

## STARS IN THE ARTS WINNERS FOR 2014 ANNOUNCED

Naples, Florida (November 14, 2013) - The United Arts Council of Collier County has announced the winners of the 2014 *Stars in the Arts* awards. Representatives from several disciplines in the arts community are among those chosen and include one couple, three individuals and two nonprofit cultural organizations. Winners are **Linda Cummings, Mally Khorasantchi, Megan McCombs, Jon and Sonja Laidig, Holocaust Museum and Education Center and Naples Botanical Garden.**

The United Arts Council introduced the *Stars in the Arts* program eight years ago to recognize individuals and organizations for leadership in the arts. Nominations are accepted from the public, and this year 39 nominations were received. A selection committee consisting of past *Stars in the Arts* winners and leaders in the arts community review applications. They carefully assess credentials and rate each nominee based on their contributions to the arts.

Elaine Hamilton, the Council's executive director, indicates "These are the 'People's Choice' awards. The public nominates worthy candidates from the arts and cultural community, and nominees are evaluated by their peers. This year's winners are certainly deserving of this recognition."

Awards will be presented to the winners at a luncheon at the Waldorf Astoria on Friday, March 7. Information about the event is available by calling 254-8242.

The 2014 winners come from several arts disciplines, including theatre, visual arts, museums and arts education. They are:

**Linda Cummings** - Linda currently serves as the Fine Arts Coordinator for the Collier County Public Schools and is a champion for the arts in our schools. She has been on the CCPS staff for 10 years, and previously worked for the Bonita Springs Art League. Linda taught school in Minnesota for 13 years, and was named Minnesota's Middle School Art Teacher of the Year. She has initiated numerous collaborations in music and art between CCPS and nonprofit arts groups. Linda oversees annual student art shows and Honors Concerts for band, orchestra and chorus. Although she plans to retire in May, she will leave behind a rich legacy of devotion to the arts.

**Mally Khorasantchi** - Mally is a professional artist, whose colorful canvases are in private collections all over the world. She has studied with many of the top artists in the country. Her works have been shown in galleries and exhibitions at numerous locations, including New York City, Palm Beach and Dusseldorf. Several of her works were selected for exhibition in the Tampa International Airport. Mally served six years on the board of directors of the United Arts Council and was board President in 2011-2012. She is a graduate of the Greater Naples Leadership program and active in their cultural program.

**Jon and Sonja Laidig** - The Laidigs are long-time residents of Marco Island who have a commitment to philanthropy and preserving the island's history. Their initial donation of \$1.5 million to the Marco Island Historical Society resulted in the establishment of the Marco Island Historical Museum. Without this gift, the museum probably would not have been built. Additionally, the Laidigs donated \$500,000 to an endowment for the Historical Society to ensure ongoing support for the island's history and the Museum.

**Megan McCombs** - Megan has been the director of The Naples Players children's program, KidzAct, for eight years. She is devoted to the theatre, having been an actress, director, playwright, and program manager. Under her leadership, KidzAct enrollment grew to 600+ students annually. Megan expanded the program to

include taking theatre into the schools, where 2,000+ children will be served. KidzAct presents six full stage productions each year.

**Holocaust Museum & Education Center** – Established in 2001, the museum promotes understanding and respect. The Center houses a permanent exhibit including many artifacts and original photographs related to the events of, and people impacted by, the Holocaust. An average of 5,000 visitors come to the museum annually. Their educational programs reach an average of 15,000 students each year, and include a student art contest and teacher training in the humanities.

**Naples Botanical Garden** – In just five short years, the Naples Botanical Garden has grown to be one of the leading cultural organizations in Collier County. The Garden is a community gathering place that features special events, musical and theatre performances and traveling exhibitions. From the welcoming tile mural to plein air painters, this world-class paradise combines the arts, tropical gardens and restored natural habitats. They have partnered with several local arts and cultural nonprofits, including the current partnership with the Baker Museum featuring sculptures by Hanneke Beaumont.

Individuals and organizations that have won the *Stars in the Arts* awards in the past are: Myra Daniels, Patty & Jay Baker, Olga Hirshhorn, Harriet Heithaus, Dr. Erich Kunzel, Dolph von Arx, Clyde Butcher, Andrea Clark Brown, Delores & John Sorey, Charlie Horn, Paul Arsenault, Bill Meek, Jonathan Green, Mary Margaret Gruszka, Joel Banow, Ted Tobye, Dr. Ron Bowman, Betsy & Al Harris, Jim Rideoutte, Kathy Spalding, Dr. Ron Doiron, Elaine Vreenegoor, Bette Young, Peg Longstreth, Brian Holley, Donna Fiala, Toby Blumenthal, Bert Philips, Kristen Coury, Mark Danni, Jim Cochran, William Noll, Peter Thomas, Richard Tooke, Dallas Dunnagan, Eva Sugden Gomez, Charles Gottschalk, Simone & Scott Lutgert, Jack O'Brien, student *Star* Kylan Moran; Philharmonic Center for the Arts, Naples Players, Classic Chamber Concerts, Naples Art Association, Art League of Marco Island, Paradise Coastmen Barbershop Chorus, Naples Music Club, Opera Naples, and Naples Concert Band.

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