



Learning the notes of love!

Bellevue couple finds a love letter a day keeps their marriage alive

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The love letter is a disappearing art form in this age of instant communication, but Joe and Helen Hesketh still write one to each other every day. They've been doing it for the past 35 years.

The Bellevue couple will celebrate its 55th wedding anniversary in June, but neither spouse is past the point of gushing after all this time.

"My dearest lover," Joe wrote years ago. "Your specialness today was snuggling up to me in bed, holding hands in church, making me an omelet, going back to get blueberries for me, and your concern for the kids shoes and getting what they wanted. Thanks for being my lover. I love you."

The letters aren't all filled with joy. Some of their passages bear witness to a battle-tested marriage.

"I miss you most when we are out of sorts with each other," Joe wrote. "We sort of cold-shoulder one another. Then I miss the warmth of holding your hand, the extra smiles and pleasantness of your voice, your special attention, kisses, and caresses."

The Hesketh's marriage has lasted over five decades, but both spouses admit it took some dedication to get past the honeymoon phase.

Joe was a high-school kid working at a grocery store when he first encountered Helen, a baton

twirler who used to come by the shop in her uniform.

"I liked her physique," Joe said.

While Joe gawked, Helen was plotting her first move. She hid around the corner one day to intercept Joe on his usual hitchhike from work, acting as though the whole meeting was a coincidence.

The two began dating and married four years later.

Helen sat behind the wheel when she first stopped to pick up Joe, but she rode shotgun through most of early parts of her relationship with him.

"She jumped into my life, and I didn't jump into hers," Joe said. "Whatever I did, she just went along."

The one-sidedness took its toll until Helen was ready to call it quits around 1973, after 19 years of marriage and eight kids.

The letter writing would prove to be an awakening. It started during a marriage retreat through Bellevue's St. Louise Catholic Church.

Joe attended the outing reluctantly.

"I didn't think I needed the change," he said. "I thought all the problems were her fault, and I had nothing to do with it, of course."

The Hesketh's were experiencing a disconnect, and it would take letters to fling open the doors of communication.

Spouses at the retreat had to write every day about specific aspects of their marriage, and then share the answers with their partners.

The Hesketh's say they grew closer from the experience, learning about each others feelings, as well as about themselves.

Joe realized he was frequently bold-headed.

"I'm often too stubborn to back down and say 'I'm sorry' if I think it's my fault or to forget about it so we can move forward," he wrote in one of his entries. "It makes me feel sort of stubborn like a mule."

Helen, for her part, realized that acted domineering at home to deal with her feelings of inadequacy.

"If someone disagreed with me, I fell apart," she said. "I felt like my ideas weren't wanted, or I wasn't wanted."

The Hesketh's continued their daily letter writing after the retreat, stopping only once when Helen's parents visited their home.

Joe even kept up the routine after going through quadruple bypass surgery, making illegible scribbles on a note pad after waking from the operation. Helen's letter was one of the first things he asked for.

The Hesketh's now lead marriage-counseling seminars at St. Louise, where they are known as "the couple." They have 35 grandchildren, 11 great grandchildren, and 25,000 love letters boxed up in their bedroom closet.

The notes they write are part of a disappearing art form, but it apparently isn't one that will be lost altogether.

One of the Hesketh's grandchildren, 15-year-old Joshua Gray, says he plans to carry on the tradition once he gets married.

"That's pretty important to me," he said. "I think it'll bring me a lot closer (to my spouse). It's something I think is actually healthy for a relationship."

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