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Greater Kansas City Attractions Association Announces 2021 Heart of Kansas City Award Winners

(Kansas City, MO) – Excellence in tourism and hospitality were recognized last night as nearly 100 representatives of the Greater Kansas City Attractions Association (GKCAA) were in attendance yesterday at the National World War I Museum and Memorial for the announcement of the GKCAA’s 2021 Heart of Kansas City Award winners.

The association presented its Heart of Kansas City Awards in five categories, recognizing individuals and organizations that have gone above and beyond expectations to further the goals, objectives and spirit of the Kansas City region’s tourism and hospitality industries. Nominees are required to be members, employees or volunteers associated with a GKCAA member organization. All nominations are evaluated by a subcommittee of the GKCAA board.

Fox 4 reporter Marcus Officer served as emcee of the event and along with association President Matt Schulte, who serves as the Kansas City Royals senior manager of client services and special events, presented the 2021 Heart of Kansas City Awards to the following honorees:

- **Individual Achievement Award – Randy Wisthoff; Kansas City Zoo**

The Executive Director/CEO was selected in recognition of his achievements during his 18-year tenure at the Zoo which included increasing the zoo’s funding streams that has led to more than \$100 million in capital projects including Polar Bear Passage, Helzberg Penguin Plaza, the newly remodeled Elephant Expedition which opened in 2020, as well as the new aquarium which will open in mid-2023. Other highlights have included a 40% increase in visitor satisfaction, and hitting the milestone of one million visitors in annual attendance in 2016 and 30,000 Friends of the Zoo.

“It’s been a fun 18 years,” said Wisthoff, who will step into the role of executive director of the Kansas City Zoo Foundation at the end of the year. “I’ve got a great team and this award is really for them and the Zoo.”

- **Ambassador of the Year – Kerry Jander; Kansas City, MO Parks and Recreation**

Jander was hired as the resident engagement officer just a few months prior to March 2020 and had started recruitment efforts for a new volunteer program when the pandemic hit.

Undaunted, she successfully recruited 130 volunteers who have contributed 4,400 hours since last year who help with events, pick up trash, and conduct other duties at the 221 Kansas City area parks in order to allow other staff to focus on their core jobs.

“I tell our volunteers they are the heart of Parks and we are so grateful for their service,” said Jander. “This isn’t my award – this is their award.”

- **Special Project Award – Visit Kansas City, Kansas**

While most destination marketing companies were scrambling to keep up with mask mandates, the staff at Visit Kansas City, Kansas developed the KCK Taco Trail which launched in October 2020 and still going today. The initiative, which was featured in Forbes Travel and has earned over 73 million impressions, has generated more than 12,000 restaurant visits to more than 50 KCK businesses by close to 10,000.

“It was a tough time to start a new initiative, but I think we found the magic sauce to get people out and explore their community,” said Alan Carr, executive director of Visit, Kansas City, Kansas. “This was really about getting people into our neighborhoods and getting visitors into places they don’t usually go.”

- **Allied Member of the Year – Fasone & Partners**

Fasone & Partners, a Kansas City advertising agency, supported the GKCAA this year through placement of 25 out-of-market radio promotions in drive markets and one in Kansas City valued at over \$150,000 through on-air contests that provided attraction tickets and hotel stays donated by association members as prizes.

“We appreciate the opportunity to support the members and look forward to helping again this coming year,” said Karol Angotti, the agency’s managing partner.

- **Attraction of the Year – The Kansas City Zoo**

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the Zoo was able to continue to welcome guests and avoid layoffs by shifting full-time and part-time staff into other positions normally staffed by seasonal employees. The Zoo has rebounded in attendance, already exceeding its 2020 attendance of 540,000, clocking over 600,000 guests to date, making it the highest attended attraction in the area (based on publicly available attendance numbers). During this past year, the Zoo unveiled the Elephant Expedition and brought in a pair of koalas for the summer of 2021 in addition to breaking ground on a \$75 million aquarium.

- Legacy Award – Angie Jeffries, Jackson County MO

The final award of the evening was given to Jackson County MO communications director for her contributions to the association over the past 19 years. She has served two terms as vice-president and president of the board of directors, and led various committees including the membership committee from 2006-2010, during which time the GKCAA’s attraction membership increase from 38 to 65.

“This award is not about me, it is about every single one of you that has participated in the Greater Kansas City Attractions Association from day 1,” said Jeffries, recognizing former board members in addition to current ones in the audience. “Each of you have shown dedication and loyalty to making this region a hospitality destination. Because of you, I accept this award for all your hard work.”



From left to right: Matt Schulte – GKCAA Board President/Senior Manager of Client Services and Special Events - Kansas City Royals, Randy Wisthoff – Kansas City Zoo, Michal Fasone and Karol Angotti – Fasone and Partners Advertising, Kim Romary – Kansas City Zoo, Angie Jeffries – Jackson County, Missouri, Kerry Jander – Kansas City, Missouri Parks and Recreation, Alan Carr – Visit Kansas City, Kansas.

Founded almost 25 years ago, the Greater Kansas City Attractions Association includes members from many of the city and region’s top attractions, ranging from sports teams including the Kansas City Royals and Sporting KC, museums like The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum and the National World War I Museum and Memorial, arts organizations including the Kansas City Ballet and Kansas City Symphony, entertainment venues like Worlds of Fun and Main Event, plus historic sites, major retail centers, hotels, event spaces and outdoor experiences on both sides of the state line.

About the Greater Kansas City Attractions Association

The GKCAA is a not-for-profit member organization dedicated to enhancing the success of member attractions through the strategic initiatives of collective marketing, membership services, networking and educational programs, advocacy as a collective voice, and providing opportunities to connect with local businesses interested in supporting the Greater Kansas City area’s tourism industry. For a complete list of members and to learn more, visit attractionskc.org or facebook.com/AttractionsKC.

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