

East Fishkill *Living*

February 2021



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Sewn Together: Kim and Bruce Coneeny

Photo by Patti Hale

The Coneenys: A Lifetime of Love— and Service

Among the first things you see entering the Hopewell Junction home of Bruce and Kim Coneeny is their 10-seater kitchen table that now doubles as a workspace. On it rest two sewing machines and swaths of fabric of various colors and patterns—a vibrant sight that brightens up the faded walls and antique hutch filled with photos and mementos that proudly signal their Irish roots and strong love of family.

"Welcome to our workshop," says Kim, who, with Bruce's help, has been making masks since the pandemic hit last March.

When local health-care workers began pleading for more personal protective equipment (PPE), Kim kicked into high gear, pulling reams of fabric from "my she shed." Bruce kept cutting, and Kim kept sewing, answering the calls from nurses who needed masks—using them as coverings to keep their N95 masks clean. Once Bruce posted their sewing activity on social media, then the radio station did a story, "it snowballed." Their first big request (for 50 masks) was from Mid-Hudson Regional Hospital.

The couple would start at 8 a.m. and go until 5 p.m. every day to keep up with the demand from nursing homes, day care centers, group homes, and first responders. "Cut, iron, sew—that was our day," says Kim. "I couldn't go anywhere anyway, so it kept me focused."

MAKING MASKS

Even a shortage of elastic didn't slow them down. Donations of fabric, elastic—often in the form of hairbands—poured in. Says Kim: "Every time we went out to the mailbox, we had elastic!" People tried to pay for the masks, but the Coneenys refused. Ask them how many masks they've made and delivered, and they're not sure. "Once we hit 1,700, we stopped counting."

By Jeanne Cotroneo Darrow and Lauren Fitzgerald

Photos by Patti Hale

Kim learned to sew from Bruce's grandmother, an upholsterer and tailor who immigrated at age 18 from Ireland. She started in the sweatshops, became a costume foreman on Broadway and ended up tailoring shirts for celebrities like Nat King Cole. Dutchess County was where she spent summers before making it her year-round home.

Bruce, an only child, moved to the area from the Bronx in 1969 to live with his grandmother after his parents divorced. His father, a U.S. Navy Veteran and retired NYPD officer, relocated to California. Bruce was soon joined by his mom, who bought four acres of land for \$1,000 (the former chicken farm of Sonny Widerman) and built the family home, where Bruce and Kim still reside.

HOME ON CHURCH STREET

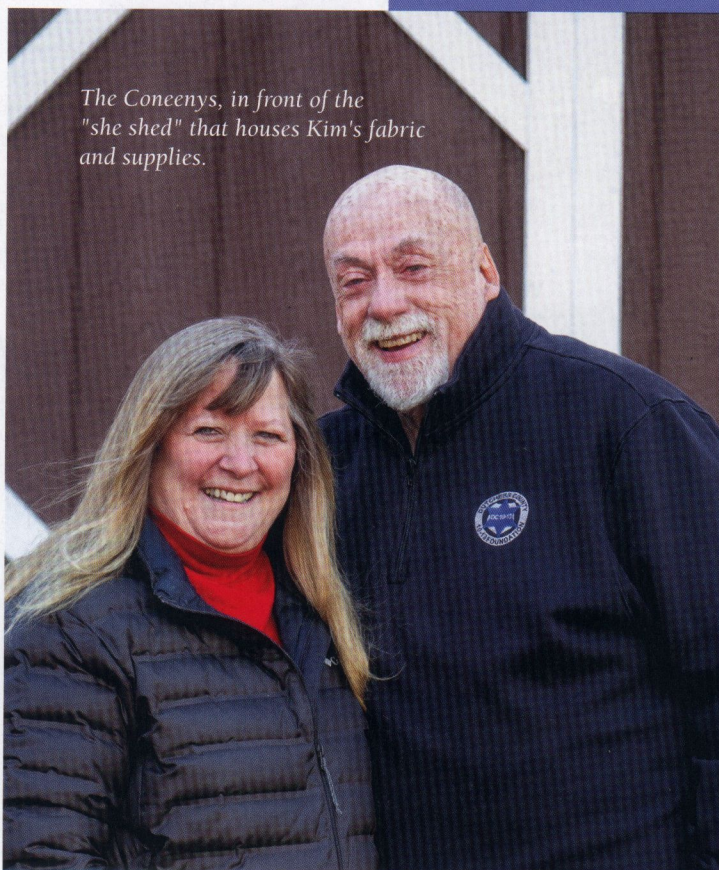
Their house is just a few miles from the heart of Hopewell Junction, where Kim (White) grew up. Church St., named for its two churches (now Frankie's Superette and Hopewell Antique Center), is where Kim's parents raised their four children and commuted to their IBM jobs in Poughkeepsie. "There was just one quiet street, and we'd walk around town to see our friends," she remembers.

It was on her 15th birthday when Kim walked the short distance to what is now known as the Hopewell Rec, where the Hopewell Hose carnival was taking place.

That's when she met Bruce, a volunteer firefighter. They dated for a few years and married in 1974, a week after Kim's graduation from John Jay High School.

