



Liana Benavides Master Gardener of the Year 2020

By AnnMaire Caldwell

Liana Benavides, our Master Gardener for the Year 2020, is the type of person who brings warmth and nurturing to even the coldest and most dreary of all the seasons of the year. She has always nurtured her two daughters, now teenagers, her three dogs, and even the plants that she raises in her backyard. But nurturing plants was slow to emerge from her DNA.

As a child, Liana's mother and grandmother were very much involved in gardening, but Liana shied away from this activity. Liana explains that she was initially turned off from raising plants because everything she planted always died, so she preferred to avoid the heart wrench she felt watching little plants struggle and eventually wilt away.

This situation might have endured, if it were not for Liana's dedication to being the best mother possible for her two daughters, Danae and Natalie. When her older daughter founded a garden club at Tex-Hill Middle School, Liana supported her by becoming a parent volunteer with that project. That was five years ago and now she is the Coordinator of the program even though her own daughters are now in high school. Although an involved parent, Liana was not yet an involved gardener herself.

Enter Ruby Zavala into Liana's life. Under Ruby's tutelage Liana began to help with gardening programs at other schools, making school visits and giving presentations. When Ruby suggested that she become a Master Gardener, Liana objected, revealing to her that the color of her thumb was brown, not green. Ruby persisted in encouraging her, as did her father Art Vazquez, himself a newly minted Master Gardener, until Liana cautiously became part of last year's Class 63. While in training, Liana learned that the difference between a brown and a green thumb is education. She has now begun the transition from crying over dead plants to finding satisfaction in their flowers, foliage, and fruits.

Liana's approach to gardening is the same as her approach to her daughters, her dogs, and probably to her husband Ricardo as well: she nurtures them. Liana confesses to naming her plants. Her favorite is a red Hibiscus that she has named Hula. When a plant dies, as some always do, she still feels the same grief that she experienced as a child, but now she has the skills to prevent these tragedies from happening as frequently.

Hers is a symbiotic relationship with her plants. She nurtures and cares for them, and they, in turn, fill her with a sense of purpose and delight. This relationship is especially true during this COVID-19 pandemic, when our worlds have shrunken to the parameters of our homes and yards. Liana's yard has now become her oasis, her source of exercise, her source of solace and kinship with nature. Before

the virus invaded her life, Liana never had a lot of time for gardening in her own yard, but now she has expanded her activities there to include growing vegetables. Although she is still involved in the middle school gardening project through a virtual program of videos, slideshows, and pictures, she cannot nurture plants or students virtually. Her own garden, especially Hula, fulfills this need.



Since her certification, Liana’s involvement in the Bexar County Master Gardener program has gone beyond hands-on gardening activities. She, along with Anne Marie Pease and Sandra Hernandez, helps to put out the weekly *Leaflet* that members receive via email. Every third week, it is Liana’s turn to provide this valuable information service to the membership. She also helps Muriel Lanford with the Master Gardener Facebook page, which is now public and thus available to anyone who clicks “like” on the page. As part of her Facebook activities, she is currently involved in publicizing this years’ “Cultivate!”, which will be presented virtually to the public.

As a San Antonio native, Liana has spent her life giving back to her community in many different areas. In addition to her volunteer efforts with school gardening programs, Liana also volunteered as a Friend of the San Antonio Library, having served as the Secretary of the Friends of the San Antonio Public Library – Encino Branch. Liana, who played the flute during her school days, now serves as a parent volunteer for her daughters’ high school choir and orchestra programs, supporting Danae as a vocalist and a pianist and Natalie as a violinist. What lucky girls to have a parent such as Liana, who gets behind them in all their endeavors!

In November, Liana was elected to serve as BCMG Vice President for 2021. She is excited to serve on the Board and is looking forward to being a part of the progress BCMG is making in the virtual world. No stranger to serving on Boards, she feels this group will be different, as BCMG operates as a team and works diligently to get the job done. She has greatly appreciated all of the support she has received from the many mentors that are a part of BCMG. Liana hopes to see community outreach continue on Zoom and Facebook through 2021 and perhaps when things finally return to “normal” that BCMG will continue to offer a hybrid of in-person and virtual opportunities.

When asked what she will do when her daughters graduate in just a few years, Liana admitted that she has thought about that question. Right now, she has no answers, but we know that she will continue to be committed to helping her community and the Master Gardeners. Perhaps her love of taking pictures of her plants will lead her to become even more involved with the Bexar County Master Gardeners’ digital projects. Whatever she decides to do when the empty nest occurs, it is certain that a person who loves to nurture living things from people and pets to plants will continue to bring her loving care to all her future pursuits.