

# SBM SOUTH BRUNSWICK MAGAZINE

Life in Southern Brunswick County, NC

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a Parade of Homes  
Triple Award Winner

### Revitalizing

Downtown Shallotte

### The Visionary behind the

Southport Village Shoppes

### Helping a Friend

in St. James Plantation



Meet your neighbors:

-Tom Shoaf

-Kathryn Parker





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# Taking Care of Their Own

## St. James Community Members Help a Friend

**What** do you do when someone you love needs your help? What if the problem is bigger than packing moving boxes or giving them a ride home from the airport — much bigger? What if the problem is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more commonly known as ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease?

In early 2010 Keith Kopka, chef at St. James Plantation's Members Club, was diagnosed with ALS. As word spread, the community, along with St. James Properties, LLC, and Troon Golf, banded together and organized a benefit golf tournament to raise money for the Kopka family. Aptly called "Taking Care of Our Own," the tournament, dinner and silent auction, held on November 19, 2010, was the larger St. James community's way of doing just that.

Chef Kopka, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, came to St. James from Boston in 2008. He found working in the kitchen at the Players Club much more relaxing, and less demanding, than the job he left in Boston. He'd traded 16-hour days and an ambitious menu (one that never repeated an item for two years) for more time at home with his family.

Soon he was moved to the Members Club, where he met the challenge of a kitchen that wasn't running as well as it could. He began to make simple changes. The pantry and cold storage were stocked and organized. His menu

"It was the most un-athletic thing I'd ever seen him do," says Megan. "But we weren't concerned. Keith was 41, young, healthy. What could be wrong?"

As new symptoms presented themselves, Kopka visited his doctor. His doctor referred him to a specialist, and the specialist sent him to Duke Medical Center. At Duke he received his diagnosis.

Word began to spread through family, friends and coworkers. Their reaction to the news was strong and immediate and offers of help poured in.



emphasized healthier food. He held his staff accountable for their duties. In short order, the Members Club kitchen was running smoothly.

Then, in the prime of his career and life, Chef Kopka found himself facing the challenges of ALS.

"My wife, Megan, and I were playing in a parents/players soccer game with our kids," Kopka says. "I went to cut around one of the players and I lost my balance, I just fell right over."

Megan, his son, Bruce, 14, and daughter, Jaden, 11, didn't think anything of it.

Above: Keith Kopka, chef at St. James Plantation's Members Club, was diagnosed with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, in early 2010.

"The response was overwhelming," Megan says. "It was heartwarming to see how many people wanted to help us."

One person who wanted to help was Kopka's boss, John Brown, with Troon Golf. He proposed a benefit golf tournament. Kopka resisted.

"I put off the tournament forever," Kopka says. "I felt like it was begging and I didn't want to take any handouts."

Eventually, Kopka came around to the idea. He and Brown talked about the fund-raising goals and initially settled on \$15,000 — enough to bridge the gap between employment and social security disability payments — but Brown convinced him that they could raise more than that. They settled on \$30,000 as the target.

“We wanted to help Keith out,” says St. James resident and tournament coordinator Wayne Moody. “He’s a super guy and everyone loves him. He goes out of his way to make us happy in his dining room and I felt that we needed to take care of him when he needed it. He’s family and that’s what you do for family.”

The organizers of the tournament reserved the Founders Club course and began to sign up golfers. The response was so overwhelming that a second course, the Players Club, took on overflow golfers. In the end, 260 golfers, including Kopka,

took to the courses. A post-tournament reception, dinner and auction held under a tent outside the Founders Club drew another 100 people, and, all told, 371 of Kopka’s friends, family, supporters and fans attended the day’s events.

“The generosity shown to Keith and his family was phenomenal,” Moody says. “We nearly tripled our goal and raised \$87,700. I know that will have a huge impact for the Kopkas as they move forward.”

Moody says the tournament would have never been possible without the help of John Brown, Troon Golf, St. James Properties, LLC, the participants, an army of volunteers and especially the help of fellow St. Jamesian Bill McCormack.

“Everyone loves Chef Dude,” McCormack says. “You don’t find stand-up guys like that very often, and when you do, you take care of them.”

Kopka’s condition has progressed to the point where he needs a cane to walk. He has all but stepped out of the kitchen, taking on more of a director’s role. He, Megan, Bruce and Jaden know that soon he’ll be confined to a wheelchair. Megan’s found a bright spot in this, though: “I found a chair that will raise him to countertop level so he can still do what he loves — cook.”

The \$87,700 raised through “Taking Care of Our Own” will go a long way to replace Kopka’s salary and help pay for the necessary renovation to his home, and for this the Kopkas are extremely grateful.

With tears welling in her eyes, Megan says, “We never



Above: Kopka hangs out with his family — wife Megan, son Bruce and daughter Jaden.



Above left: Kopka (right) with his fellow staff members. Above right: The Kopkas at home.

Left: Chef Kopka at work at St. James Members Club.



knew how many would show up for 'Taking Care of Our Own,' and we never knew how generous they'd be. We thought we'd be lucky if 100 people showed up and we raised \$5,000."

Chef Kopka touches his wife's shoulder and adds, "What transpired was beyond..." his voice breaks. "What transpired was beyond anything either of us



Above: Friends, family and neighbors gather with the Kopkas at the "Taking Care of Our Own" fund-raiser.

could comprehend. I can't repay anyone who has helped me out; all I can do is thank them and find some way to pay that love and generosity forward." ■

### How to Help ALS Charities and the Kopkas

The Kopka family home requires major renovations, which are currently underway. Joe Firetti of Firetti Builders, Inc. generously agreed to undertake the renovation at cost plus \$1. For a list of suppliers and subcontractors contributing to the project, visit [www.firettibuilders.com](http://www.firettibuilders.com).

Megan Kopka has a blog at [www.caringbridge.org](http://www.caringbridge.org). To read her updates, type KeithKopka in the search box, sign up and follow their progress.

The Kopkas are involved in two ALS-related charities, Cooks for a Cure and the Walk to Defeat ALS event on April 16 at UNCW.

In Cooks for a Cure, participating restaurants and retailers agreed to donate all proceeds from the sale of certain items and dishes to the ALS Association. Visit <http://cooksforacure.com/home/> for more information.

For more information on The Mad Chefs, Chef Kopka's Walk to Defeat ALS team, or to donate to their walk, visit <http://bit.ly/MadChefs>.

The Kopka family also faces the challenge of acquiring a wheelchair-accessible, ride-in van — a realm with which they are not familiar. If you have any information that could help the Kopkas, visit Megan Kopka's blog at [caringbridge.org](http://caringbridge.org) and let her know.

Anyone interested in directly assisting Kopka and his family can send checks (made payable to Keith Kopka) to: Wayne Moody, 4413 Salt Mist Court, Southport, NC, 28461.



Left: In all, the "Taking Care of Our Own" fund-raiser brought in more than \$80,000 for the Kopka family.

Below: Two hundred and sixty golfers participated in the golf tournament at the Founders Club and Players Club.