Bruce had graduated from Arlington High School in 1969, then attended Dutchess Community College (DCC) before enlisting in the Navy in 1971. Kim also went to DCC and became a certified dental assistant, a career she would continue, part-time, for 24 years.

After Bruce completed his tour with the Navy, the couple became caretakers for a historic property on East Hook Road in Wicopee before moving into the lower-level apartment in Bruce's mom's home. In 1976, he started part-



The Coneenys, in front of the "she shed" that houses Kim's fabric and supplies.



time with the East Fishkill Police Department (EFPD), later becoming its first full-time officer and a sergeant. EFPD was then located in the basement of the present-day town hall, and cases ranged from burglaries to helping herd buffalos that had escaped from a Stormville farm!

CHIEF OF DETECTIVES

Bruce joined the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office in 1980, spending most of his time in "plain clothes," working crime scenes, sometimes around the clock for three or four days. Those times were difficult once their three children—Kara, Lauren and Devin—came along in 1981, 1983 and 1986. "I don't think there ever was a night when we didn't get a call," Kim recalls. "But when he could break away from work, he always did." He even was able to coach baseball and Pop Warner football when Devin was a young player.

With the area population growing and changing, the police had to adapt. Bruce says the "age of technology

really helped us." The Detective Lieutenant helped start a Crimes Against Children unit with the District Attorney's office and local Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) programs. He also taught crime scene photography and wrote the photography manual for police training. Bruce says he "got in that car every day and looked forward to going to work, where each day is different and you have a chance to help someone."

Healthcare workers remain close to the Coneenys' hearts, as both daughters are now ultrasound technicians. Kara works at Westchester Medical Center and lives in Beacon with her husband Matt and their children, Cassius "Cash" James, 2, and Isla, 4 months, who Kim and Bruce love to babysit. Lauren lives in Brooklyn and works at Brooklyn Hospital Center. Devin works at Lake Auto and lives in the apartment below Kim and Bruce. They appreciate having him close. Completing the Coneeny clan are Charlie and Eddie, sister and brother Silky Terrier-Chihuahua mix rescues.

Continued

A Lifetime of Love—and Service - Continued

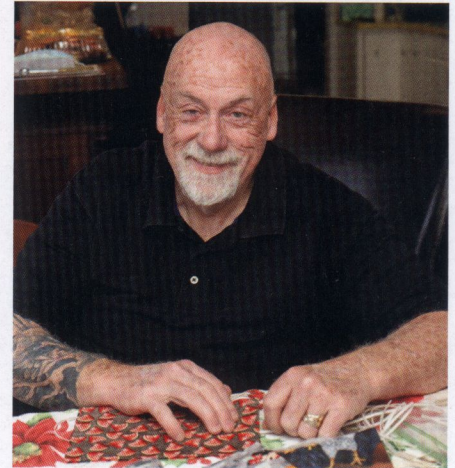
ANOTHER FAMILY HEALTHCARE BATTLE

In 2008, Bruce was diagnosed with neuroendocrine tumors, a rare form of cancer that affected his pancreas. He had surgery to remove it and ever since has been traveling to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center every 28 days for chemotherapy. He continued to work part-time but decided it was time to retire in 2009. "When you have cancer, your whole family has cancer," he says. "We face it and move forward."

Determined to keep busy, Bruce remained involved in his community, helping to found DC 10-13, a non-profit organization committed to helping law enforcement members and their families who may be suffering financial hardship or illness. He currently serves as its chairman. He's also a member of the Emerald Society of New York and the Wappingers Falls St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee, serving as grand marshal in 2016. Most recently, he put his knowledge of Dutchess County to work as a real estate agent at Berkshire Hathaway Home Services, earning his license during the pandemic.

Now married for nearly 47 years, together for 49, Kim and Bruce are grateful for the lives they've built in a community they love dearly. That community—including our healthcare workers and first responders—is undoubtedly just as grateful for them. ♦

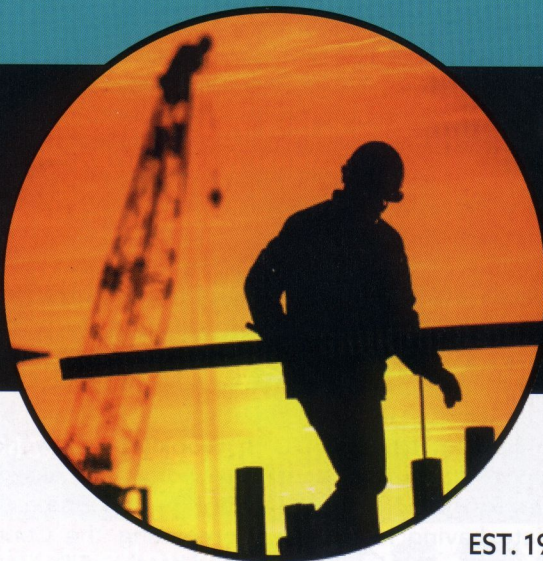
We would like to thank THE DARLIND COMPANIES for bringing you this cover story.



Kim and Bruce Coneeny have been making and donating masks for their community since last March.

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