

Kentucky Colonel couple helping people 'on the fringe'

By JOHN MCGARY
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There are a lot of Kentucky Colonels in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and, for that matter, around the world.

In the case of Lisa and Mark Molla, the honorary designation arranged by state Rep. Joe Graviss and presented by Woodford Judge-Executive James Kay last week can't begin to describe their level of community service.

"When my dad retired, I thought they would travel the world. Instead, they have traveled all the roads in Woodford County and given back all their time to this community."

The ceremony, which took place Nov. 4 at the Spark Community Café, where they regularly volunteer, was a total surprise, they said.

"I was sitting with my back to the door ... and we're finishing lunch with Matthew and Jordan (Matthew Coyle is their son-in-law and the husband of their daughter, Jordan) and all of a sudden, James Kay is standing there along with Mary Nehring, and I

looked at them like, 'Hey, guys, what's going on?'" Mark said.

"And I was headed to my car to go get something and Jordan was like, 'No,

mom.'" Lisa said, laughing.

A few minutes later, Kay read from the certificates proclaiming Mark and Lisa to be Kentucky Colonels, a process that began when

Nehring wrote a letter to Graviss describing the volunteer work the couple has ramped up since the beginning of the pandemic. "Lisa prepares the food for all the children involved in the Esperanza program and Mark drives the van shuttle to take kids home from Esperanza. (Esperanza is a program that provides food, mentoring and recreational opportunities to students for whom English is a second language.) All of their help is volunteered (and Versailles Presbyterian Church (VPC) donates the use of the church van and gas to run it," Nehring wrote.

The Mollas live in Stonegate subdivision. Mark retired in December 2018 and the following fall, volunteers from VPC, of which he and Lisa are members, began picking "clients" up in a church van and taking them to the Food Pantry for Woodford County once a month. That process changed when the pandemic began, Mark said, and since then, they've delivered meals in the church van and sometimes their own car.

That's also when they began volunteering for Spark Community Café, waiting



MARK AND LISA MOLLA have delivered thousands of meals throughout Woodford County since the pandemic began – sometimes in a van belonging to their church, Versailles Presbyterian, and sometimes in their own car. That and many other good works were recognized Nov. 4, when they were given certificates proclaiming them Kentucky Colonels. (Photo by M.T. Eggert)

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tables twice a week, then delivering them weekly on Fridays. In March, Spark began to serve breakfast to the Esperanza children, and Mark and Lisa would help deliver them. Lisa became the "snack mom," preparing snacks every Tuesday to about 50 children.

"I wanted to make sure they were healthy snacks," she said.

"All the mentors immediately told her there could be no sugar involved," Mark said with a laugh. "These kids were already fired up enough after not being in school ..."

"All day," Lisa added.

When schools stopped in-person instruction classes and officials had to figure out how to provide meals to children, the Mollas struck up a relationship with Simmons Elementary cafeteria manager M.T. Eggert, Mark said. They began coming in every Friday and Monday to put together bagged breakfasts and lunches for each day of the week for parents to pick up.

Each week, there were 50 or so bags left over from the 250 they'd prepared, and the Mollas knew many of the Esperanza families couldn't get to the school during the two-hour window when they were being given out. "That's how Mark and I got started on telling M.T., 'Listen, we'll take these bags, and we'll get them delivered.'"

When the federal Summer Food Service Program began, the Mollas moved to Woodford County Middle School, where they helped prep 750 meal bags. Again, some were left over – between 80 to 100, Mark said.

“And we said, ‘Listen, I think we know where some of these areas are – some of these hot spots – that aren’t near these bus locations (where the meals were delivered by school buses). ...’” Mark said.

The Mollas asked if they could load up the church van (and sometimes, their own car) with the bagged meals and deliver them. The answer was an enthusiastic “Yes.”

Mark is 64, Lisa, 58. The New Jersey natives, who moved to Woodford County in 1985, have been volunteering for many decades. Jordan Coyle, their youngest daughter, is quite proud of her parents, but envisioned a *slightly* different future for them. “When my dad retired, I thought they would travel the world. Instead, they have traveled all the roads in Woodford County and given back all their time to this community.”

The Mollas say they’re quite happy traveling those roads, where they’ve discovered people “living on the fringe” and tried to help them. And while they’re each proud to be Kentucky Colonels (though they know the honor has been, at least in the past, rather generously applied), they say their unpaid work is reward enough.

When told of Jordan’s comment, Mark laughed and said they would have cut their retirement travels a bit anyway, due to COVID restrictions.

“We have established relationships with many of these families that will last for a long time,” Mark said. “It’s not an obligation; it’s not a chore to us. We get so much back from it that this is something we almost prefer to do.”

The other colonel next to him agreed.