

# LOCALFOUNKS

BY MARY WANSEER

Basil Benjamin and Mike Kovacs at Alexandria Oaks Park.

Mike Kovacs and his wife, Chelsea Hamilton, moved to Avondale in November 2020 from New York City. They were ready for a change of pace, a change of weather and a change of taxes.

Kovacs and Hamilton tend to be analytical people and embarked upon "Operation Sunshine State." For quite some time, they researched a variety of locales throughout Florida. Jacksonville was the only city that ticked all their boxes.

"We picked Avondale for its charm, walkability and lifestyle. We absolutely love it here!" Kovacs said.

Both are professionals in the finance arena - Kovacs at the regional headquarters of Circle K in the Regency Square area, and Hamilton as partner at the downtown office of PwC, the U.S. division of Britain's PricewaterhouseCoopers.

In addition to employment opportunities and old oak trees, the vintage architecture of Jacksonville was another drawing card for Kovacs and Hamilton. They bought a historic house built in 1924 at the corner of Pine and Ingleside.

"It's a great house, but it wasn't set up for our lifestyle," Kovacs said.

So, they hired a general contractor and are currently in the midst of a major renovation. Of all the remodeling projects, the most prominent is having a bedroom converted into a wine room. They are wine collectors with a variety of cork preferences from all over, and they need to accommodate their accumulation.

"We don't like to discriminate when it comes to wine," Kovacs said.

Their collection now consists of close to 10,000 bottles.

"I probably shouldn't admit it. We're crazy!" he said.

The couple are also foodies. As with wine, it's apparent that they don't discriminate when it comes to eateries either. They have a long list of favorites. Kovacs likes that



## MIKE KOVACS

Mike Kovacs and Graham Basworth hiked through Kyrgyzstan.



Graham Basworth and Mike Kovacs at Ala-Kul Lake, Kyrgyzstan.

there are so many to choose from just around the corner from their home.

"We love Orsay. More recently, Josephine's we've really enjoyed. We spend a fair amount of time in San Marco, and we were just at Oceana. Southern Grounds is great for coffee and snacks. Mojo's is fantastic," Kovacs said.

To remain active in the community, the pair not only support local restaurants but also attend community events like home and garden tours and live music shows in Avondale. Every Saturday finds them at Riverside Arts Market. Their favorite vendor is Joe, the dairy farmer.

"We buy goat milk, and cow milk, and goat fudge and eggs. He's our go-to guy," Kovacs said.

Kovacs is a member of the Jacksonville Saints, an Australian rules football team that competes at home in Jacksonville and away in nearby cities. Kovacs described the sport as a combination of American football, rugby, soccer and volleyball. He is so new to the team that he doesn't yet know all the positions, only that he's a ruckman because he's tall.

"It's just wacky. A bunch of guys run into each other and then go have some drinks after. It's a good time. I had never played before moving here," he said.

Kovacs loves to travel. Most of the time, Hamilton is with him. But he also likes to hike, and she doesn't mind that he goes on crazy adventures with his friend Graham Basworth from New Orleans. Kovacs and Basworth have trekked Machu Picchu in Peru, the Otter Trail in South Africa, and parts of the Appalachian Trail. On July 19, 2023, the two buddies conquered the remote mountains of Kyrgyzstan. This hike held the most significance for Kovacs.

During the previous summer, Kovacs had suffered a heart attack. That was highly unusual for an active 42-year-old with no symptoms. He learned for the first time that he had a rare, congenital condition. But he also learned that it was fixable. On July 19, 2022, Dr. Kevin Landolfo performed at Mayo Clinic the open-heart procedure that saved Kovacs's life. Exactly one year to the day later, Kovacs crested a 13,000-foot pass in the Kyrgyz Mountains, overlooking the glacier-fed Ala-Kul Lake.

"It was incredible - the scenery, the effort, the emotion - all of it," he said.

He's already planning for future expeditions. Yet, no matter how far he may roam, Kovacs will return again to Avondale, to his historic house, to his wife, and to their two dogs—12-year-old Compass and 1-year-old Bean.

"We expect to be here for a long time!" he said.



The Kovacs Family: Mike, Chelsea, Compass, and Bean.

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