

# *River Road* **LIVING**

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## *The Stanko Family*

**LEADING WITH GRACE, FAITH, AND HEART**

Cover Photo by Kami Thacker Photography

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# *The Stanko Family*

## LEADING WITH GRACE, FAITH, AND HEART

By Kathy Elliott | Photos by Kami Thacker Photography

### *A Richmond family's journey of resilience, purpose, and the joy of helping others shine.*

For **Liz and Chris Stanko**, home is more than a place—it's a feeling built on faith, gratitude, and connection. Married in 2018, the couple has created a blended life filled with laughter, family traditions, and community spirit. Together with Liz's grown children, **Sam (25) and Ellie (23)**, and their beloved Springer Spaniel, **Laney**, they've built a life centered on kindness and purpose—values that ripple through everything they do.

But Liz's journey to this season of stability and joy wasn't simple. A Richmond native and UVA nursing school graduate, she became a single mother when her children were just three years and three months old. For the next 17 years, she raised them largely on her own,

juggling multiple jobs, long days, and a deep determination to create a nurturing home. "We made it work—with God by our side all along the way," she recalls. "There were hard seasons, but they taught us how strong we really are."

Her parents, **Susan and Dave Norton**, along with her sisters and close-knit circle of friends, became her village. That foundation of family support—and her own unwavering belief in purpose—eventually led Liz to her life's work: **Junior Assembly Cotillion (JAC)**.

### **Becoming the "Cotillion Lady"**

In Richmond, Liz is affectionately known as "The Cotillion Lady." Children and parents alike call her that when they see her around town—and she smiles every time. "I actually love it," she says. "To me,

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Liz assisting a 6th grade young lady and gentleman with proper dance position at first dance 2025



it means they associate Cotillion with warmth, growth, and joy. I've even joked about putting it on my license plate!"

That joyful presence has been the heartbeat of JAC for more than a decade. Liz began directing alongside her mother, who co-owned the long-standing program with her dear friend **Jackie Davidson**. When her mom retired in 2012, Liz followed her heart—purchasing her share of the business and stepping fully into the role of owner and director. "I didn't know the first thing about small business ownership," she laughs, "but I knew it was where I was meant to be."

Over the years, Liz has turned JAC into one of Richmond's most respected youth programs—now in its **81st season**—teaching sixth-ninth graders timeless lessons in manners, confidence, and connection through the art of social dance. But beyond the etiquette and dance

steps, Liz's mission is much deeper: "It's not about perfection," she says. "It's about how we make others feel."

That philosophy carried her through one of the program's greatest challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic. While most similar organizations closed their doors, Liz and her sister **Katherine Byer**, who co-owned JAC at the time, decided to keep going. "We knew our young people needed connection more than ever," Liz explains.

With the help of their dedicated "JAC family", (friends so close they are like family); the program was redesigned from the ground up—spacing students apart, adding creative line dances, and focusing on conversation and confidence when the world felt disconnected. "We

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just kept dancing," she says. "We refused to let the music stop."

That resilience paid off. Within a year, enrollment bounced back stronger than ever, and JAC went on to win Richmond magazine's "Best Youth Dance Instruction" (2022-2025) and "Best Dance Event or Series" (2025).

## The Heart Behind the Tradition

For many families, JAC has become a rite of passage. **Kelly and Michael Blumenthal**, both Cotillion alumni from the 1990s, are now watching their own sons carry on the tradition.

"What started as reluctant lessons became something transformative," they shared. "Cotillion quietly instilled lessons we didn't even realize we were learning—grace, confidence, respect, and how to carry ourselves in any setting. Now our sons get to experience the same thing, and that fills our hearts with joy."

Another family, **Monica and Paul Balduf**, credit JAC for changing their daughter's life.

"Our daughter, Sarah Ashley, who has Down syndrome, completed two years of Cotillion and now proudly serves as a Junior Assistant," Monica said. "Liz didn't just 'allow' her to be included—she championed her, encouraged her, and saw her gifts and potential. That kind of heart is rare."

Stories like these remind Liz why she does what she does. Each season, JAC students donate candy and handwritten notes to Virginia service members, raise more than \$5,000 annually for local Christmas Mother funds, and choose stickers of positivity from an "Affirmation Wall" to carry home. "We want our students to see that kindness isn't just taught—it's lived," Liz says.

Outside the ballroom, Liz and Chris embody the same spirit of care. Chris works in logistics for Chesterfield County Public Schools and is known for his cooking and backyard garden. Sam lives in Arlington and works in consulting for Ernst & Young while Ellie serves as an inclusion specialist at the Weinstein JCC while she prepares to pursue her doctorate in occupational therapy.

Their family motto has become a guiding light for the next generation of Cotillion students, too:

***"Be the reason someone smiles today."***

As the Stanko's prepare for the holidays—and for Liz's parents' upcoming move to Westminster Canterbury—they're reflecting on how faith and perseverance have carried them through every chapter. "We've learned that we're stronger together," Liz says with her trademark optimism. "And if you can share that light with others along the way—well, that's what life is all about."

