Most people involved with the Drug Awareness Program know the story behind Enrique Camarena, but it is worth knowing some of the history behind the reason the Elks created an award in his memory and the evolution that award has taken over the years.

Shortly after Kiki’s death in 1985, Congressman Duncan Hunter and Kiki’s high school friend Henry Lozano launched “Camarena Clubs” in Kiki’s hometown of Calexico, California. Hundreds of club members pledged to lead drug-free lives to honor the sacrifice made by Kiki Camarena. These pledges were delivered to First Lady Nancy Reagan at a national conference of parents combating youth drug use. Several state parent organizations then called on community groups to wear red ribbons during the last week of October as a symbol of their drug-free commitment.

The first Red Ribbon Week celebrations were held in La Mirada and Norwalk, California and in 1988, the National Family Partnership (NFP) coordinated the first National Red Ribbon Week with President and Mrs. Reagan serving as honorary chairpersons. The following year, the Elks (who began their Drug Awareness Program in 1982) made the Red Ribbon Celebration part of their DAP and continue to encourage its support to this day.

Henry Lozano, who helped found this initiative is now a member of the Elks and a proud Ambassador to the Elks Drug Awareness Program.

From this simple start of handing out Red Ribbons, the DAP encouraged States to hold “Hands Across the Borders” celebrations; Red Balloon launches and a variety of Programs centered around Red Ribbons. In 2010 the Elks celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Red Ribbon but recreating a ribbon with the original pledge taken by those kids from Calexico.

In conjunction with the Red Ribbon celebration, the DAP piggy-backed with a program that the Elks instituted years before, whereby community law enforcement officers were recognized by their local Lodges. Why not, the DAP asked, then recognize someone in law enforcement who stood for the values held dear by DEA Agent Camarena? During the 1990’s, the Elks had partnered with an organization known as PRIDE. This organization encouraged young folks to stay drug and alcohol free and through song, dance and skits, bring their message to everyone. PRIDE held an annual event and it was at such an event that the Elks Enrique S. Camarena Award was presented.

State Chairman were encouraged to nominate individuals and from those nominations a National Winner was selected. That winner was sent to the PRIDE Conference and the award was made in front of 1,000’s of participants. Over the years, the attendance at PRIDE conventions dwindled. The DAP was looking at ways of increasing participation in the Award. It was decided that individual certificates would be made available to all
nominees and that the National Winners would be announced at the Grand Lodge Convention and receive their awards at their State Association Conventions.

Participation increased, but never seemed to reach more than about 25% of the States participating. Rather than present certificates to the individual State’s nominees, the DAP decided to present them with the same award as given to the National Winner and to upgrade the National Winner’s Award. Participation remained about the same.

In 2010, the National Winner was chosen from California. The Elks’ old and dear friend, Henry Lozano asked: “Could we invite Kiki’s wife to attend?” Of course, the answer was “YES” and she was able to be present in California when the award was given. During that time, Mrs. Camarena talked passionately about the Camarena Educational Foundation and mentioned that their major fundraiser for the Foundation was the creation of a life-sized bronze bust of her husband. At a later meeting in Chicago, the Directors of the DAP asked themselves, why don’t we present one of these busts to the Lodge that nominates the National Winner? Last year, the National Winner nominated from a Lodge in North Carolina was present at the NC 2011 Convention where he received his Award and the bust was presented to the Reidsville NC Lodge to present to their community.

Mrs. Camarena was also able to attend the DAP Annual Training in Phoenix last year. She thanked the State Chairmen for honoring her husband’s memory all these years and for the work they did in Drug Awareness.

This small part of the Elks Drug Awareness Program has grown from a simple Red Ribbon to an award for all State Nominees; an award for the National Winner and an award for the Lodge nominating the National Winner.