

Josette Keelor Feature Story Writing 0C3

Woodstock Walmart employee strikes a chord by singing nightly announcements

By Josette Keelor

The Northern Virginia Daily

Those who enjoy late-night shopping at the Walmart in Woodstock might already know the voice of Keli Kirby, who gives the closing announcements.

But unlike at other store locations, Kirby doesn't just say them — she sings them.

"I want to spread joy and sunshine to as many people as I can," she said.

Inspired one night when Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made For Walkin'" came into her head, Kirby quickly changed some lyrics to fit her last call announcement and took to the PA system with background music that she played from her phone.

"These carts are made for pushin'," she sang. "And that's just what you should do. One of these days this Walmart's gonna shut on down on you."

The Edinburg resident didn't have a TikTok account at the time, but after her colleague posted a video of Kirby singing the closing announcements, she recalled, "It got 500,000 views in 24 hours."

Kirby, 47, decided to start her own TikTok account, and the video she posted of herself singing the closing to the tune of John Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane," brought in 1 million views in 12 hours, Kirby recalled.

That's when she knew she had something.

That video, a "little ditty about closing time," now has 11.2 million views, and her TikTok account now has 189,000 followers and 1.9 million likes.

"It's insane," she said.

Overall, she's had great feedback, too.

"For all the thousands and thousands of comments, there have literally only been a handful of negative," she said.

But she quickly shuts out the haters.

"I choose to surround myself with positivity," she said.

Though she appreciates that viewers find the videos funny, Kirby doesn't think her talent for wordplay is anything special.

"It's something that I've been able to do my whole life," she said.

"A song will just come to me."

She usually spends five or 10 minutes coming up with words that involve customers bringing their purchases to the checkout lines, and then she's good to go for what she's been calling the Nightly Voice of Reason.

"This is just normal to me," she said. "This is just something I figured everyone was able to do."

There also seems to be an endless number of songs to choose from, she said.

"'Jack and Diane,' of course, is one of my favorites," she said. "I love doing 'Proud Mary.' I enjoy all of them."

Some are more challenging than others to work with her lyrics, but she said she sometimes has help, recently recruiting her 21-year-old daughter, Brianna, to help her with the rap portion from "About Damn Time," by Lizzo.

"In a minute / it's a / crucial time for / men and women / to bring those carts on up. / There I said it, / I don't regret it, / hurry if you want to bring 'em / that'd be fabulous."

Kirby recently returned from a Walmart's shareholders' meeting in Arkansas where she said they treated her like a celebrity after hearing about her unique take on the closing announcements.

"It was the most amazing experience of my life," she said.

"I got to meet all kinds of associates from all over the country," she recalled. "I saw a bunch of performances."

Christina Aguilera performed along with the Jonas Brothers, Jon Batiste and Rachel Platten.

James Corden hosted the associate meeting, and "he was hilarious," Kirby said.

While there, she also saw her first-ever baseball game.

Though she's worked for Walmart for five years, she said being invited to the shareholders' meeting, which she called more of "a giant carnival," was unusual.

Kirby, who also has a 26-year-old son, Tristan, said the experience has given her a lot of hope for the future.

Homeless since the end of December when the house she was living in was sold, she said she's been living with a friend and trying to think what to do next.

"I have faith that when the time comes, the time will come and I will find a place," she said.

For now, though, she's having fun.

"This has really helped my spirit get uplifted," she said.

"In the same breath, I try to reciprocate it," she said. Taking the time to send "good vibes" to others, she hopes to be "an inspiration" to others in their hardship.

“You have to keep on pushing, keep on believing in yourself,” she said.

Her TikTok success sort of fell in her lap, she admitted, but it’s not too far off from her dream career of being a cruise ship lounge singer on seniors tours.

With a passion for music from the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s, she said she wants to “keep bringing happiness to people,” particularly those who also love that type of music.

“I’m so excited that people want to hear my story,” she said. “I want people to feel good and enjoy life. The more positivity we spread, the less negativity we spread.”

