MOM to Many

From holiday festivities to annual gatherings, Longwood matriarch Kit McDonald opens her home and heart to an extended family of loved ones.

By Kevin Fritz

Mother's Day has long been a time-honored tradition to pay tribute to the matriarch, the glue of the family, the one who gave us life and whose influence stays with us the rest of our lives. But growing up, there always seemed to be that one mom in the neighborhood who took the role one step further.

In **Longwood**, that distinction belongs to the Kool-Aid Mom, also known as Miss Kit—two of the endearing nicknames bestowed on **Kit McDonald**, who is one of Central Florida's true matriarchs.

Born Kathryn Bertucci in New Orleans, she met **John**, her husband of 35 years, when she was just 13. The childhood sweethearts never looked back. They came to Longwood 20 years ago and settled in Brantley Harbor where she began to form her legacy.

All about the Kids

A devoted mom and grandmother, Kit rules over much of the holiday festivities in her Lake Brantley neighborhood. In fact, every holiday you'll find neighborhood children of all ages flocking to the McDonald house to take part in her Christmas parade, Halloween hay ride or Easter egg hunt.

"My mom was the same way when we were growing up," says Kit, one of eight children. "I guess that's where I get it from. It's always about the kids."

All told, Kit has five sons, three daughters-in-law and four grandchildren—not to mention two dogs and a parrot. She also runs a day care from her home and is currently taking care of six little ones, with the oldest being 2 years old.

Following Hurricane Katrina, Kit added to that mix by selflessly taking in six nieces and nephews while their parents returned to New Orleans to rebuild. Three of her sons—**Michael**, **Joey** and **Ryan**—all live within a mile of her home. Her youngest is 13-year-old Kasey; her oldest, Little John, lives in New Orleans.

A Close Family

Kit loves to bring the entire family together at least once a year by planning family reunions, and she always chooses a new place to explore. They have congregated for the past 10 years in places such as Cancun, Destin and Jamaica, and also enjoyed taking a Caribbean cruise together.

Even friends tag along sometimes. When her son Michael was in the Marines and couldn't make the Cancun reunion, his best friend went along in his place.

"Each year, we have about 30 of us," Kit says. "We are a very close family."

But it's the holidays when Kit really shines, and she doesn't miss a trick—especially at Christmas. Santa arrives in a fire truck, bringing joy to dozens of children. She

JULIE BERTUCCI

Longwood matriarch Kit McDonald (seated fifth from left), known as Miss Kit, surrounds herself with her children, their spouses and her grandchildren as well as other extended family and friends.

acts as grand marshal of an annual neighborhood Christmas parade in which about 200 people participate, riding through the streets of Brantley Harbor with decorated vehicles of all shapes and sizes.

Kit also hires a professional photographer to be sure each child gets a keepsake picture with Santa. In essence, she creates memories that children cherish forever.

"Kids are such a big part of her life," says her daughter-in-law **Jill**, who has been Kit's day care partner for the past five years. "She knows everybody, and everybody knows Miss Kit."

Without a doubt, the true mark of a matriarch is someone whose role it is to keep family together, as well as the families they touch as they grow. Kit McDonald truly fits that bill. It's that passion that drives her—and the children who make it all worthwhile. L

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