

The long and winding road to lasting love



By Brock Weir

‘Oh, god,’ says Marie Barnes.

‘It’s a long and complicated story,’ adds husband Gordon.

It seems like a simple enough question, but ‘How long have you been married?’ turned out to be anything but. From the kitchen of their Catherine Avenue home, Gordon Barnes produces a scroll. Laying it out on the floor, weighing it down flat on the hardwood, he unfurls it.

It’s their story, laid out on a roll of paper no less than three metres in length.

It charts the Aurora couple’s personal milestones against the milestones marked by the world at large – for better or worse – and still has an extra metre or two left to fill in.

But the chart itself is really only a thumbnail of their story; the look they exchange tells enough to render my original question inconsequential.

‘Marie likes to say she’s glad she got her Gordons in the right order,’ says Mr. Barnes, pausing about a third of the way up Marie’s side of the chart when she entered her first marriage to Gordon Aiken who, for much of their marriage, served as MP for Parry-Sound Muskoka.

Marie readily agrees: ‘It’s a good record.’

Gordon, 85, and Marie, 91, have been together for over 50 years, nearly 30 years of which have been spent as man and wife.

Over those 50 years they say they have never actually had a fight. Theirs is a union, they say, bound not only by love but a shared inquisitiveness, a thirst for knowledge – science and history – which they agree is ‘much more interesting, more titillating’ than ‘somebody’s fiction.’

It’s a relationship that was forged by a shared love of the arts – Marie’s creative passion lies in textile art while Gordon’s is in ceramics and pottery – which brought them together all those many years ago.

‘It just happened,’ says Marie. ‘There was just never any doubt. I knew he would never let me down.’

Their paths intersected in the 1960s at the Ontario Craft Foundation (OCF) where Gordon was eventually tasked with the day-to-day operations of the group. But, Marie, as it happened, was a member of the Foundation’s 12-person Board.

‘She was my boss,’ says Gordon, then a happy bachelor, with a certain degree of pride, to which Marie responds with a twinkle. But their paths started in very different areas.

Marie’s chart began in Alberta in 1926, born to a family with Danish roots. Her father was a butter maker from Denmark who came to the prairies to make his fortune running creameries.

After studying at the Vancouver School of Art, she married the first Gordon and started a family. They settled in Bracebridge where

Marie's art largely took a back seat to her role as a mother and political wife.

Gordon's side of the scroll, meanwhile, begins in Minnesota in 1933. "I came in with Adolf Hitler and Franklin D. Roosevelt," he says with a chuckle "where he grew up on a 120 acre cattle farm.

After his primary education in a one-room schoolhouse, the family moved to a larger community and Gordon got his feet wet as a photographer for the high school newspaper and yearbook, work which eventually landed him a journalism scholarship.

His education continued at St. Olaf College and the University of Minnesota where he decided to enlist in the army before the G.I. Bill was fully repealed.

"There were a lot of us that became patriotic in December 1954 and January 1955," he says.

Eventually, with a focus on education and the arts, Gordon landed in Canada where he not only took up his artistic endeavours in earnest but worked in a number of educational posts, including a long-time stint at Seneca College's King Campus.

By this time, their artistic paths had finally crossed.

Artistically, they were a force to be reckoned with and, in their craft world, they literally took the world by storm. Marie says their involvement with the OCF turned into a "trip around the world" taking them just about everywhere with a flourishing craft movement, from Peru, to Japan, to Ireland.

"We started to get friendlier as the marriage had crumbled back here," says Gordon of their trip to South America. "We were together in Peru, but we were together-together two years later in Dublin."

Love flourished as they subsequently toured England, indulging Marie's passion for ecclesiastical embroideries and there was no turning back.

"We had been living in sin," says Marie, of how their relationship progressed.

On marriage, Gordon says, "We basically said, 'why bother?'"

"It didn't seem important. It wasn't on our list," says Marie.

"And there's always other options!" Gordon adds with a three-part duck, cover and grin.

Marriage made its way onto the list, however, in 1989 when both were employed by Seneca's College of Applied Arts & Technology and the powers-that-be pointed out that, if married before the time of retirement, one's spouse would receive half of the other's pension in widowhood.

"Marie came back that night and said, 'I think we might have to get married,'" recalls Gordon. "And I said, 'You're sixty-what?'"

Perhaps it wasn't the most romantic reason to lock this relationship down, but it's a relationship that has endured.

When asked the secret to a long and happy relationship, Gordon offers a tip on what not to do, by cupping his hands into an imaginary smart phone, furiously typing with his thumbs.

"Talk and communicate " that's the secret," he says, looping back to their proud claim of never having had a fight over the past fifty years. "Whenever there is an issue, let's be rational about this. What is the issue? What is the worst possible thing that could happen? What's Plan B, if that is the case?"

"We work it out," adds Marie. "I can't remember a situation where it didn't seem logical to proceed through it. Dam the torpedoes and full speed ahead."

Another one of Marie's pro-tips is to "develop wide friendships and sincere friendships with a lot of people" and both agree on the importance of having varied interests as well.

"There has to be a willingness to let the other person pursue that interest," says Gordon. "Neither one of you own the other."

Adds Marie: "I've never had to ask permission."

"We now observe that it is a span of 50 years since we first met," says Gordon, finally answering the initial question. "At 91 and 85, I think we can carry on."