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VOWS

William Sirotty and William Stelling



Jon Gilbert Fox for The New York Times

BEDFORD, N.H., MAY 25 Dr. William Sirotty, left, and William Stelling amid rose petals.

By JOEL ELLIOTT Published: June 8, 2008

WHEN Dr. William Sirotty first asked William Stelling to marry him in 2004, he was not quite prepared for the response he received.

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Jon Gilbert Fox for The New York Times

The reception.

It was: "You're proposing to me over the phone?"

Dr. Sirotty hadn't thought of it that way. He had impulsively called Mr. Stelling from work to suggest they take a road trip from their town of Amherst, N.H., to New Paltz, N.Y., where same-sex couples were being married by the town's mayor.

Undaunted by Mr. Stelling's reaction, Dr. Sirotty, an internist at the Nashua Medical Group in Nashua, N.H., went straight from his office to a florist shop and then headed home. When Mr. Stelling answered the doorbell, he found Dr. Sirotty on one knee.

"Will you marry me?" Dr. Sirotty asked, rose in hand.

"That kind of melted my heart." Mr. Stelling later said.

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... that kind of melted my heart, and I was like, 'Bill, you're so cute.'

But a rose was for several years the furthest they could progress. New Hampshire at that time did not allow same-sex civil unions, and the State Supreme Court in Kingston, N.Y., quickly barred New Paltz officials from performing marriages for same-sex couples.

Dr. Sirotty and Mr. Stelling, now both 56, have not always been of the same mind.

They met in 1981 at Dr. Sirotty's 30th birthday party in New York, where both were then living and working.

"He was gorgeous; he was interesting," Dr. Sirotty recalled. "And from my perspective, maybe he was slightly exotic. I can't say it was love at first sight, but you get the idea."

Mr. Stelling spent many of his formative years in Asia, eventually landing in the East Village, where he became a founder of the Fun Gallery, which helped introduce graffiti art, including that of the late Jean-Michel Basquiat, to New York.

Dr. Sirotty, from Long Island, made his way to [Georgetown University](#), from which he received his medical degree. He then began practicing in New York.

For six months the two men pursued an intense romance until Mr. Stelling, who enjoyed New York's clubs and arts scenes and had some exploring to do, ended it.

"He would say that I dumped him," said Mr. Stelling, now a supervisor at the call center at PlumChoice Online PC Services, in Billerica, Mass., a provider of computer support. "But I would like to say that I set him free to explore."

The two had many mutual friends, but for nearly 10 years, Mr. Stelling and Dr. Sirotty had no contact other than to occasionally glare at each other from across a restaurant, Mr. Stelling said.

Then, at a Christmas party in 1990, Mr. Stelling suggested they see each other again.

"Over my dead body," Dr. Sirotty recalled thinking.

But Mr. Stelling persisted.

"He just kept calling him and calling him, asking him out on dates," said Susan Sirotty Myers, Dr. Sirotty's sister. It wasn't until the spring that Mr. Stelling succeeded in winning him over.

Dr. Sirotty explained how wariness gave way to love: "I remembered why I liked him. He's witty, he's cute. He's funny. He's very smart. He's knowledgeable — he knows something about everything."

Mr. Stelling's mother, Cassie Stelling of Harlingen, Tex., whom he describes as conservative, at first was not sure how to approach her son's relationship.

"Are you and Dr. Bill close?" his mother asked, Mr. Stelling recalled.

"Yes," he replied.

"Are you *very* close?"

"Yes, mother."

A pause.

"Are you as close as can be?"



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When he again said yes, she said: "Well you know, that's good. Everyone needs to have someone to love."

In January of this year, when New Hampshire began allowing same-sex partners to enter into civil unions, Dr. Sirotty and Mr. Stelling decided to follow up on the promise they had made in 2004.

On May 25, on the grassy lawn of the Bedford Village Inn in Bedford, N.H., Dr. Sirotty and Mr. Stelling stood before Elizabeth Campbell, a justice of the peace, and more than 130 guests, and vowed to honor and love each other. Friends from all over the world, including several from Mr. Stelling's sixth-grade class at the International School Bangkok, attended.

"He has been looking for a soul mate and he finally found one in Bill," Dr. Sirotty's sister said of her brother. "He found peace and love that he had never had before."

Beaming, Dr. Sirotty and Mr. Stelling walked hand-in-hand down the aisle, and, instead of a single rose, showers of pink petals rained on the formally dressed couple.

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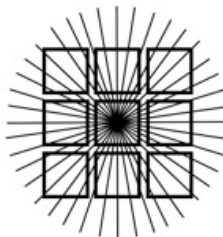


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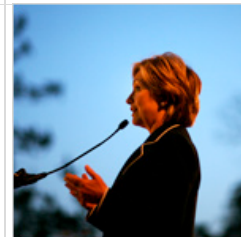
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