

# Outstanding Individual Volunteer Service

## Mary Ernestine Butler

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Mary Ernestine Butler first began volunteering with Texana Center in 2002 with one mission, to put together and direct a choir at the Texana Learning Center in Missouri City for persons with an intellectual and/or developmental disability. Since then, Ms. Butler, has devoted her efforts to ensure each member of the choir performs to the best of their ability.

Ms. Butler spent many years teaching music in public high schools after receiving her Bachelor's degree from Florida A&M University; her Master's from Columbia Teachers College in New York and an Honorary Doctorate degree from Sacred Music Mount Hope Bible College. Her love of music has led her to direct choirs for groups around the country including the Alpha Kappa Alpha South Regional Choir. In fact, Lee Brown, former Mayor of Houston, honored her by declaring "Mary Ernestine Butler Day."

Since she first started the Texana Choir nine years ago, the choir has grown to over 30 members strong. Working with the choir once a week, she trains each member not only to sing but also to read music and understand what each note means just as she did when she taught music to high school students.

As any choir director would agree, working with a large choir can be challenging and sometimes a 'stern' demeanor is necessary. When she asks for the choirs' attention, you could hear a pin drop from the anywhere in the room. However, underneath that formidable exterior, there is an extremely passionate and caring volunteer.

Ms. Butler accepts any client who wishes to join the choir with open arms. She takes the time to teach them all in exactly the same way and taps into their abilities with nurturing and by helping each member to reach their fullest potential.

She makes a difference in the lives of everyone she comes in contact with, but has a really special bond with the clients in the Texana Choir. One of our clients, who had never attempted to speak, expressed an interest in the choir, Ms. Butler took her in and to everyone's surprise, she tried to sing. Ms. Butler saw the potential in this client who began to respond to the music; and eventually learned to sing without words but in perfect pitch, an amazing accomplishment.

The Texana Choir has two large scale public performances each year; one at Celebrating Abilities in March which is held at Sugar Land Town Square and the other a Holiday Concert, performed at the American Baptist Church in Missouri City. Last year, Texana asked that the choir perform on the steps in the foyer as people arrived at the Annual Gala. This required smaller choir for safety reasons, but you would have thought we had asked Ms. Butler to "cut off a limb!" She said it was one of the most difficult things she had to do as she did not want to leave anyone out.

The joy the choir exudes is unbelievable. The choir, both uplifting and inspiring, would not be possible without the direction of Ernestine Butler. Through her leadership, dedication and 'can do' attitude Ernestine Butler has brought happiness not only to the Texana's clients but the people of Fort Bend County through these public performances. She has most certainly been a catalyst in the integration of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities into our community.

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***Nominated by Texana Center***