

## RON STEELE

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Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# INSPIRED BY THE MOOSE

By Dawn Brotherton

Tucked behind The Shops at Carolina Furniture off of Richmond Road with only a square, white sign to point the way, lies Moose Lodge 757. Unassuming as it is, the tremendous outreach the Loyal Order of the Moose organization has within the Williamsburg community is surprising. Ron Steele is the governor of the 757 Lodge and became a member of the Moose Fraternity when he was 21 years old because his stepfather was a member. He had no idea about the full extent of membership and how rewarding it would be throughout his life.

Ron grew up in St. Mary's, Pennsylvania, attending the Pennsylvania Institute of Technology for electrical occupations. "My mother lied to me twice. She said there was such a thing as Santa Claus, and if I graduated from college, I wouldn't have to dig ditches for a living," Ron says. He jokes about it, but Ron loves his job as a construction foreman with Cable Associates building fiber optic plants and doing long haul fiber optic runs. For twenty years, he installed main power lines before getting into fiber optics. He moved to Newport News in 1987 in search of work and

then found his way to Williamsburg in 2005.

He and his new bride, Donna, are very active in the lodge. Originally, the Fraternal Order of the Moose was established as a social club for men. It rapidly expanded its mission to include housing and educating children of deceased Moose members at Mooseheart, a community outside Chicago. Beginning with eleven children in 1913, Mooseheart has since transitioned over 11,000 children through the Child City in the last 90 years. The war years brought in the largest population of residents. In 1994, Mooseheart opened its application

process to any child in need of help. Some of these children have lost one or both of their parents or were in an environment not conducive to healthy development.

Moosehaven, an active retirement community in Orange Park, Florida, is the other charity supported by the international Moose community. Established in 1922, it is exclusive to members of the Loyal Order of the Moose and Women of the Moose. Initially the residents operated a successful dairy farm to help offset the cost of living in the renovated hotel along the St. Johns River. Moosehaven has since been transformed into a 63-acre campus with a full range of activities for Moose members over the age of sixty-five.

Now the Loyal Order of the Moose and Women of the Moose boast over one million members with lodges in all 50 states, Canada, Great Britain and Bermuda. In addition to support at the international level to Mooseheart and Moosehaven, each lodge works within their community on projects they are passionate about.

Moose 757 focuses a lot of their fundraising on supporting cancer patients. One of Ron's favorites is Russ' Pay It Forward Seafood Festival, run in conjunction with Uncle Russ' Dockside Seafood Market, held at the lodge in September. "This is money strictly to have fun with their families and their kids and to enjoy what time they have left. It's not for doctor bills. It's about quality of life," Ron says.

Along with the Warwick Lodge, Moose 757 is sponsoring the Massey Cancer Golf Tournament at the Kiskiack Golf Club on June 8. All proceeds will benefit the Massey Cancer Center in Richmond.

They also work with The ARC of Greater Williamsburg, donating time and resources to help enrich the lives of adults with develop-

mental disabilities. In return, the members of ARC come to the lodge and help run some of their events. "Just the smile on their faces. That's all you can ever ask for. They're just thrilled to death to be at the party."

The community programs they support are not limited. "Anyone can identify someone who needs help. All they need to do is bring an idea, and we'll do whatever we can to help people," he explains. Ron was passionate explaining the lodge's involvement with the Safe Surfin' Foundation, a Virginia-based organization intent on educating children and parents on using the internet safely.

Moose members work with FISH on the EZ Child ID program, providing parents with an electronic file containing personal information, electronic fingerprints, photographs and a video file of their children. He hopes it never has to be used, but Ron knows it's best to have it available to law enforcement if a child becomes lost or is abducted.

After his stepfather passed away, Ron dropped his membership for a short time. But soon after his move to Williamsburg, he found his way to the 757 Lodge and renewed his standing. "I met the people in Williamsburg, and they make you feel at home. The first day I walked in there, I joined again. That was 2005, and I've been a member ever since."

Over the years, Ron has held many different positions in the organization including trustee, prelate, the person who looks after members who are sick, sergeant at arms, the person who runs the meetings, various board chairs and now the governor for two years. One of the hardest tasks he is concentrating on is helping the Moose Lodge break away from the stigma that it's only a bar for old people. "We enjoy our libations every now and then, but it's so much more than that. People from the outside

don't realize that. We make fundraisers fun."

Membership into the Fraternal Order of the Moose has its privileges as well. Their dining room is open seven days a week with daily specials. Watching sporting events is more fun with a group as they gather around the many televisions tuned into the game of the season. When he's traveling, Ron likes to visit other lodges. "If you're a member in one, it means you are a member in all of them. They are usually very friendly. You can go anywhere, and if you walk into a Moose Lodge, you feel like you're at home."

In order to attract the younger crowd, the lodge opens their doors to nonmembers for certain events and bands so others can learn more about them. "It's a fun group that's family-oriented," Ron says. "I want other people to see it's not a beer joint. It's a place to go help others and do for others."

He is inspired by the people he has gotten to know who put others above themselves. "The person who will give you his last dollar because you need it more than he does. That's what motivates me. The people who put other people's well-being first. The world needs a whole lot more of that right now." Jimmy Keatron is one of Ron's mentors. He has been a Moose member for over 50 years. "He comes to every meeting. He's there for every fundraiser. He's what it's all about."

In a few months, Ron Steele's time as reigning governor will be complete. He hopes to get in more golfing. "I'm no good at it, but it only takes one good shot a day to make you come back." Even without the golf, Ron finds no shortage of things to do in Williamsburg. He enjoys the feel of a small town with all the city amenities. "I love it. It's got a little of everything you want right here. The best of both worlds: city and country." NDN