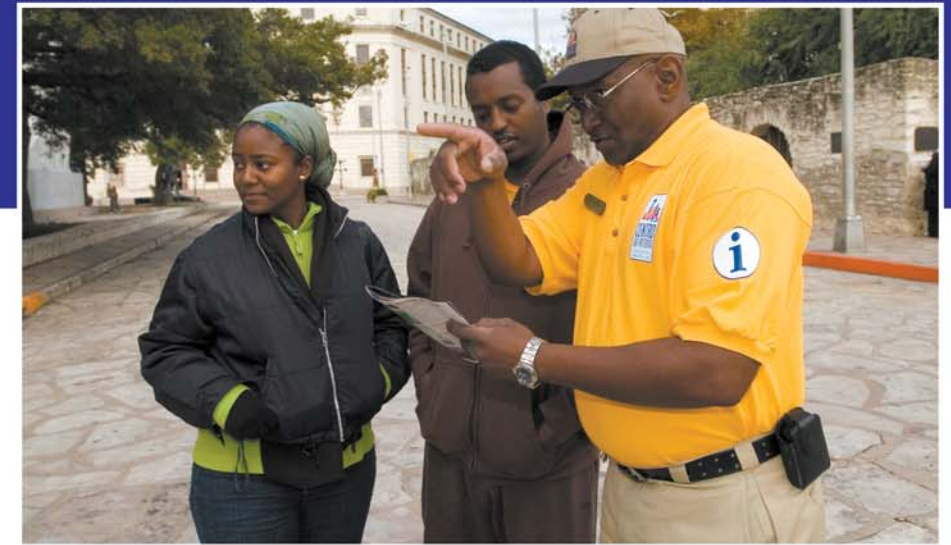




Ambassador Amigos Catherine Martinez (left), Thomas Wilson and Stefanie Toliver, answer questions and direct downtown visitors. In honor of the group of 65 Amigos entering their 10th year, they have retired their familiar teal shirts for new gold ones.



Thomas Wilson (right), a San Antonio native, is now a team leader. "I enjoy helping people downtown and helping beautify our city," he says. "I take pride in my city."

# Amigos: 'The face of downtown' celebrates 10th anniversary

BY JEANETTE MCNAMEE

For 10 years, Centro San Antonio's Amigos have helped downtown visitors find lost cars and lost hotels, directed them to the Alamo and the River Walk, among other destinations, and helped keep the area clean and green. As the number of visitors, residents and workers in downtown has grown, so have the Amigos.

"The idea was in place about five years before the Amigos started," says Ben Brewer, president of the Downtown Alliance San Antonio, which led the efforts to establish the Amigos.

Brewer and other business leaders saw how well similar programs worked in other cities and were convinced that such a program was needed here to provide supplemental services within the Downtown Improvement District. Downtown Alliance provides staff and administrative services and partners with Centro San Antonio in support of the Amigos.

"We never thought 10 years ago that this would make such a huge impact with our guests," says Hector Venegas, general manager of the Menger Hotel. He was a member of the board of Centro San Antonio when the Amigos were born.

Ambassador Amigos direct visitors and others around the downtown area and answer questions about the city's history. Maintenance Amigos supplement the city's efforts by sweeping streets, collecting bags of trash, removing graffiti, weeds and more. Streetscaping Amigos install and maintain plants in planters on light poles, stair rails to the river, and in large terra-cotta pots throughout downtown.

"All Amigos go through orientation where we teach them about downtown San Antonio," Brewer says. "They learn public relations skills because they are the face of downtown."

Venegas says the Amigos make his guests "feel they have been taken care of ... they feel secure with the information that they receive, as far as addresses go, and the questions that they have."

If Ambassadors don't have the answer to a particular question, they can call a dispatcher for the information or take a person's number and call them back with the answer. PDA's with portable printers were added to the Ambassadors' resources last summer, allowing them to print out directions for visitors.

Some of the common (and often humorous) questions which the Amigos are often asked include: Why was the Alamo built

in the middle of downtown? Is this the original Alamo? (Some people think the Alamo built in Brackettville for the John Wayne movie is the original.) Is John Wayne buried at the Alamo?

One person who has been answering visitors' questions for many years is Stefanie Toliver, who was in San Antonio for only 10 days when she became an Ambassador Amigo 10 years ago. A native of Germany, Toliver and her husband, Aubrey, moved here when he left the military.

The Amigo job was ideal, she says, because "I love history, and I love to talk."

After becoming an Amigo, Toliver took advanced training and read everything she could find about the area's history. She became a certified tour guide in 2001.

"I wanted to know everything possible about downtown, not just the Alamo," she says, pointing to the history of the King William District, the Spanish Governor's Palace, Main Plaza and the Menger Hotel.

"I love San Antonio because it has such a rich heritage," says Toliver, who is now an operations supervisor, overseeing the Ambassador and Maintenance Amigos.

Over the past 10 years, Bernie Cantu has proudly watched the Amigos grow from 25 to 65 and its service area expand. He was operations manager for Centro San Antonio when the Amigos began and is now special projects manager. Jimmy Richards became operations manager in October.

"The Amigos now service an important area on the west side of downtown (Market Square); and the delivering of services has become more efficient," Cantu says. "A greater number of people, including local residents, recognize and use the Amigo services."

The service area spreads from Interstate 35 on the west to Interstate 37 on the east; St. Mary's, Brooklyn and McCullough streets on the north; and Market, Villita and Dolorosa streets on the south. In celebration of their anniversary, the Amigos' familiar teal uniform shirts will be replaced by gold shirts.

Cantu often receives e-mails from visitors who've been impressed by the Amigos. Following are a few of the comments.

From a woman from Colorado: "We've been helped more than once by your Amigos, and they are so friendly, so courteous and so anxious to help. . ."

From a woman from Connecticut: "I was in San Antonio during Luminaria, and I wanted to give kudos to all of the ambassadors who graciously helped me a few times in obtaining directions during the event. . ."

From a San Antonio man: "I attended the opening of the Museum Reach . . . I was very pleased to see a number of (Centro San Antonio) Amigos at the event and available to conduct tours, answer questions and, in general, interact with the public. This is an excellent resource for both locals and visitors to our city."