immediately afterwards Mary set out to make sure it got back on track working with all the Square Dance Callers and dancers across the Rio Grande Valley and 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.

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.

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.