

Merlyn and Raymond Cooper march on in love and faith

If you were to meet the Coopers in person, you might remember them as winners of the On Top of the World Holiday Lights Contest last year, but it's unlikely that you would recognize them as soldiers.

That's because public perception of soldiers has been shaped and characterized by the wars and battles that dominate human history.

So how could this friendly, musical couple possibly be soldiers?

Merlyn and Raymond Cooper do not bear arms and they are decidedly non-confrontational, but, make no mistake, they are immersed in a struggle of epic proportions and have been for a long time.

It's a struggle against oppression and poverty. Their ammunition is faith, love and music. You see, they are both Officers of The Salvation Army.

Raymond first fell in love with the girl he calls his North Carolina sweetheart with the voice of an angel 58 years ago. At the time, Raymond was on the faculty of The Salvation Army College in Atlanta, and Merlyn was a student. Since then, for 55 years, they have been a tag team of husband and wife, and mom and dad, to Major Raymond Cooper III, who also serves in The Salvation Army at its National Headquarters in Alexandria, Va.

Mom and dad couldn't be more proud of their son.

Commissioners Raymond and Merlyn Cooper served in The Salvation Army for a combined total of 91 years before retiring in 2002. At the time of their retirement, they were the leaders of all Salvation Army personnel and services in the 15 Southeastern States. However, that doesn't mean they quit serving. They have crisscrossed the globe for the Army since then, in ministry and music. They serve the active Salvation Army Officers in Florida as Pastoral Care Officers. You could call them ministers to the ministers.

For the Coopers and The Salvation Army alike, music is a large component of their ministry of Christian love and public service.

On Tuesday evenings, the Army conducts character building activities for children of our area, many of whom are disadvantaged. The kids are picked up and brought to the Belcher Road facility and are given a hot meal



Commissioners Raymond and Merlyn Cooper
wish you a merry Christmas!

Last year, in upper Pinellas County alone, almost 30,000 people were helped by The Salvation Army. More than 9,000 meals were served, plus 1,200 more meals during the holiday season.

and nourishment for their souls.

On Wednesdays, the School of Music welcomes many of the same kids for a meal and musical instrument instruction. Some kids continue through an advanced program with the possibility of college music scholarships.

The good works of the Coopers and The Salvation Army are too numerous to do justice in these few words, but try to absorb these statistics from a year ago. In upper Pinellas County alone almost 30,000 people were helped. More than 32,000 cash grants were given, 9,000 people were visited in hospitals and nursing homes and 9,000 meals were served, plus 1,200 more meals during the holiday season.

Thousands of our future builders and leaders have attended character building activities conducted by The

Salvation Army.

The Army is focused on assisting with or providing some of the most basic of human needs like rent, clothing, food, furniture, housing and medication, and even human trafficking intervention, to name a few. They provide prevention and development opportunities for youth, women and men through music, worship, counseling and even probation assistance.

Those recognizable white cargo trucks with the iconic red shield represent a branch of The Salvation Army that is separate and self-sufficient. The Adult Rehabilitation Center, as it is called, specializes in alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs. Its self-sustenance is due in part to the generosity of donors, like you, and also to thousands of volunteers, many of whom

**Getting
to
Know
You**

A monthly
feature
about the people
in your
On Top
of the World
community

by
John Koning

were beneficiaries of its programs and services.

Whichever part of The Salvation Army you encounter, their motto remains the same, "Heart to God, hand to man."

The fact that Raymond and Merlyn Cooper call On Top of the World home is not luck or accident. They heard about OTOW from friends years ago. They were attracted to the services and amenities our community offers as well as our proximity to The Army's Center for Worship and Service, on Belcher Road. In turn, they now bring OTOW to the attention of friends and colleagues who are moving to this area.

So the next time you pass someone by the pool or on the street, remember that they too could be a soldier on a march of love and faith.