View Kirby’s videos at [tiktok.com/@kelikirby9600/video/7083283642524503339?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&lang=en](https://www.tiktok.com/@kelikirby9600/video/7083283642524503339?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&lang=en).

Lake Frederick neighbors share love of birdwatching

By Josette Keelor
The Northern Virginia Daily

Bill Parkin, 79, remembers walking down a sidewalk at Lake Frederick with his binoculars nearly seven years ago when Dave Boltz, now 72, pulled up in his car and asked if he was bird watching.

“And we’ve been birding together since,” Parkin said.

Parkin has been bird watching since 1993, when he and his wife went on a second honeymoon to Cape Breton in Canada.

“There were eagles all over the place,” he recalled. They also saw “puffins and all sorts of exciting new birds that I’d never seen before.”

At the time the couple lived in central New Jersey, and Parkin would walk near their house to spot birds in the area.

Parkin was a state epidemiologist and director of epidemiology and disease control in New Jersey for about 15 years following eight to 10 years in epidemiology in Pennsylvania.

After he and his wife retired, they moved to Lake Frederick in 2010.

“Birds brought me here,” he said.

He had read about a barred owl spotted at Lake Frederick, and he traveled to the area to see it.

“Didn’t see the barred owl,” he said.

But he did find a new place for himself and his wife, who was retiring from being assistant dean at George Washington University and wanted to move out to the country.

“Since I’ve been here, I’ve seen over 200 species of birds,” Parkin said.

He said that Boltz has spotted four or five types of birds that he hasn't seen.

Boltz saw a golden eagle that Parkin has yet to see.

Typically they see birds like Canada geese, Carolina wrens, eastern kingbirds, mockingbirds, gold and house finches, sparrows and blue jays, Boltz said.

But both men said the most unusual bird they've seen at Lake Frederick is a white pelican, which is often seen on the Atlantic coast but usually not this far inland.

Boltz also recalled seeing several black-bellied whistling ducks for a few hours one day. Those would be expected on the southern coast of Louisiana or Texas, he said.

Though Parkin has many more years of experience in bird-watching, he said that Boltz has the better ear for identifying bird calls.

"They have to call out to us and tell us they're there," Parkin said. "When we hear the birds, that tells us where to look."

Boltz, who played trumpet in the Air Force band for many years before teaching band in Fairfax County, retired in 2011.

He became interested in bird watching while living in the Alexandria area and hearing that the Wild Bird Center was hosting bird-watching activities.

"I like to do a good outdoor activity," he said.

But he warned: Bird watching, he said, is addictive.

"It's a laid-back kind of hobby that gets you outdoors," he said. It also offers "a lot of neat things besides birds."

Twice, he recalled, he and Parkin encountered bears in the wild while searching out birds.

Another time in West Virginia they saw a rattlesnake.

"We weren't in danger of being bitten," he said.

One of Boltz's favorite places to spot birds is Briery Branch Gap west of Harrisonburg where, he said, "you find a totally different set of birds."

"We did a two-week trip to Texas, Bill and I, and saw over 200 species in two weeks," he said.

Parkin said it's hard to choose a favorite spot because the world offers such interesting birds.

Having traveled to Chile, Brazil, the Galapagos Islands and Svalbard between Norway and the North Pole, he said one bird he's still hoping to see is Ross's gull, a pinkish seagull that lives in the far north and which he missed seeing in Svalbard.

"Other than that, I love penguins," he said, and he's seen five or six species.

In Ecuador, he “blinked at the wrong time” and missed a bright orange bird that his group had been watching for.

“The guide was the only one that saw it,” he said.

Many people, when they travel, visit museums or cathedrals, Parkin said, but birding takes him and his wife — an “SOB” or “spouse of birder” — into the smaller towns and countryside.

“We end up back in the backwaters somewhere,” Parkin said. “There’s always a bird that I want to see.”

Camp Follow the Leader a unique experience for area children, volunteers

By Josette Keelor

The Northern Virginia Daily

WINCHESTER — On Friday morning, day campers from around the area met for the last day of the weeklong Camp Follow The Leader at Bethel Lutheran Church, 2077 N. Frederick Pike, where many enjoyed their first-ever camp experience.

