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# Improving life in Louisville one project at a time

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Subtle eyelashes accent the words "Lynn Family Stadium" on the home of Louisville City FC and Racing Louisville FC.

It's a detail on a dynamic structure that begs the question, "Who are the Lynns?"

Most people who drive by that sign near the cross-section of Interstates 71 and 64 probably don't have a clue about the optometrist-turned-entrepreneur those eyelashes represent or the close-knit Louisville family with a vision to help the community.

But in the upper echelon of Derby City, in a complicated world of big boards that keep organizations running and society spinning, the Lynns are known as a successful, enthusiastic and charismatic force.

Dr. Mark and Cindy Lynn have a reputation for using their passion — and checkbook — to make Louisville a better place. Over the years, they've contributed to more than three dozen causes throughout the city, the largest and most obvious being the four-year-old soccer stadium. But some of their impactful work may be felt more intimately through organizations like local 4H groups, Blessings in a Backpack, and Vision Impairment Preschool Services. They often put their resources behind philanthropic work related to children's issues and development to improve the community for the next generation.

This year they've added a new cause to the portfolio. Mark and Cindy are co-chairs of Norton Healthcare's recently announced "Just Imagine" campaign and will lead a massive fundraising effort to increase access to healthcare, bring in world-class physicians, and push for research that improves the quality of life. As co-chairs, the Lynns will connect the campaign to business and community leaders and lead by example as they donate to the cause.

progression of the disease at the Norton Neuroscience Institute, and the uptick in education and intervention through the Wendy Novak Diabetes Institute. Those are the advances that can happen with a campaign like this, he said.

As an optometrist and entrepreneur, Mark says he knows *just* enough about overall medical care to be “dangerous.” Yes, he is a doctor, but since he doubles as a businessman, he approaches situations differently than most in white coats. In turn, Cindy keeps him balanced. She’s a force of nature in her own right when it comes to their philanthropy, sometimes literally kicking him under the table when he’s reluctant to support a program or project she’s certain will improve the community.

Ahead of the campaign, the Lynns sat for an hour-long interview with The Courier Journal answering that “*who are the Lynns?*” question, but also sharing in detail why improving healthcare is personal to them and how they found themselves in a position to propel it forward.

“Just imagine, *what if*, you could make a change,” Mark said. “Just imagine, what if, one person can make a difference? We all have wants, we all have things that yesterday could have been better if. ... well, tomorrow can always be better if you just imagine it to be better.”

## High school sweethearts and a stint at Elvis' Graceland

"The Lynn Family" of Louisville began when Mark and Cindy started dating in 1975. High school sweethearts at Apollo High School in Owensboro, the duo met through marching band. Once he got his driver's license, he'd drive her to get candy from a corner store each day before school.

Mark was the son of a railroad cop and Goodwill shop clerk, and always dreamed of being an optometrist. He was a grade older than Cindy, and when the time came for him to go to Murray State University, the couple did everything they could to make the distance work. Every Friday at 1 p.m., he'd drive the 140 or so miles back to Owensboro to see her, and every Sunday at 5 p.m. he'd start the engine for his trip back to school. She eventually joined him at Murray and studied home economics.

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But why wait?

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They moved from Kentucky to Memphis so Mark could attend Southern College of Optometry. That's where they had their first two children — and their first health scare as a couple. Cindy's first pregnancy was extremely high-risk, and she ended up on bed rest for five months.

In those months, Cindy was forced to stop working, so Mark juggled schoolwork and worked 40-50 hours each week as a night-time security guard at Graceland, the mansion once owned by singer Elvis Presley.

"We could have crashed and burned when the problems with the pregnancy hit, but we didn't," Mark said, recalling the 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. shifts he worked to make ends meet.

"I didn't have it hard during all that," he continued. "She's tough. Have you ever laid in bed 24 hours a day for five months? It's terrible. I wouldn't want to. I don't know how you do that, but it all worked out."

All that bed rest paid off, and Cindy gave birth to their son Mark in March 1983. Their daughter Mandy followed in December 1984.

Even with all those late nights, Mark finished optometry school in 1985 with about \$90,000 in debt. When he couldn't find a job with a salary to support his family and pay down that debt, he made plans to join the U.S. Air Force. He'd filed all the paperwork and passed all the tests, and the only thing left to do was take his oath in Nashville.

The car was packed for that trip and Mark had the key in the ignition when Cindy ran out the front door.

