

# 'Sandies' honor Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance's top members

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"Networking Queen," award recipient Violeta Huesman of Keiser University speaks to guests during, "The Sandies," an annual Members' Choice Awards Luncheon for the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance held at the Fete Ballroom at Polo Grill. PAUL VIDELA/Bradenton Herald BRADENTON HERALD — pvidela@bradenton.

**LAKWOOD RANCH** -- The Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance celebrated its rapid growth and spotlighted some of its most outstanding members Wednesday at its annual Sandies awards luncheon.

The winners at the awards ceremony, in its third year, are chosen by the alliance's 400 members for their contributions in areas such as networking, volunteerism and recruitment of new members. The Sandies draw their name from the sandhill cranes that populate the area.

"These awards honor individuals who strive toward the highest level of personal and professional accomplishment, for making a difference and forging paths of leadership for others to follow," said Tommy Klauber, chairman of the business alliance's board, owner of the Polo Grill and himself a winner of the "Bull by the Horns" award for embracing leadership. The luncheon was held in Polo Grill & Bar's Fete Ballroom.

He made sure to thank his wife and business partner, Jaymie Klauber.

"She's the one who pokes the bull with the horns," he said.

Members and award presenters marveled at the tremendous growth the group has enjoyed in recent years -- it has added just more than 80 members in 2013 alone.

"I think I was about No. 96," said Marc Simms, managing partner at RPM Business Advisors and winner of the "Networking King" award, who joined the group in 2006.

Simms said he chose to join the business alliance because "it had the opportunities for me to help the organization, and the organization to help me to become part of this community."

With other business networking groups, "you're like a number," said Amanda Vercheski of Lakewood Ranch Commercial Realty, winner of the Young Professional of the Year award. With the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance, she said, "I think it's just like a family."

Service is also a big part of the group, members said -- both to the community and to one another.

"Help each other and don't ask for anything in return," advised Violetta Huesman of Keiser University, crowned "Networking Queen." "It will come back to you twofold."

Other award winners were Judy Athari of Buffalo Lodging, for the "One of a Kind" award; "Rising Star" award, Chris Deleonardo of Wells Fargo; Jules Price, Send Out Cards for the "Ray of Sunshine" award; and Annette Gueli of Pro-Motion Notions for Volunteer of the Year and the "Best Rancher" award for registering the most new members.

Honorees were given a sleek award statuette, treated to lunch and dessert and entertained by emcee and comedian Tim Wilkins, a Sarasota resident whose material had plenty of local flavor, including some cracks about the new Nordstrom Rack that opened recently in University Park.

"I've just never seen people who were so excited. You'd think George Clooney was inside that place or something, women were lined up out front," Wilkins quipped. "The exciting thing is for women, you've got a place to drop off your husbands, 'cause Total Wine is right next door."

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