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Chicago Tribune

Founded June 10, 1847

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YOUR VOICE

A winning formula for a loving marriage? Communication and compromise.

By David McGrath

When my wife and I got married in August 1972, I was a substitute teacher for Chicago Public Schools earning \$40 a day. Marianne had a permanent gig as a fourth grade teacher at St. Barnabas Elementary for \$5,000 a year.

So, whenever we traveled, we stayed at quaint budget motels such as the Abe Lincoln in Effingham or Millie's Winter Motel in Winter, Wisconsin. Marianne hated most of them, but I liked the prices, along with the fact that I could park my 1964 Oldsmobile Super Eighty-Eight several feet from the door of our room.

When I finally landed a full-time job teaching English at Chicago Vocational High School, starting at \$9,570 a year, we stepped up to Motel 6, where the sheets were freshly laundered, and you could splurge on extras such as phone service or a mini fridge for an additional \$5 a night.

By the time Mike was born in 1975, and I'd earned a master's degree entitling me to a raise at Vocational, we would book a couple of days during spring break at a Holiday Inn with a pool, and we'd head home with one or two monogrammed hotel towels as "amenities."

All of which I've been inspired to recall after our weekend at the Lido Beach Resort in Florida, gifted to us by our three children on the occasion of our 50th wedding anniversary.

With two pools, two hot tubs, two restaurants, valet parking and our balcony on the fourth floor overlooking the white sand



David and Marianne McGrath in a DuPage County forest preserve in 2012.

ABEL URIBE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

beach on the Gulf of Mexico, Lido is a far cry from the Abe Lincoln, and an extravagance I would think twice about booking myself.

But in consideration of the love it came from, and the 50 years of dual occupancy Marianne and I were commemorating, we accepted it with gratitude and humility.

While golden jubilees are the bread and butter of small-town newspapers, including Effingham's Daily News or Winter's

Sawyer County Gazette, big city dailies like this have way weightier urban, national, and international issues to cover.

But in these virulent times, a commentary about how such an accord might have been achieved by two perfect strangers for half a century, would seem appropriate.

So, on our first evening at the resort, at Lido's Drift Restaurant, as Marianne waited for her baked snapper, and I, the grilled shrimp, we sorted out what enabled us to arrive at this point in our lives.

"I thought you looked like actor Michael Parks," she said.

"And you, Natalie Wood. Still do," I quickly added.

But then we got serious and both agreed our longevity could be traced to a single moment when I sat on the stairwell just inside the front door of our home, several decades earlier.

Our three children were school-age, and metaphorically, so was I, as I was headed out to a cocktail lounge to meet my volleyball friends for the second night in a row.

Far removed from the romantic, poetry-writing, guitar-playing folk singer she had married, I had devolved into an aloof, hard-drinking, Al Bundy clone, who felt his youth, freedom and artistic horizons had been occluded, if not sabotaged, by a needy family and a stressful job.

The adult in our marriage, kneeling on the stairs in front of me, and sensing peril to both us and the kids, extracted from me the aforementioned truth, along with several more that the Sawyer County Gazette could not have published in a family newspaper,

before she suggested a plan.

Like the wives of half of my like-minded friends, she could have chosen to cut loose the baggage and commence a separate life. But we had known our love as a living thing, which both of us feared to kill.

Instead, I would start pulling my weight with the kids, so she could break free of her own chains, obtain an advanced college degree and cultivate a social life beyond the children, her mother and me.

And she would indulge my frat house routine — the softball, the fishing, the beer — until it ran its course. After which I could build that cabin in the woods and write the novel with which I'd been making false starts for the previous 10 years.

Meanwhile, every Saturday night would be a mandatory assessment session, which is teacher jargon for going out on a date at a pizza joint.

Maybe it was just by making a plan, or maybe the string of 2,000 dates, or maybe it was the chance for each to pursue their dreams. But I grew to know her better than before, and she, me, it seems.

Every couple must find a key, and ours was not separate lives. Instead, it was talking and more talking and granting each other the room to be who we are. Today we are grateful and amazed at each other's blossoming, and our love is the best that it's been.

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