

Meet your 2021 Bexar County Master Gardener Board members

By Ann Marie Caldwell



President Lynn Cox

*Most of you have already met the **Board President Lynn Cox** since she is now in her second term as President, and she served two terms as Vice President in 2018 and 2019. Lynn is a powerhouse with many years of gardening experience behind her. She was a Master Gardener in Montgomery County, just north of Houston, and in Portland, Oregon prior to becoming a Bexar County Master Gardener. She has twice won the coveted award for the Texas State Master Gardener of the Year in the*

extra-large county division, first in 2006 when she was the Montgomery County entry and again in 2018 as the Bexar County Master Gardener candidate.

Lynn has been truly challenged in her presidency due to COVID-19 restrictions, but, with the help of her husband, she has met these challenges head on, using video conferencing via ZOOM technology for meetings and events. Lynn explains that the COVID-19 restrictions have led to an expansion of and innovations in the Bexar County Master gardeners' mission to educate the populace on the best gardening techniques. She is now working on the digital program ¡CULTIVATE!, for which she is organizing speakers and will herself give three presentations on Native Ornamental Shrubs, Shade Gardening, and Texas Superstars. A former teacher, Lynn continues her love of teaching by giving presentations through the Speakers Bureau.

Lynn's newest project for this year is to develop ways of getting input from more Master Gardeners about programs they would like to see the Board enact. She would like to tap the talents and skills of heretofore silent Master Gardeners to get them more involved in actively working to make our organization even better.

Lynn is a very positive person and sees the Coronavirus as both a challenge and a blessing. It has challenged the membership to search for new ways of being Master Gardeners and, at the same time, it has opened up the membership to new possibilities for service since the old ways of volunteering are now cancelled. For Lynn, personally, the new restrictions are a blessing since they have meant that she gets to spend one week out of every month with her three-year-old grandson, who lives in Houston, a joy that continues to enrich her life.



Liana Benavides, the Board Vice President, *is relatively new to gardening and to the Bexar County Master Gardeners. However, in her short three years since certification, Liana has been active in helping put out the weekly Leaflet and in working on the Master Gardener Facebook page, which she set up with the help of her husband, who is a computer specialist for Rackspace. Prior to her entrance into the Master Gardener Program, Liana was very active in helping with her two daughters' middle school Garden Club, an activity she still continues, even though her daughters are now in high school. Liana will be this year's nominee from*

Bexar County for the Texas State Master Gardener of the Year in the extra-large county division.

As Vice President, she will step into the presidency next year. Therefore, this year, her main mission is to assist Lynn in her duties as President and to learn as much as she can about those duties. She will chair Lynn's new advisory committee to search for more ways to involve the general membership in Board decisions and activities. Like Lynn, Liana has a

positive view of the pandemic restrictions. She explains that these restrictions have given the Board the time to step back and review projects, evaluate programs, and expand membership participation.



Nancy Mills, the Board Secretary, is also relatively new to the Master Gardener organization, having just completed her certification in 2019. Nancy is a retired Literacy Specialist for the NEISD. Even though she is new to the BCMG, for some time Nancy has been active in helping with the Children's Garden, doing propagation at the Botanical Gardens and working as a docent in the Culinary Gardens at SABOT. Recently, she has helped with plant sales for both the Botanical Gardens and for the Master Gardeners' last rodeo event. She loves her work on the Board, and we look forward to her serving

as secretary for many years to come.



Kathann El-Amin, the Board Treasurer, is originally from North Carolina, not from the Middle East as her married surname might suggest. She brings to her office a wealth of experience since she is a CPA and worked for 28 years as an accountant for various non-profit agencies. This is Kathann's second year to serve in this position. She is not bound by any two-year term limit and will serve until, as she put it, someone younger wants to take over. That being said, she loves her job, especially working closely with the MG Office Manager, Linda Milikien, on accounting and insurance matters and with the Board in preparing the annual budget. She

also prepares a monthly financial statement that is presented at monthly Board and General Membership meetings.

Kathann has always loved working with plants and could not wait to retire so she could enter the Master Gardener Training program. For her, it has been a whirlwind affair: retirement in 2017, MG training in 2018, Board Treasurer in 2019. Since becoming a Master Gardener, Kathann says she has learned tons, despite the many years she spent gardening on her own, and especially enjoys sharing her knowledge with others.



Aaron Kelman is the Director of Membership for the Bexar County Master Gardeners. In this capacity he is the one who checks that members have paid their membership dues, and he scrutinizes the VMS to check that members have earned the requisite six CEU's, attended two general meetings, and have met their required volunteer hours; this year and last set at 12 hours to account for COVID-19 restrictions. Aaron comes to us with a 38-year background in working with computer systems, so the Board is lucky to have him fill this very important position.

