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## **BEST BUDDIES TO HOST CHAMPION OF THE YEAR GALA IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA FEATURING TOP PHILANTHROPIC LEADERS**

August 16, 2021 – Best Buddies International, a nonprofit founded in 1989 by Anthony K. Shriver to establish a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development, and inclusive living for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), is excited to announce its annual Champion of the Year Gala hosted by Best Buddies in

Southwest Florida.

Champion of the Year is an annual fundraising competition organized by our staff, Event Committee and Advisory Board, featuring a select group of individuals, professionals and prominent community leaders. These philanthropic trailblazers compete to raise the most funds for Best Buddies and earn the ultimate title of Grand Champion of the Year. By reaching out to the community to raise funds and spread awareness, candidates champion for Best Buddies, our mission, and people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“Everyone in the Best Buddies Program touches the heart of a lot of people,” says participant Julie Lyle. “We all have different abilities and make a lot of friendships. Best Buddies does amazing zoom meetings like citizens class, zumba, Friendship Friday, ambassador training, buddy matching and dancing. Everyone on zoom sees everyone as perfect. We all have beautiful smiles to light up and shine. We accept everyone for who they are as they are. Our only requirement is to be ourselves. That is what Best Buddies is about.”

The event will take place on Friday, October 22, at Spanish Wells Golf & Country Club in Bonita Springs. The Champion of the Year Gala will celebrate the efforts of 14 philanthropic leaders from Southwest Florida while partying with a purpose to raise funds for Best Buddies programs. The gala will feature a silent and live auction, dinner, cocktails, dancing, a keynote address from a Best Buddies buddy pair and a special awards ceremony. This year’s Champion of the Year Gala will raise funds to expand the programs offered for students and adults with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities. Corey Lazar, morning anchor of WINK News, will serve as emcee with Rick Gallo as auctioneer.

The official kick-off party for the friendly fundraising competition will take place on August 24 at Discovery Village at the Forum. Champions will gather with their top supporters

and campaign managers to share their passion for inclusion and friendship. The 2021 Champion candidates include: Matthew Boggan, Design MNB Web Design Studio; Edye Button, Cash Flow Strategies Business Coaching; Cody Eads, Florida Division of Vocational Rehab; Laura Georgelos, Coldwell Banker Realty; Haley Marra, FGCU student; Kevin Montoya, Vera Bradley @ Miromar Outlets; Laura Morrina, Embassy Creek Elementary School; Alexis Poore, Publix; Sheena Reagan, Zimco Entertainment; Char Seuffert, Brightway Insurance, the Seuffert Agency; Mary Shea, La Quinta Inn & Suites by Wyndham Hotels & Resorts; Team Lenny & Kristine: Lenny Cannova and Kristine Skaarsgard, Modern Woodmen of America; and Dre White, I Want That Yummy.

Visit [www.bestbuddieschampion.org/southwestflorida](http://www.bestbuddieschampion.org/southwestflorida) for more information and to purchase tickets for the event.

Host Committee Members for this year's Best Buddies in Southwest Florida Champion of the Year Gala include chair Alina Gonzalez-Dockery of Life Law Planning; Eileen Snider, Broward Factory Service Lee and Collier; Edye Button, Cash Flow Strategies Business Coaching; Marty Wisher, Starlight Productions; Tanya Lockett, Discovery Village at the Forum; Juana Rodriguez, the Lactation Whisperer; Valerie Lee, Val's Angel Love; Marilyn Santiago, Creative Architectural Resin Products; Courtney Sharkey, Moorings Park; Amanda Slade, Vera Bradley; Julie Lyle; Molly Morrina; and Caroline Vives.

Julie Lyle continues, "I love doing things with my best buddy. We have fun growing together. I also love attending the Gala committee meetings and being a part of the planning. I feel included and that makes my light shine. So does giving speeches and networking with others. My favorite part is meeting up with my Best Buddies to go out to eat. We laugh so much. We raise money for Best Buddies by hosting the Gala with an auction. We also get matched with community champions that help raise money. We love when anyone helps us in any way. Everyone is a gift."

Sponsorship opportunities are still available. For more information, please contact Area Director Melanie Musick by email at [melaniemusick@bestbuddies.org](mailto:melaniemusick@bestbuddies.org) or by phoning 859-314-5807.

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