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TOP STORY

John and Linda Kelly named South Central Kentuckians of the Year

AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 55 min ago



Back in 1988, when John and Linda Kelly were new parents, their 18-month-old daughter Victoria seemed like any other kid who'd spend hours in front of the television watching *Fraggle Rock*.

The couple didn't have any reason to suspect something else was going on until their friend, a nurse, pointed out that Victoria wasn't smiling, socializing or reacting to noise. That observation led to a doctor's visit in Nashville and a diagnosis that raised more questions than answers – autism.

“Now, this was in 1988 and the term autism was just not something that people had heard. There was not a great deal of exposure to it,” John Kelly said.

At first, their search turned up few answers. Everyone wanted to do something, but few knew how, Kelly said. Eventually, their search led them to approach Western Kentucky University and start the Kelly Autism Program to support children and young adults on the spectrum.

On Tuesday, John and Linda Kelly were honored at WKU's Knicely Conference Center as the 2019 South Central Kentuckians of the Year by the Community Foundation of South Central Kentucky. The award, according to the foundation, commemorates a person's leadership, initiative, influential work and inspiration of others.

Jennifer Wethington, the foundation's executive director, said what she appreciates most about John and Linda Kelly is their ability to view adversity as opportunity.

"They took that passion and made it beneficial to a lot more people than just themselves," Wethington told the Daily News. "I really appreciate that ... when they become passionate about somebody or something, then they really put all of their efforts behind that."

Since first moving to Bowling Green in 1983, the couple has supported several local and area causes, including the Center for Courageous Kids, New Beginnings Therapeutic Riding, Public Theatre of Kentucky and The HIVE, among many others. In 2010 and 2012, the two created funds through Community Foundation to continue supporting local nonprofits, a news release said.

John Kelly spoke for himself and his wife in saying the two were "truly humbled and appreciative" to receive the award. Linda Kelly preferred not to be interviewed.

"We see ourselves as a very small piece in a very large and giving community," he said. "We're just very proud and happy that we're able to contribute."



In an interview with the Daily News, John Kelly reflected on the Kelly Autism Program's evolution. As Victoria grew up, so did the program, including adding an after-school program, a middle school program and its Circle of Support, which supports 60 WKU students on the autism spectrum.

Mary Lloyd Moore, executive director of the Suzanne Vitale Clinical Education Complex that houses KAP, described the two as “instrumental in all the programming that we provide.”

“John and Linda Kelly have been pioneers in providing autism services here in our community,” Moore said.

Along with the 60 participants in the Circle of Support program, Moore estimated another 50 engage in the program's Prime Time program, which is an after-school program that focuses on teaching social and personal skills. Through a separate initiative, the program also serves about 20 adults not in the Circle of Support, Moore said.

“We're constantly kind of pushing out and growing and developing,” Kelly said of the program's 17-year journey. “It's the people that have worked (in) the programs that have made it all happen.”

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