

# If these walls could talk - Mission BBQ owners share the passion behind their business



*Mission BBQ co-owners Stephen Newton (left) and Bill Kraus find meaning in honoring those who protect and serve. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)*

**By Jennifer Williams**

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Sitting in a booth at the Canton location of Mission BBQ during a busy lunch hour, Bill Kraus peeled back the brown paper of a carefully wrapped framed photograph. The co-owner of the restaurant revealed a portrait of a clean-shaven young man dressed in a crisp military uniform. He was killed while serving overseas in 2006, and his mother offered the photo to Kraus and fellow Mission BBQ owner Stephen Newton to hang on the interior wall of the restaurant, beside dozens of photos and mementos of those who served or are currently serving their country.

It's not the first time Kraus and Newton, 50-year-old parishioners of Church of the Resurrection in Ellicott City, have had such a personal encounter, and it won't be the last.

"It's our honor to be able to display this so his story, his service live on," Kraus said.

## **More than just a business**

Friends for more than a decade, Kraus, a former employee of Under Armour and Newton, a former Outback Steakhouse executive, have opened seven Mission BBQ locations since Sept. 11, 2011. Eight additional locations are slated to open this year.

The energetic duo's mission to serve goes well beyond providing barbecue and a tantalizing array of sauces.

Every day the men, who are both married and have three children each, strive to honor American heroes, supporting organizations such as the Wounded Warrior Project.

Growing up in a lower middle class neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio, Newton said he was inspired by business leaders who gave back to the community.

At Ohio State University, he was moved by the words of former coach Woody Hayes, who said, "You can never pay back, so you should always try to pay forward."

With both of his parents gone, Newton said he hopes he makes his children proud “because I stood for something.”

For Kraus, a former altar boy educated at the Jesuit Marquette University High School in Milwaukee, Wis., and Marquette University, the mentality of being, “a man unto others,” was instilled at a young age.

“I’m sure at certain points of my life I wasn’t as much of that man as I should have been,” he acknowledged, “but you get to a certain point in life where you try to be more selfless than selfish, try to give back and to do right.”

Honoring those who put on a uniform to “protect, serve and save our country,” as Newton says, struck a personal note when Kraus’ oldest son, Andy, a Mount St. Joseph High School graduate, served two tours of duty in the U.S. Marine Corps.

“He doesn’t know this,” said Newton, “but I watched him (Kraus) go to Mass at 6 in the morning at Resurrection to pray for his son.”

Kraus’ younger son, Alex, also a Mount St. Joseph graduate, is currently enrolled in the U.S. Naval Academy and also expects to serve.

Every day at noon, each restaurant broadcasts the national anthem.

### **Like family**

Some may find it difficult to enter into a business relationship with a friend.

“I never had a brother, so my friends kind of became my brothers,” said Kraus, with a nod in Newton’s direction. “Do we fight? Sure. But at the end of the day, we still love each other.”

Thanksgivings are spent at the Kraus home. “Every Thanksgiving we play football together,” Newton said, adding that the pair likes to believe they are “a young 50.”

On Christmas Eve, the families attend Mass together and then enjoy a meal together.

“For my family, that is one of our most treasured nights,” Newton said.

The business owners said they like to believe this celebration of friends and family doesn’t stop with them.

“So the business is closed on days where our mentality is that it’s more important to spend those days with family,” Kraus said. “If we don’t want to be here, we assume our teammates don’t want to be here as well.”

### **Inspiration**

“We often say, ‘if these walls could talk,’ because so much of what you see in the restaurant, folks have brought to us,” Kraus said. “If you think about what it took to earn that patch or that helmet ... and somehow they feel so moved by what we’re doing that they want to share it with us.”



*(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)*

At Mission BBQ, it's not uncommon to have someone humbly ask to hang a picture of his or her father from the time that he served, and without telling Dad, bring him into the restaurant.

"And the dad is moved to tears because in his mind, he's just doing his job," Kraus said. "We can all serve and find ways to have significance and meaning in our life, and for us, it's this."

On his wrist, Kraus wears two bracelets - one in Tiffany blue that reads, "All things are possible with God," which is in memory of his sister, and another from Wounded Warrior that says "Integrity." During the day, he tries to keep them aligned in a way that they read, "God, Integrity."

"With the loss of my mother in '06, my father in '07 and my one and only sibling in '09 - that gives you perspective on life and how precious and how short and how real it is," Kraus said. "You should take stock every day and live every day with people you love and enjoy spending time with."

Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien, a former military chaplain who served as archbishop of Baltimore, spoke at the eighth-grade graduation for Kraus and Newton's youngest children.

"He told the class to stand up," Newton recalled. "He told them that he was giving them a life lesson - that as you go through life you should stand for something."

"I'll never forget that," he said.

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