

Rising to the **Top**

This Maitland executive brings new excitement to the chamber.

By Kevin Fritz

The Maitland Chamber of Commerce discovered a hidden gem in **Maria Alvarez Simmons**. The dedicated, driven new executive director of the chamber, an accomplished leader in promotions, sales and marketing and community relations, was not even looking for a new job when friends and family told her of the opportunity that became available when **Mary Hodge** announced her retirement after 11 years of service to the chamber. Simmons hit the ground running in July solidifying marketing efforts and focusing on increasing the membership of the 54-year-old organization.

Although it can be an arduous process hiring a key executive, the decision by the board of directors to bring Simmons into the fold was made easier by Simmons' solid reputation that preceded her.

"We wanted to grow, but not be unrealistic," says **Denise Beumer**, chamber president. "The way Maria took the City of Casselberry to the next level is what we were looking for in a leader. She brings an increased level of excitement to the chamber."

The board also saw a wealth of experience in marketing, event planning and branding that Simmons has garnered through the years, primarily through the City of Casselberry, and Ryder Truck Rental where she worked at its headquarters in Miami for 17 years before relocating to Orlando to be with her ailing father.

"I am so glad I did it," she says about spending her dad's last five years alive close at hand. "It was a great gift."

Fluent in Spanish and English, Simmons' growth plans comprise an even closer bond between

the chamber and the City of Maitland for which she believes "the possibilities are endless," and reaching out to area organizations, holding true to the chamber motto, "Growing Community Roots."

"I am hoping to bring in more involvement with Orange County chambers," she adds, hinting at her vision of a more robust Maitland Chamber of Commerce. "We may expand, but first I would like to get our membership numbers up."

After arriving in Central Florida, a chance meeting via a friend at a jazz concert found Simmons working part time for the City of Casselberry as an executive assistant. Within three years, her talents had taken her to a managerial position. As the recreation division manager, Simmons helped change the perception of the city via media and public relations efforts and rebranded its image, including creating its first-ever logo.

She also fashioned—and implemented—the popular "Swing Fore the Arts" golf tournament in 2006 when funds for the city's arts program were cut. Simmons borrowed from her own experience of working on the famous Doral Ryder Cup to make the art tourney a money-making success: It has raised more than \$30,000 since its inception. She hints that a golf tournament in some shape or form may emerge through the auspices of the Maitland Chamber.

Married for more than 25 years, Maria and her husband, **George**, who live in Casselberry, raised three children and dote on two grandchildren. **L**



COURTESY OF MARIA SIMMONS

Maria Simmons is ready to hit the ground running as the new president of the Maitland Chamber of Commerce.

For more local profiles, visit CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.