NEWS RELEASE

Customer Relations Team Members Honored for Compassion

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April is National Autism Awareness Month — a time meant to raise awareness and encourage acceptance of autism and draw attention to the tens of thousands of people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) each year. Recently, three members of American Airlines' Customer Relations (CR) team were recognized at the 2018 Stevie Awards for Sales & Customer Service for the compassion they showed in response to email inquiries involving children with special needs.

Helping an elementary student get his wings
Michelle Wanzo and Donna Turilli, both members of CR's elevation team, won a gold award in the Customer Service Complaints Team of the Year — Other Service Industries category for their response to an email Michelle received from a Las Vegas teacher who was struggling to reach a student with autism.

The teacher wrote, "I am a teacher with an autistic student obsessed with American Airlines. Our school lost our special education teacher, so I am at a loss on how to reach him. He carries a model American Airlines plane with him and wants to be a pilot when he grows up. He is super smart but has limited social skills. American Airlines is what he cares about. If you have any handouts, flight schedules, anything with your logo — maybe it would inspire him to focus and learn for a few more hours. I want to be able to show him that I care to try to connect to him as his teacher."

Michelle took action.

"Our management team empowers us to think outside the box, so I decided we needed to hand deliver some American 'swag' to him and his classmates," Michelle said. "It was just the right thing to do."

Michelle worked with leaders in CR and recruited Donna to help organize the effort. The duo headed from Phoenix (PHX) to Las Vegas (LAS) and, with additional help from Line Maintenance Manager Kip Hartzell and Staff Assistant Shelly Marquez, based in Las Vegas, gathered mock passports, kids wings, pins and airplane rings for the teacher's class. For the student himself, the team also brought a variety of American posters, his favorite American Way magazines, a backpack and a new model airplane.

The surprise visit from American has renewed the student's interest in school, and he has become more engaged in class, his teacher said. She added that the student and his classmates have a sense of community that didn't exist before American's visit. The teacher has asked the American team to return for an upcoming career day.

"Las Vegas may not be my own community," Michelle noted, "but American is a global community — and that makes Las Vegas my community, too."

Top: Donna, Michelle and Maytee stand with Customer Relations and Customer Service Recovery leaders at the 2018 Stevie Awards ceremony.

Michelle, Donna, Shelly and Kip in a Las Vegas classroom presenting American swag to the class, including one very big fan of American.

It takes a village … and a dedicated Customer Relations Representative

Meanwhile, CR Lead Representative Maytee Miller took home a silver award in the Front-Line Customer Service Professional of the Year — Other Service Industries category for assisting a mother who had concerns as her stepdaughter traveled alone internationally. During their correspondence, the mother disclosed that she was in the hospital with her newborn son.

"I think I mentioned that I was pregnant, and my son had been unwell after being born," the mother said.

Maytee called her immediately after reading that email.

"We chatted briefly about what was going on. She was going through a very hard time and had not yet processed the news that her son was going to have lifelong struggles," Maytee said. "I tried to encourage her and shared my personal struggle with my son and his diagnosis."

Maytee's son, Sebastian, was diagnosed with autism when he was two years old. Although their sons are years apart with different medical conditions, Maytee could still relate to the mother's experience. "I wanted so bad to give this woman a hug and tell her that everything was going to be alright," she said.

With that in mind, Maytee mailed a heartfelt card of encouragement to the mother and a blanket to her son. The mother was overwhelmed.

“It is honestly one of the most touching gestures I've ever seen, and I will always remember it,” she wrote back by email.

The mother explained that learning about her son’s condition and the future hardships likely to come was frightening, but speaking with Maytee and reading her inspirational words in the card gave her “a ray of light at the end of the tunnel.”

“You sharing your story with me really gave me a boost of positivity and optimism,” the mother wrote. “The way you speak about your son is beautiful — you showed me that my life may be better because of the illness that [my son] has.”

The newborn's grateful mom sent this photo of him to Maytee. “We all feel like the world is a better place,” she said, in response to Maytee's actions.