

NEWS

Calendar shines spotlight on inspirational Wilmington seniors

Photo shoots for the calendar began Thursday at several Wilmington landmarks

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Naydi Nazario, 64, is one of 11 people chosen to be featured in next year's Wilmington 60 Strong calendar. *EMMA DILL/STARNEWS*

Twelve inspirational local senior citizens will grace the pages of next year's Wilmington 60 Strong calendar.

Approximately 50 seniors were nominated to be a program ambassador this year. A panel of judges selected the top 12 calendar models based on their commitment to a healthy lifestyle and their individual accomplishments. The photoshoot for the calendar began Thursday at landmarks throughout Wilmington and will continue through Saturday.

Lisa Iezzi, 61, of Wilmington donned a series of red dresses to have her portrait taken at Thalian Hall. Iezzi works as a social worker for New Hanover County. She has a passion for helping babies and infants affected by substance abuse.

"I love those babies," she said. "It really gives me a chance to make a difference, not only with the children ... but to actually help the parents to get into treatment and redeem themselves."



Lisa Iezzi, 61, is one of 11 people chosen to be featured in next year's Wilmington 60 Strong calendar.

Iezzi keeps the trunk of her car stocked with diapers, baby wipes, formula and other supplies she might need to help the children and families she works with each day. She always carries gift cards to give to those in need in the Wilmington area, and each Christmas her family “adopts” a family in need, providing them with gifts and a meal.

Thalian Hall resonates with Iezzi because she loves to be on stage. She studied opera for a time in college and has performed in several Wilmington theater productions.

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Naydi Nazario, 64, of Wilmington believes in staying active. Nazario competed in the marathon during the 1984 Olympics, representing her home country of Puerto Rico. Although Nazario has since given up running, she now bicycles regularly and plays pickleball.

“I'm always active,” she said, “active until the day I die.”

Nazario taught sports psychology and coached track and field at UNC Wilmington but has since retired. She believes everyone, regardless of age or ability, should find activities they enjoy to stay healthy.

Valerie Lingo, 66, of Wilmington is another ambassador dedicated to helping others and maintaining her health. Lingo is taking classes to become a foster parent and helps support her daughter, Yolanda, as she cares for several foster children. Lingo and her family owned the restaurant Jamaica's Comfort Zone in Wilmington until closing it two years ago in order to spend more time with her family.

Lingo's family has a history of high blood pressure, which has motivated her to stay active. When COVID-19 upended her active lifestyle, she became determined to schedule exercise into her day. Since the pandemic began, Lingo said she hasn't missed a day of working out. She has even learned how to hula hoop.

“If we control what we eat and what we put in our bodies we control the quality of our life,” she said. “My goal is to control the quality of my life so that hopefully God allows me to be here a long time with my family.”

The 60 Strong ambassadors were selected by five judges, including local TV news anchor Jon Evans and New Hanover County Commissioner Jonathan Barfield Jr.

60 Strong ambassadors

Randy Anderson, New Hanover

Bernadette Baker, New Hanover

James Hunt, New Hanover

Lisa Iezzi, New Hanover

Valerie Lingo, New Hanover

Gayla MacMillan, Pender

Deborah Maxwell, New Hanover

Naydi Nazario, New Hanover

Ben Pratte, New Hanover

Richard Skalski, Pender

Carol Stein, Onslow

Brent Wright, New Hanover

Wilmington 60 Strong aims to celebrate local seniors and is sponsored by Wilmington Health as part of its new Anchor Senior Care Advantage, a program designed to keep seniors active and to help them navigate Medicare and other healthcare decisions.

The calendars will cost \$15 and proceeds will benefit the YMCA of Southeastern North Carolina. Calendars can be purchased online at wilmington60strong.com starting in mid-October.