The camp is for children ages 6 to 10 with special needs and pairs them with one or more buddy volunteers who are in high school, college or graduate school.

It’s “an amazing experience,” said Coley Carpenter, 26. “I would say they can’t really get it anywhere else.”

The one-on-one relationships are what make the camp unique, said Angela Eberle, a Valley Health physical therapist who co-directs the camp with occupational therapists Matthew Thompson and Molly Connor-Hall.

“That is the keystone of the camp,” Eberle said. “Every camper gets a buddy volunteer. Some get two. ... They get what they need.”

The camp charges \$75 tuition but offers scholarships that bring the cost down to \$25. Campers bring their own lunch.

The Winchester Medical Center Foundation covers the remainder of their costs through grant money.

“It’s because of them that we can keep going,” Eberly said.

The camp started in 2005, and she said they’ve received the grant every year. Eberle also praised Bethel Lutheran for offering their building and grounds all week.

“They are wonderful hosts,” she said.

From 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. each day, the 24 campers were split into two groups, half enjoying activities at the church while the other half attended a local field trip. Then the following day, they would switch places.

Monday's field trip was at Northside Lanes, Tuesday's was at the Discovery Museum, Wednesday's at East Coast Gymnastics and Thursday's at the pool at Stonebrook Country Club.

On Friday, all the campers and their buddies enjoyed a carnival atmosphere with a petting zoo, horseback riding, music therapy, a magician and balloon artist, a face painter and various craft stations.

Campers could invite family and friends to a luncheon provided by Chick-fil-A, included in the cost of the camp, and they celebrated the end of a fun week with awards and a slideshow of photos.

Jorge Chang, 9, of Winchester, got to look at the animals, help with potting a plant and work on a rocket craft, said his buddy volunteer, Emma Wagley, 25, a physical therapy student at Shenandoah University.

Jorge has cerebral palsy, and Wagley said that he had an exciting day on Friday.

"He wrote his name," she said. "That was pretty big."

At East Coast Gymnastics on Wednesday, Jorge played on a trampoline with buddy volunteer Reid Malony, 17, a student at James Wood High School.

"He loves riding on the bus," Reid said.

Though Jorge doesn't talk, he can vocalize his interest, Reid said.

"We painted some picture frames," Reid said. They also made a jellyfish out of streamers.

Carpenter, of Fauquier County, was volunteering all week by helping campers with their gross motor skills.

A first-time volunteer at the camp, she said it's a great experience to add to her master's program in occupational therapy at Shenandoah University.

The activities have exceeded her expectations, especially the quiet areas where campers can calm down as needed or interact with sensory toys like fidget spinners and bubbles.

At Friday's music therapy session with music therapists Tara Lescalleet and Samuel Christie, Carpenter helped out on gross motor skills.

"The kids just really loved it," she said.

A former elementary school physical education teacher, Carpenter enjoyed seeing how the campers were getting along through the week.

"For the most part, it seems like they've really taken to their groups," she said.

Pointing out a couple of campers who were hanging out away from their group, she said it's nice to see them making friends.

In addition to the petting zoo animals and horses, a dog was available at the start of each day to provide a calming presence for campers as they arrived.

“They had a really good time,” said Kevin Owens, a magician who was there with his wife, face-painter Michelle Owens.

Standing under a dry pavilion as rain poured down, he said that Friday’s weather cooperated for the most part.

A “magician and balloon guy” for 38 years, he’ll be at the Frederick County Fair today and in September will be at the Edinburg Ole Time Festival.

Camp Follow the Leader is about opening doors for kids who haven’t had that chance elsewhere.

For many, this is their first camp experience, Eberly said.

She’s unaware of other camps that offer the same sort of one-on-one experience.

Children with physical, emotional or behavioral struggles are welcome, and she said the camp will accommodate them as best they can.

And although activities are planned, she said campers are free to step away as often as they need to.

“They direct pretty much what they’re doing,” she said.

For more info, go to tinyurl.com/camp-leader.