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GETTING MARRIED

It's Never Too Late for Love, Marriage

* Over the course of 3 years and 60 coffee dates, Gerd Lester was futilely looking for 'The One.' Enter Deena Schwartz.

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There's an art to the coffee date, and Gerd Lester had mastered it. Not by choice. As his ad in the Jewish Journal stated, the then 66-year-old really was looking for a nice lady for a serious relationship. But three years and around 60 coffee dates later, he still hadn't found "The One."

He actually only got together with about half of the respondents, the ones who met his date criteria: The woman had to meet him at least half way, have her own car ("because I didn't want to run the wheels off mine") and not demand they meet at a fancy place with valet parking.

Even still, most women were a disappointment, recalls Gerd, now 70.

Until Deena Schwartz. Deena, 58, had something the other women didn't--firsthand knowledge of what it feels like to lose a child.

"We had something terribly important in common. The other women all felt I should be over it. She understood that you never get over it and lets me talk about [my daughter] whenever I want."

After four years of off-and-on dating, they decided they shared more than that, and so married, both for the second time, last October, at the Holiday Inn in Hollywood.

They first met for coffee at Dupar's in Studio City. By now, the waitresses were used to seeing him with different women and just issued knowing smiles. Deena remembers being "shocked at meeting this man who was tall and handsome and very nice."

He told her he would call again. She thought, "That's what they all say."

Then he did.

"And I learned he was honest, kind and sincere. I had stars in my eyes."

He introduced her to Baroque music, which they now both love, and she introduced him to the finer points of ballroom dance.

"He took me dancing on our second date, which was something because he wasn't fond of dancing. At first he bounced a lot, but now we look like a couple. We blend."

Then, as happens in time with every real relationship, their differences wore down their veneers of unconditional acceptance. She didn't like the way he dressed. He didn't like the way she exaggerated. She didn't like being around his son; he said too bad because he was all he had left.

They split up a few times.

In some instances she came around, in others he'd give in. Though, they admit, changing at their age isn't easy.

Initially the issue was Gerd's only remaining child, Perry, who's mentally retarded and sometimes acted inappropriately.

"I couldn't be with anybody who couldn't accept my son. He's all I have left," says Gerd, whose first wife died nine years ago after the couple were separated.

Through training and medication, Perry's been able to curb his impulses. He stays with his father every other weekend and holidays, and now Deena is the conservator of his affairs in case something happens to Gerd.

"There's no one else I'd trust," he says. "We've made a big turnaround."

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Other issues revolve around certain die-hard traits, which they've worked on in therapy. Gerd, a retired owner and manager of several apartment buildings, says, "I like to keep only one credit card, not her. I can't bear to part with something until it's worn out. She throws things away when she's tired of them. I don't mind if my sheets don't

match; she does."

A few of his habits annoy her as well. For example, he used to drive after dark without his lights on to save his car battery until she convinced him it wasn't safe. He doesn't see the need to wear clean socks every day. And he likes to wear a tired pair of turquoise shorts that he's had for 10 years. (She has photos to prove it.)

"It's those little things that irk a woman," she says. "But he's my beshert," a Hebrew word that means the person meant for you.

A librarian for Calvert Street Elementary School in Woodland Hills, Deena also works in the Granada Hills Branch of the L.A. Public Library and admits that she likes things a certain way. She started her profession after her son died, her remaining four children were grown and she saw her way clear to divorce her husband of 30 years.

After the wedding, Deena and Gerd made his Franklin Hills home theirs and let her surviving son move into her Woodland Hills condo. But the merging of households has already proved contentious. "It's a cozy little house, but it's a total bachelor's pad," Deena says. "The other night I laid it on the line. I said, 'Do you want to sleep with a warm living being or stay with your memories?' "

The home features suits of armor in the halls, derringer pistols on the wall and a copy of an ancient Egyptian painting of a circumcision in the living room next to a bow and arrow. "It's historic," he defends.

There's not a drape in sight. "They spoil the view," he says, and the kitchen trash bin is on top of the sink, so he doesn't have to bend down.

"Recently he saw this contraption on a cooking show for hanging pots, you know those really beautiful copper ones?" says Deena. "Well he got one of these, only he hangs everything on it: his dented 20-year-old pots, the hand mixer, the ice cream scoop. He thinks it's incredibly efficient. And he's kept the same old paper cup on the sink for 10 or 15 years, but he insists it's clean because he washes it."

His response: "She exaggerates my place something awful. We all have some peculiarities, and she has quite a few."

For instance?

"If she uses a hand towel once, she throws it into the washing machine. I could use one for a week."

"I rest my case," Deena says.

Where's John Gray when we need him?

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So what keeps them together despite their differences?

"You know," he says, his voice going soft, "neither of us had much affection in our first marriage, and we've discovered it's very important to both of us."

Also, she says, "We know that people you love can be taken tomorrow. Losing a child gives you a whole new sense of what's important, so you don't stay mad long."

His daughter was 27 when she died of a rare congenital brain tumor in 1991. After completing her master's degree in social work, she got a job working in a battered-women's center and died four months later. "I miss her," he says, his voice still breaking.

Deena's son Stephen died after a nine-year battle with Hodgkin's disease in 1985 at age 22. "We believe they're together somewhere," she says. "Both were very spiritual and neither married."

At the traditional Jewish wedding, Deena's son gave her away. Her three daughters and her son's fiancée were bridesmaids.

Gerd's deceased daughter's prayer shawl cloaked the couple. Its fringe kept getting tangled in the best man's glasses. Best man Irving Croshier, also the couple's therapist, occasionally helped shore Gerd up when he seemed to grow weak in the knees.

The bride wore a light-blue, off-the-shoulder Jessica McClintock dress of silk with long lace sleeves and a matching elbow length veil.

The groom wore a dark blue suit and dark blue tie.

In keeping with her orthodox tradition, she walked around her groom seven times, and the couple lit candles on a table that held pictures of their deceased children.

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At the reception, held at the Holiday Inn's Room at the Top, the one that spins, guests dined on lemon chicken and peach melba and danced to

Lionel Ames and his three-piece band.

For their honeymoon, the couple cruised to Mexico. It was a first for Deena, who had never before been on a boat or a plane and (except for the train ride from New York when she moved here as a girl and one car trip to Las Vegas) had never been far from home.

This spring, they will fly to Israel and to Danzig, Germany, Gerd's homeland, which he hasn't seen since 1938.

In the meantime, they'll create their home together, agreeing easily on keeping at least one thing--all their letters to each other. Their missives not only capture a courtship, but also a bygone tradition of romance.

Both have shoe boxes full of letters from the other that chronicle their separations, reconciliations, even their marriage proposal. In a couple of letters to Gerd, Deena wrote that she'd like to marry him someday. Then one day she said so in person.

"Did you say you really wanted to marry me?" Gerd replied, not quite believing. When he saw she was serious, he said, "I'm glad you brought it up. I'm a little bashful. Let's do it."

He wears the same wedding band he wore when he married his first wife 32 years ago. "The marriage wasn't that bad and the ring is still good."

But Deena's ring is new. "That's what she wanted," Gerd says, with the shrug of a new husband eager to please.

PHOTO: Gerd Lester and Deena Schwartz didn't have the smoothest road to the altar, but the bond of their both losing adult children proved strong.

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