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57 years on, variety is still the spice of David and Dierdre Tomlinson?s life



By Brock Weir

Strung around her neck on a leather strip were the eyeballs of former lovers.
This was, without thinking, the first words that came out of Dierdre Tomlinson's mouth when working as a palliative care volunteer when a rather dour patient looked up from his chair, spotted her necklace, and grumbled, ?And what are those??
?I was trying to cram the words back into my mouth,? Dierdre recalls. ?After what seemed like a long, silent pause, he said, ?I thought there would be more.'?
In reality, for the past 57 years, Dierdre and David Tomlinson, who welcome hundreds of people to their famed Merlin's Hollow garden each year, have only had eyes for each other.
?I have more of a sense of humour than David,? Dierdre confides as David leaves the kitchen table to take a phone call which, as it turns out, was a call to arrange an upcoming engagement in Dierdre's busy social schedule. ?He's very interested in scientific bird research and things like that, but I am more varied and different in that way.?
?I'm not so interested in people,? David adds with a wry smile, phone call concluded and Dierdre's concert date in Downtown Toronto firmed up for this week. ?Dierdre is very interested in people. She likes people and gets on with them, and I get on with them when it suits me.?
Fortunately for the people of Aurora, those times when it suits David are frequent as they welcome hundreds of people through their famed Merlin's Hollow garden each year, and as David, 84, continues his advocacy work in Town for the advancement of the Ivy Jay Nature Reserve and the Aurora Arboretum, but both halves of the whole agree that their differences keep the spark in their relationship.
This Valentine's Day, The Auroran asked the well-known just what makes them tick after 57 years.
It's a relationship of mutual respect and understanding, of shared and varied interests, but, perhaps most importantly, a friendship that continues to go from strength to strength.
Dierdre, 77, and David came from similar backgrounds, both from what Dierdre describes as ?very low, working class families? in the United Kingdom, Dierdre from London and David from Manchester.
After first crossing paths by chance and thinking little of it at the time, they truly met for the first time in a rather unusual way: stopped at a traffic light amid the hustle and bustle of London.
?I was travelling to college on my scooter in busy London traffic when I stopped at a red light,? Dierdre recalls. ?Another scooter came up with two men on it, and it was David's friend driving. David said, ?Nice night, isn't it?' I agreed and went onto the next red light. He then said, ?Warm for this time of year.' I agreed and went on. This happened for eight traffic lights and then he finally said, ?Fancy coming for a coffee?' I thought, why not??
The trio parked on the side of the road, found an Italian coffee house and spent the night chatting.
David and Dierdre were engaged three months later.
?The next week when I went home, I told my mother what had happened and she said, ?You went out with strangers like that? I said I knew I was safe because there were two of them. Such was my naivety!?

David says it's a good question what initially made him spark a conversation with the young lady on the next scooter. He had just come out of what he describes as an unhappy relationship with another woman and ?wasn't keen on jumping through the same hoops again.?

?But, it all worked out,? he says, looking over to Dierdre. ?It was a very lucky break, wasn't it, love? It was sheer luck.?

While they had similar family backgrounds, they came into the marriage with different life experiences. While David was not a scholar, starting as a gardener's apprentice at the age of 12 before working his way up the ladder to eventually become a renowned landscape architect, Dierdre had decidedly different interests.

After her father died when she was just three, she was considered an ?Officer's Orphan? and between the ages of five and 18 was sent to a boarding school paid for by the army. She went from working class to the middle class, she said, and left school with a yen to be a teacher, pursuing her passion at the Froebel Institute.

After their marriage in 1962, the Tomlinsons had two daughters ? Beth and Melinda ? before David's scooter-driving friend invited them to come and visit him at his new home in Canada in 1974.

He and David eventually formed a business partnership and the family of five ? including dog Lucy ? were bound for Aurora.

They first settled into a house on Wellington Street ? unfurnished as the furniture they had sent on was a casualty of a warehouse strike.

?We arrived on August 14,? says Dierdre, ?which is David's birthday, and we couldn't get anything out until Hallowe'en.?

?We were in this big empty house and that is what really impressed me,? David adds. ?When our furniture arrived, we already had a TV, tables, chairs and beds. People would come and say, ?I've got a spare bed. Use that.' Or, ?We have a spare TV in the basement.' In the end, we had a houseful of furniture in those days. Canadians were very generous and that's what really made us stay. We haven't lived anywhere else.?

Generosity might have been a factor in staying put, but they were more than willing to pay this generosity forward. In a few short years, they moved out of their digs on Wellington and found a new home on Centre Crescent, Dierdre's only stipulation to the real estate agent being a small old house in good shape on a large lot.

Here, David's background as a landscape architect came into bloom as he set about transforming the square lot into a series of three very different, expansive gardens. Dubbed ?Merlin's Hollow?, the gardens became renowned after they decided to open up their gardens for free to share them with the community.

David, still insisting he's the antithesis of a people person, although not quite convincingly, attributes the idea to open the garden entirely to Dierdre.

?About a year in, I thought it looked so great we had to share it,? says Dierdre. ?David reluctantly agreed to do that and last year was our 37th year of doing free open days. At one time, we used to have over a thousand visitors each time we opened because there were not that many gardens around that were open to the public. They loved it and kept coming back.?

They not only came back, but wanted to see if their own thumbs were green by buying plants from the couple. They had little money at the time and decided this would be the perfect side hustle.

?We did that for 25 years,? she says, ?and it helped put in hedges and fencing.?

Nowadays, much of the garden work falls on Dierdre as David continues his work with such organizations as Nature Aurora, the Aurora Community Arboretum, and fostering what has become a passion project, making the Aurora Wildlife Park on Wellington Street East (formally the Ivy Jay Nature Reserve) a reality.

So, after 57 years, how does their garden grow?

?We enjoy each other's company,? says Dierdre.

?We're best friends, really,? agrees David. ?It's good to have different things that you do separately. Half of the things you do together, but have some things you do on your own ? then, when you meet at the end of the day, you can talk about it. One of the important things is when you do get cross with each other, which you do, don't go to bed feeling cross. Don't go to bed angry. Sort it out and then sleep.?

?David,? interjects Dierdre with a laugh, ?you really should write a book! I find with a lot of young people, marriages last for such a short time. Get to know them well before you get married. See how much you share that would work for a while.

?I said to David, ?You're not perfect, but I couldn't live with perfection. It would show me up!?