

The king of

# POP

**I**t started as a favor to a friend,” **Michael Mcaleer** recalled, as well as out of “boredom [as a] young guy retired.”

After injuries caused the 23-year letter carrier to retire early from the Postal Service in 2008, he was looking for something to occupy his time. “I drove around in an RV for a few years and volunteered for park services,” the Jersey City, NJ Branch 42 member and trustee said.

But in 2015, when a friend with a roasted corn business was going through a hard time, “I asked what I could do to help,” Mcaleer said, and soon took over the business. “He also had a kettle corn machine, and it was a lot easier and fun to do.”

He quickly went to work researching how to make the sweetened popcorn. “I figured it out on my own,” he said. “I went on YouTube, got a recipe and changed it to my recipe,” altering it to his liking.

Mcaleer has two kettles—one is 80 quarts (“I can cook pretty quickly with

that,” he said), and one is 160 quarts, which he describes as a “gigantic monstrosity.” Then there’s the sifter, a “table with holes in it,” where you prepare the popcorn and then bag it right out of that.

The process is like this, Mcaleer says: “You get the oil hot, throw the popcorn in, and when it starts popping, you do sugar. Then salt on the table when it’s cooling.”

And his new hobby took off.

Popping the sweet and salty treat was a “nice, stress-free” activity, Mcaleer said, adding that after years in the Postal Service, it was “a little more fun and light-hearted.”



**Michael Mcaleer with his Just Delicious Kettlecorn partner, Betty Charles Castaldo**

He soon acquired a business partner, Betty, a friend of his since their teenage years, who also had wanted to help out their mutual friend. She serves as the front of the business, which is called Just Delicious Kettlecorn, while Mcaleer cooks in the back.

“She came up with the name and is the voice of reason,” he said. “I’ve been cooking my whole life. I don’t have to deal with much else.”

The duo now regularly sets up a tent at events to pop the snack for hungry



**Mcaleer makes a muscle with some friends at MDA Camp in 2016.**

patrons under a banner with the name of the business, and can be found online at [facebook.com/JDKettlecorn](https://facebook.com/JDKettlecorn).

“Mostly, we’re at farmers’ markets,” he says, which happen about three to four times a week in season. Other events include beach concerts at the Jersey Shore (which are “a blast because you’re also listening to great music,” he said), cultural festivals, fairs, and events for organizations in northern New Jersey looking to raise money.

One event near and dear to Mcaleer’s heart is Muscular Dystrophy Association Summer Camp in New Jersey. “I go to the camp every year—three a year,” he said, adding that, sadly, this was not the case in 2020 or during this summer because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Kids from New York and New Jersey with muscular dystrophy (MD) and related neuromuscular diseases attend the weeklong camps. Children with MD have a lot of needs, Mcaleer said, adding that “it’s \$2,000 to send a kid to camp.” He helps NALC branches raise money to send as many youngsters as possible to the camps each year by providing kettle corn for them to sell.

He loves attending on Sponsor Day, when MDA sponsors like him are invited to hang out with kids and participate in activities. He’ll put on a little show making kettle corn for the camp participants, and he gets a kick out of seeing the youngsters meeting new friends and getting to know letter carrier volunteers who from other branches who serve as “helpers.”

Mcaleer brings all of his kettle corn popping equipment. “I explain how to do it and give them bags for the week for movie nights,” he said, adding with pride that the campers have taken to calling him “Pop-Pop Mike.”



“After all the negative stuff at work with management, it’s nice helping these kids out,” he said, adding that it makes him feel great to not only help send kids to camp, but also to help give parents some time off while their kids have a blast.

Though the summer camps turned to a virtual format in 2020 and 2021, Mcaleer looks forward to being able to return in person in the future.

For his business, the pandemic “has put a big crimp in everything we do” because of all the canceled events, he said, but the Just Delicious Kettlecorn duo jumps at attending “whatever comes up” event-wise in New Jersey. Mcaleer said they’re currently regulars at a Bayonne farmers’ market, are helping NALC branches with MDA fundraisers as well as raising money for other organizations, and have signed up as vendors to pop at street fairs in Nutley and Jersey City in September and October.

Though they’ve introduced flavored corn (like salt and vinegar, sinfully cinnamon and dill pickle), “fresh, hot kettle corn is our big seller,” Mcaleer said. They are looking to expand on baskets and other gifts for holidays in the future.

One thing they love to do at events is having a “guest popper.” It could be a friend, an adult or youngster they’ve just met, or a special guest such as former professional heavyweight boxer Chuck Wepner, a musician, or a mayor or city council member. He’ll hand

them protective equipment and teach them how to pop the corn, and he’ll make a photo op out of it.

Safety is paramount, though, and safety gear like goggles is necessary. “No. 1 is, you have to have your eyes protected. Kernels are popping. And gloves,” he said, before adding, “I always have burns. It’s part of the job.”

To entertain the youngsters, he also has equipment like a Spider-Man face mask and Captain America glasses.

Mcaleer and his business partner hope to continue with Just Delicious Kettlecorn for the foreseeable future, although he notes, “To tell you the truth, we don’t have a long-term plan.”

He said that eventually it would be nice to “open a store or get a popcorn truck so that we’re not setting up from scratch constantly,” adding that “unloading the truck is a big event,” and setting up is “a lot of hard work.”

Otherwise, he says, they are content to “make a little bit of money and help out small groups raising money.”

And though Mcaleer has been retired from USPS for more than a decade, he was a shop steward for many years and remains involved with his branch as trustee. His kettle corn business is pretty well known in postal circles, he says. “I’ve even shown up in Atlantic City at a [letter carrier] training event and handed out popcorn,” he said.

At events, he added, “Many times I’ve run into people, even from other branches,” he said. “Letter carriers are everywhere.” **PR**