

THE FELLOWS' FORUM

SOCIOLOGIST AND PASTRY CHEF DESIGN THEIR WEDDING: CREATING RITUAL NOT A PIECE OF CAKE

Both academics and nonacademics have recognized weddings as events that not only bind a couple together but also reveal what is valued by the participants, how they view themselves, and the nature of their union. As Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz said in the book *Wedding as Text: Communicating Cultural Identities through Ritual*, through the design of and participation in rituals such as weddings, “we convey meaning about identity and community” through even the smallest details. As my husband-to-be, pastry chef Dan Beckett, and I planned our own wedding last fall, we were keenly aware of this phenomenon. We faced many seemingly mundane decisions: where to hold it; what to wear and how to walk down the “aisle”; and how to organize the reception. Each choice held special meaning.

We decided to get married at Cloudland Canyon State Park in North Georgia. This choice reflects our love of the outdoors and our appreciation for the natural beauty of Georgia; it also commemorates a fantastic day of hiking we experienced there. In addition, the park had a building for special events available in October 2006, the five-year anniversary of when Dan and I first met. The location gave us the opportunity to share with our guests the beauty of Georgia in the fall, to create a relaxed event, to avoid religion (which we do not practice), and to include our beloved pet, a boxer named Frances, whom we adopted earlier that year. (Although my mother jokingly noted that the location was “equally inconvenient for everybody”—Dan’s family resides primarily on the East Coast while mine lives in the Midwest and on the West Coast—she later proclaimed it “perfect.”) The location also allowed us to be married by someone nontraditional—Susan Tamasi, a linguist at Emory whose past intertwined with ours in interesting and meaningful ways. Dan and I originally met through linguistics (we were both enrolled in a graduate program at Georgetown University); Susan had met Dan years ago at a linguistics conference; and she



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and I became friends through our involvement in linguistics at Emory.

With the “where” determined, Dan and I had to decide the “wear,” as well as how we would proceed down the aisle. As a feminist, I knew fashioning myself (literally) into the bridal role would be a somewhat uneasy task. Our location suggested somewhat casual attire; however, as an American woman, I was well aware of the salience of the bridal white dress (most likely long, and with a veil or headpiece) in the event. I long have viewed this dress as imbued with various symbolic meanings—virginity, purity of heart—that the bride (but not groom) is obligated to display. Dan and I went shopping together, and we found a simple white dress.

I decided that the cultural understanding of “white dress = bride” outweighed what I believed to be the possibly sexist interpretation of the white dress.

I also was aware of the traditional procession that was to occur in the dress, which Marjorie Ingall—in an essay called “Going to the Temple”—aptly likened to “having the bride’s dad hand her off to her husband like a football.” However, I also acknowledged the fond memories my mother had of her own father’s role in her wedding ceremony and my love of my own father. We decided that my father would not walk me down the aisle; instead, Dan and I walked together. We integrated our parents into the ceremony by having each perform a reading we selected. These choices prevented me from feeling like an object passed off between men while also enabling us to acknowledge the importance of family.

We had to decide how to organize the reception, especially the food—Dan’s specialty. We wanted it to have a homemade flavor, but we knew we could not do all the work ourselves. Thus, we decided to have a barbeque; we ordered in a white sheet cake and side dishes, and family members generously helped set up and cook the meal. Dan marinated all the chicken and beef, seared the tofu (I’m a vegetarian), made biscuits and rice pilaf, and baked and frosted three cakes. (Needless to say, I looked on in awe.)

In the end, our wedding day was filled with symbols of the importance of family, our appreciation for nature, our shared past, mutual and individual interests, and our respect and love for one another as equals. It was also characterized by myriad pragmatic choices. In making these choices, we replicated tradition, broke from tradition, and reshaped tradition to create our own version of the wedding and reception ritual. Even though it wasn’t easy, I think it turned out sweet. ■

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