



Contact: Gayla Schaefer
(850) 622-7813
Gayla@VisitSouthWalton.com

**10/12/2016
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Visit South Walton Announces the 14th Annual

Van Ness Butler Jr. Hospitality Award Winner: Jennifer Steele

Visit South Walton announced the 2016 Van Ness Butler Jr. Hospitality Award winner at the 30th Anniversary Walton County Tourist Development Council (TDC) Annual Meeting on October 11, 2016.

“We are proud to present the TDC’s highest honor to Jennifer Steele for 2016,” said Jay Tusa, Executive Director for Visit South Walton. “Tourism in South Walton succeeds through the efforts of dedicated, enthusiastic and innovative people and this award recognizes an outstanding woman who has made a significant impact to enhance South Walton as a destination.”

Steele, who summered in Grayton Beach as a child before receiving her BFA from Valdosta State University, moved to the area in 2000 to co-found the Seaside Repertory Theater (The REP). After serving as the Managing Director there for seven years, she owned a consulting firm for non-profit organizations before taking the helm as executive director of the Cultural Arts Alliance (CAA) in 2008.

“Jennifer Steele has made it her life’s work to bring, foster and nurture all aspects of one of South Walton’s most beloved, unique and valuable commodities: Art,” wrote Stacey Brady, Director of Marketing and Communications for Grand Boulevard in her nomination. “She has guided the Cultural Arts Alliance to initiate and oversee many of the most popular and important events in our market.”

In less than a decade, Steele has led the CAA to become a successful arts organization which supports local artists and students with grants, workshops, event productions and [The Foster Gallery](#), a newly opened artist co-op featuring at least a dozen artists on seasonal rotation.

“There is one dominant theme throughout her career: the belief that art in its many diverse forms not only brings enjoyment, meaning and understanding to our lives but also creates an economic engine that drives commerce through tourism” wrote Russell Carter in his nomination.



Through the CAA, Steele has spearheaded several of South Walton's most successful events including the nationally acclaimed 30A Songwriters Festival, Valentine Tour of Homes, ArtsQuest and Seaside Writers Conference (now known as ArtsWeek South Walton), South Walton Fashion Week, A+ Art Series and the Flutterby Festival.

"With each South Walton branded event, the marriage of art, beach, travel destination and South Walton has been elevated and cemented," added Brady. "One of the most compelling aspects of Jennifer's work is that the arts-based events are able to touch on every wonderful and note-worthy cultural aspect of our community."

At the Bayou Arts Center, a TDC owned and maintained facility, Steele has headquartered the CAA and overseen dramatic growth in programming and grant awards made to teachers, students, artists and other arts organizations.

Steele also serves or has served as Chair of Walton County's RESTORE committee, as a member of the Tourist Development Council, as a board member for the A Better South Walton nonprofit organization, and as Chair for the TDC's advisory committees for New Product Development and Arts, Culture, Events and Activities.

"A true South Walton visionary, Jennifer's innovation, tenacity and creative dedication make her a very worthy recipient of the Van Ness Butler Jr. Hospitality Award," concludes Brady.

MORE INFO:

Learn more at www.visitsouthwalton.com/30years

ABOUT THE VAN NESS BUTLER JR. HOSPITALITY AWARD:

The annual hospitality award was established in 2003 by the Walton County Tourist Development Council (TDC) to encourage and recognize excellence in hospitality service, travel/tourism marketing, advertising, promotion, and contributions to the local community. This award also honors the Florida Tourism Hall of Fame inductees and pioneers of Walton County's hospitality and tourism industries.

The award is named to honor the legacy of service embodied by the Van Ness Butler family who acquired the land now known as Grayton Beach in 1922 and Van Ness Butler, Jr. who served as the first chairman of the Walton County TDC 30 years ago. Nominees for the Van Ness Butler Jr., Hospitality Award are awarded for the current year on their initiative, merits and innovation in achieving organizational success and on working with other community businesses or organizations to enhance Walton County's local, national or international standing as a travel destination.



Previous Award Recipients

- 2003: Van Ness Butler Jr.
- 2004: Joann Saucier
- 2005: Don McQuade
- 2006: Robert Davis
- 2007: Pat Potter
- 2008: Johnny Earles
- 2009: Walton County Commissioners (Scott Brannon, Sara Commander, Larry Jones, Cecilia Jones, Kenneth Pridgen)
- 2010: Keith Howard
- 2011: Michael Adkinson
- 2012: MC Davis
- 2013: Malcolm Patterson
- 2014: Jeanne Dailey
- 2015: Mike Ragsdale

***As part of the Walton County TDC's 30th Anniversary celebration this year, the organization will be sharing in-depth articles each month spotlighting the winners of the Van Ness Butler Jr. Award and the Artist of the Year Award. Stay tuned for these special community highlights and stories all year at www.visitsouthwalton.com/30years or contact Gayla Schaefer at (850) 622-7813 for more information.*

###

IMAGES: Please contact Hannah Vermillion at hannah@visitsouthwalton.com or (850) 622-7811 for images of the Walton County TDC 30th Anniversary Annual Meeting and the Van Ness Butler Jr. Award to Jennifer Steele.