

# NEWS RELEASE

**DATE:** March 23, 2010

**CONTACT:** Michele Delmar 832-725-0085 or  
Joyce Claypool Kennerly  
713-385-5592

**RELEASE:** IMMEDIATELY

## VOLUNTEER FORT BEND ANNOUNCES COUNTY'S TOP VOLUNTEERS

The winners of a county-wide search for the top volunteers in Fort Bend County have been selected by a panel of judges from more than 25 nominations received from throughout the county. These five individuals—Dr. Mary Ernestine Butler, KK West, Barbara Garaygordobil, Robert Pourciau, and Michael Biasini—have exhibited exemplary service to the organizations for which they volunteer, and have made a significant impact in the lives they touch.

The five honorees will be recognized for their accomplishments by Fort Bend County Judge Robert Hebert at a celebratory breakfast on Thursday, April 29, beginning at 7:30 am, at Safari Texas Ranch, 11627 FM 1464 in Richmond.

The panel of judges included Stafford pharmacist Gene Woo; community volunteer Shirley Clark; Mabel Menefee with Career & Recovery Resources; Suzanne Hinds with United Way of Greater Houston; and Fred Arnold with Minute Maid.

Upon learning of the phenomenal accomplishments of the volunteers who were nominated for this award, Minute Maid generously requested the honor of being the presenting sponsor of the awards ceremony in April for the second year in a row.

A retired music teacher, Dr. Mary Ernestine Butler was nominated for her volunteer work at Texana Center, where she shares her love of music with more than 30 individuals with developmental disabilities who now make up the choir that Butler started nine years ago. Butler was nominated by Texana's Community

(more)

**P.O Box 1751, Sugar Land, Texas 77487-1751**

## VOLUNTEER FORT BEND – WINNERS – PAGE 2

Relations Manager, Andi Wallis, who was amazed at Butler's ability to instruct and direct the whole 30-member choir at one time. "Working with one or two individuals with developmental disabilities is hard enough at times, but try multiplying that figure to over 30 people!" Butler never limits the choir to individuals who are higher functioning. In fact, one new member of the choir has never been heard to speak, but with Butler's encouragement, her new student soon began to respond to the music. "There may not be any words, but she can sing in perfect pitch," remarks Wallis. "This is an absolutely amazing accomplishment!" Butler's passion for music and its ability to cross all boundaries has made an indelible difference in the lives of the Texana community.

KK West has been described as a woman with a servant's heart and a leader's shoulders. She has devoted numerous volunteer hours to the organizations about which she feels strongly, including the Fort Bend Women's Center, the Fort Bend Junior Service League, and the American Cancer Society, for which she recently helped to raise an astounding \$94,000 in the organization's inaugural event in Fort Bend County. West began her volunteer service nearly 15 years ago by helping underprivileged children at JFK Elementary School in Houston. Since then, the scope of her volunteer service has grown by leaps and bounds to the point where she seems to effortlessly direct the activities of 300 volunteers involved in the Junior Service League. "KK is a true leader—not afraid to 'roll up her sleeves,' not afraid to lend a shoulder for a volunteer to cry on, and not afraid to hold volunteers accountable," says West's husband, Scott, who adds that she even holds *him* accountable in their volunteer work together. "I got in trouble a couple of times because I was falling short in my commitment!" West's sense of excitement and vision for her volunteer projects help to inspire many other volunteers to do more, be more, and give more with "a joyous heart and committed hands."

Barbara Garaygordobil received nominations for the incredible work

(more)

she has accomplished in starting the Learn English Ministry – a program she began last year ago at Sugar Land’s St. Laurence Church, but which has spread to several other churches and community centers in the area, helping more than 3500 individuals learn English. Her goal was to teach immigrants how to speak English so that they are better able to integrate into the community and become independent, productive members of society. Garaygordobil began the ministry with virtually nothing, but she enlisted the support of Cardinal DiNardo and began recruiting volunteers from area churches. The program is now in nine different locations throughout the county, including several community centers and other churches. Garaygordobil’s passion for the program is infectious, and she continues to inspire other volunteers with her boundless energy. “She sometimes receives 200 or more phone inquiries daily from potential students, and spends long hours returning each of the phone calls,” says Carol Mason, one of Garaygordobil’s nominators and a volunteer teacher in the program. “She has a vision and isn’t afraid or hesitant to pursue it.”