Aaron has only been a Master Gardener for two years, having been lured into applying to be an intern through his volunteer work with the Children's Garden. He finds great joy and a relief from the stress of his job in working in the soil, and he loves to share his new skills with others. He thrives on challenges and looks forward to mastering the demands of his new duties. It is his goal to simplify the procedural process of tracking membership hours so that others who serve as Membership Director after him will have an easier transition into this position.



Judy Warren serves as one of two **Members-at-Large**, who represent the membership in general. Judy brings to the Board a wide variety of experience. She worked for 38 years with the Texas AgriLife Extension office, where she was a Gerontology Specialist, charged with finding ways to provide for the social, psychological, and physical health of senior citizens. However, her greatest accomplishment was co-authoring a five-million-dollar grant from the Federal Government to introduce children to growing vegetables, making food using those vegetables, and encouraging physical activity, all to fight childhood obesity. This grant became the nucleus for the Learn, Grow, Eat, and Go program that has spread across the nation. Now retired, Judy is part of the nominating committee that submits nominees for the Search for Excellence awards at the State level. She also helps with the training of volunteers for the Learn, Grow, Eat and Go program here in Bexar County. Judy is a valuable resource for programs that impact older adults and Junior Master Gardeners.



Muriel Lanford is our second **Member-at-Large**. Muriel actually served as Vice President in 2020 but accepted that position only on the condition that it not lead to being President, as is usually the case. Muriel explains that her other volunteer activity puts so many demands on her time that she would not have had time to take on the duties of the presidency. This other volunteer activity is with Ransomed Life of Texas, which works to prevent labor and sexual trafficking and to treat those who have been rescued from it. Muriel became involved with human trafficking when, as a registered nurse, she saw the results of trauma on the brain and connected this trauma with the information she gained from Donald Sutherland's miniseries *Human Trafficking*. Now her primary job is to educate parents and children on the lures that predators use to entrap victims into abusive situations and to train volunteers in rehabilitating people who have been rescued from such abuse. Muriel divides her time between this volunteer mission and her work with the Master Gardeners, the latter being the light that gives her relief from the darkness of her other volunteer job.

Besides serving on the Board, Muriel is Chair of the Facebook Committee. She has worked closely with other committee members, especially Liana Benavides, to set up the newly configured Facebook page, which does a much better job of getting correct information about garden topics to the public. She also serves on the Education Committee as the logistic person who coordinates speakers for the monthly general meetings.

We now come to the last two Board Members. These are non-voting members who serve an important role as advisors.

Our **Past President Grace Emery** should be a familiar name to all. Grace was President of the Bexar County Master Gardeners from 2018 to 2019. Like Liana Benavides and Kathann El-Amin, Grace had a whirlwind ascension to her leadership position. Master Gardener in 2016, Vice President for half of 2017, and President in 2018-2019. Her ascension was of whirlwind proportions because that's the kind of person Grace is. She has been involved in gardening all her life. She served as President of the Herb Society prior to becoming a Master Gardener. Growing herbs and using them for cooking and medicinal purposes is Grace's specialty. It leaves one breathless to list Grace's accomplishments: 3 years as Rodeo Chair,

2.5 years as Chair of the Docent Training program for the Culinary Gardens at SABOT, 1 year on the Hotline, 3 years with the Speakers Bureau, 2020 Chair of the Nominating Committee for Board members, Chair of the nominating committee for the State excellence awards from 2018 to 2021, and Chair for the International Search for Excellence in 2019. Wow!



Art Vasquez The second non-voting position is that of **Parliamentarian**, filled by **Art Vasquez**. Like Grace, Art, formerly a chartered Property and Casualty Underwriter for USAA, has the skills and willingness to help out the Board whenever and however he is needed. Art is not new to the Board, having previously served as Membership Director and Member-at-Large. As Parliamentarian, it is his job to keep the meetings in order and to make sure people don't speak over one another or out-of-turn, something that is especially needed now when all

Board Meetings are held on ZOOM.

Art is the one who got his daughter Liana Benavides interested in working with him to start the Garden Club at her daughters' middle school. Although no longer actively involved in the Garden Club, he still advises his daughter and helps with digital presentations on garden topics that Liana gives to students. Every Wednesday afternoon, Art answers questions on the Hotline and, in that capacity, is a much sought-after mentor for those with gardening concerns.

Like Lynn and Liana, Art has positive things to say about the pandemic, despite the restrictions it has imposed upon in-person contact. Thanks to the new Facebook page, there has been an increase in donations from members and the public, which off-set the loss of income from plant sales. No more missed Board meetings because members are always only a click away no matter what their circumstances. The same goes for the monthly membership meetings. When the pandemic abates, these meetings will probably be of a hybrid variety and thus open to more people. According to Art, the pandemic has taught the Bexar County Master Gardeners to get smarter and to use digital technology to engage more members. He echoes what Lynn Cox has said, that the pandemic has enabled the Master Gardeners to innovate and to re-envision their role in the Community. The end result is that we, the membership, are now better served by this creative new Board.