Someone was on the phone who had an optometry practice in downtown Louisville. That doctor could pay Mark enough to start working that debt down, but he would need to start right away.

So Mark drove that car to Louisville instead.

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different. As would Louisville.

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Mark settled into his role at Lewis Bizer and Associates at the corner of First and Market streets in downtown Louisville. When the practice created a new, higher-paying position that triaged “every problem that came through the door,” he volunteered.

“I spent the next year-plus learning how to actually talk to people, listen to people, and how to decipher between real problems and nonreal problems,” he told The Courier Journal. “Most people just want to be heard, and they just want their problem fixed, and that’s what we’re supposed to do anyway.”

That experience shaped his business and, later, his family’s philosophy on philanthropy.

“At a very early point of my career, it set the tone for ‘how do you make things better?’” he remembers.

While he adjusted to his new role, Mark and Cindy continued laying roots for a faith-filled foundation for their growing family. They had two more children, Brittany in 1986 and Jackie in 1987, and Cindy wrangled getting all four kids to activities while ensuring church was an integral part of their lives. All these years later, she says her proudest moment as a mother is that all four children have maintained that faith and passed it down to her grandchildren.

Meanwhile, Mark steadily climbed the ranks of the practice and eventually bought it in 1998.

At that point, there were 19 locations, all partnered with a group called Eye Care Centers of America. Over the next decade, they opened another 43 locations. When the recession hit in 2008, they cash-flowed another two dozen or so locations. Real estate was cheaper then, and it was easier to get into shopping centers.

By the time Mark sold the practice in 2021, he had 90 locations across six states. Rather than truly retire, the Lynns launched a different endeavor, Lynn Family Sports Vision and Training, focusing on revolutionary concussion and TBI training therapy.

All the while, their family has grown, too. When their children began having families of their own, they purchased houses in the same neighborhood where they grew up. Today, all four Lynn children and all 17 grandchildren live within two blocks of each other in the Wolf Creek area.

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each. Like Cindy, their daughter, Jackie, had a high-risk pregnancy and ended up on bed rest. One of their grandsons developed a heart condition.

In these tough moments, they leaned heavily on their faith and the closeness of family.

“The minute you think you can do it all yourself, [is] the minute you've made your biggest mistake,” Mark said. “You have to lean onto that higher power. When you put your faith into God and you truly believe and you step out on that, there's a big comfort there.”

For Mark and Cindy, that comfort and faith come with a responsibility and drive to help others.

### **Fewer barriers to healthcare, more research**

Cox says Mark and Cindy were a natural fit for Just Imagine co-chairs because they don't get caught up in the bureaucracy of healthcare. They look beyond it, think bigger, and have a reputation in Louisville for choosing causes that will succeed.

“Mark and Cindy don't get involved if they can't be passionate about a project,” Cox said. “They bring energy in a campaign, and that is the most important thing.”

This region needs to do a better job of treating chronic conditions, Cox said, but the responsibility is bigger than that. Norton Healthcare wants to play a part at every step of a person's life to help shape healthier lifestyles. Healthcare can't make leaps like that without recruiting top physicians and putting dollars behind research.

Just Imagine campaign has a focus on providing a better life for people and children in the community, and that mission aligns with the Lynn family's core values. They want to make the world a better place for the next generation.

“There are so many good causes, and there are so many good places you can donate money,” Cindy said. “A lot of what we do, we donate to child-related causes because that's really important.”

One major thing that makes this campaign personal for the Lynns has to do with Mark's mother, who developed Hepatitis C from a blood transfusion when she was very young. The

It's not hard to *just imagine* how her life could have been better with the modern education and treatments that diabetes patients and families receive at places like Norton Healthcare's Wendy Novak Diabetes Institute.

This campaign intends to drive changes and advances, like that, to improve lives.

For the Lynns, that means, just maybe, there's a safer solution to how their grandson plays sports with a heart condition. Perhaps, there's a better way to cope with a high-risk pregnancy than the five months of bed rest Cindy waited through.

But this isn't just about them — it's about looking at all the needs of all the patients in the community and asking that same question Mark asked in his practice all those years ago.

How do you make things better?

Just imagine.

*Features columnist Maggie Menderski writes about what makes Louisville, Southern Indiana, and Kentucky unique, wonderful, and occasionally, a little weird. If you've got something in your family, your town, or even your closet that fits that description — she wants to hear from you. Say hello at [mmenderski@courier-journal.com](mailto:mmenderski@courier-journal.com). Follow along on Instagram and Threads @MaggieMenderski.*