The Special Olympians from The Arc of Fort Bend County must surely be grateful to Hurricane Katrina for blowing Robert Pourciau their way. Pourciau and his family volunteered with the Special Olympics in New Orleans before evacuating to Houston and Sugar Land because of the hurricane. When he went to work for Houston Chevron, he became the company’s Special Olympics coordinator and has recruited several more employees to become volunteers. Chevron matches each employee’s volunteer efforts with \$1,000 to the organization, which was an unexpected bonus, according to Laura LaVigne, Executive Director of The Arc of Fort Bend County. “We were already so grateful for Robert’s ‘sweat equity’ with our organization – and then came the surprise of the matching funds!” she says. “With the downturn in charitable giving as a result of the current economic conditions, the matching funds were another gift from Robert.”

(more)

## VOLUNTEER FORT BEND – WINNERS – PAGE 4

Initially, Pourciau did whatever tasks were needed, such as assisting at track meets, transporting athletes, taking pictures, and helping administer medications for the athletes. As he has driven them to their many activities, Pourciau has gotten to know the athletes quite well. When he discovered that one athlete did not have a suitcase for out-of-town trips, he bought one and made sure it was given to the athlete anonymously. Pourciau wanted to get involved in coaching as well, but because of a pre-existing condition, he was unable to coach the more physically demanding sports. He did some research and found an activity that he *could* coach – Bocce Ball – and went through all the requirements to have the sport added to The Arc’s program so that athletes with limited physical abilities could participate in the games just like their more able-bodied teammates. He hopes to coach The Arc’s first Bocce Ball athletes this fall. What makes Pourciau’s volunteer work with The Arc particularly extraordinary is the fact that he does not have a family member with an intellectual disability. “We have never had a volunteer without a family member with a disability who has contributed as much time ‘in the trenches’ with our clients,” says LaVigne. “All of Robert’s efforts have been extraordinary!”

After volunteering more than 4,000 hours to the many organizations he has chosen to adopt, Michael Biasini earned national attention and will receive the Presidential Volunteer Service Award this year – quite an accomplishment for someone whose physical deformities were so severe at birth that doctors suggested his parents simply give him up for science. Biasini did live, but life would be an uphill battle for many, many years. Because of his extreme cranial deformities, Biasini began his school years in a special-education classroom. His overwhelming desire and determination to be “normal” eventually earned him the right to attend mainstream classes, but he would never forget what it was like to be a “special-ed kid.”

(more)

“As a teenager, I came to realize that my purpose in life was to help others become successful with whatever gifts they were blessed with, despite the things that society might point out as handicaps or shortcomings,” says Biasini, who now works as a teacher at Lexington Elementary School. “My classroom is a kaleidoscope of children with special needs – emotional, physical, and mental.” His insatiable desire to do more for his community led him to participate in the Fort Bend County CERT program in 2006, and to become part of the Citizen’s Support Team for the county’s Office of Emergency Management in 2007, where his innumerable talents and experience were put to good use during Tropical Storm Edouard and Hurricane Ike. For Biasini, contributing 109 hours to the Fort Bend Medical Reserve Corps in 2009 just wasn’t enough. By the time his volunteer hours were tallied from all of his other groups – including the Fort Bend County Citizens Emergency Response Team (CERT), Fort Bend County Citizens Assistance Team, FBISD Special Olympics, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Red Cross Texas Advanced Leadership Advocacy, and One Citizen - - Biasini had clocked nearly 500 hours of volunteer service in one year alone.

“The cool thing about volunteering is not only helping the people in our organizations, but also working with other organizations to make this county the BEST county in Texas!” says Biasini. The infant who wasn’t expected to live has not only flourished in his own accomplishments, he has made an immeasurable impact in the lives of the people around him.

Join us in applauding the amazing accomplishments of these five individuals at the 2010 County Judge’s Volunteer Fort Bend Awards Ceremony on April 29. Individual tickets and corporate sponsorships are still available. For information, call Kathy Renfrow, Director of Volunteer Fort Bend, at 281-340-1919, or email her at [kathyr@VolunteerHouston.org](mailto:kathyr@VolunteerHouston.org). The deadline for corporate sponsorships is April 12.