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VOWS

Molly Bracken and Tom Dunne

By [JILL P. CAPUZZO](#)

BY April, Molly Bracken's workload for the year is winding down. As an assistant dean of admission at [Princeton](#), she has already read through her share of the 18,000 application folders from prospective freshmen and has helped decide which 1,800 students will be accepted.

But for Tom Dunne, the work is just beginning. As associate dean of students, he turns his attention to the "April hosting," a campus event that welcomes those accepted students, becoming enmeshed in making sure they will choose Princeton. Then his focus immediately shifts to the events leading up to graduation and all the activities that come with wrapping up the school year.

Maybe that explains Mr. Dunne's obliviousness to his future wife's overtures when the two deans first began working together in 2000. Or maybe it was Mr. Dunne's steadfast rule not to date co-workers.

"I would send these special, sweet notes: 'If you ever want to get together for lunch,' " recalled Ms. Bracken, 31. He ignored them.

But two years later, after realizing he had no plan for meeting people outside of work, Mr. Dunne, 37, decided to ask her out after April hosting. It would take four more years for the couple to marry, on the campus where they work, met and became engaged.

"I guess I'm a procrastinator," said Mr. Dunne, a quality he kicked himself for when he learned on their second date — ice cream Fribbles at Friendly's — that Ms. Bracken would be leaving shortly to earn her master's degree at Stanford.

For the next year, and for several months thereafter, their relationship was tested by distance, time and a dead fish.

"We all wanted to see if this would endure," Kathleen Deignan, dean of undergraduate students at Princeton and Mr. Dunne's boss, said of the close-knit campus community, which was encouraging the couple.

The first test involved a molly fish named Colby (after Ms. Bracken's alma mater, Colby College). She left the fish in Mr. Dunne's care when she went to Stanford. He nurtured the pet during the following school year, and Colby thrived in his office.

"The survival of the fish was a metaphor for the whole relationship," said Mr. Dunne's administrative assistant, Shelley Junnos. When Mr. Dunne traveled west to bring Ms. Bracken home in June 2003, Ms. Junnos was to take over care of the fish.

Meanwhile, the second challenge was the monthlong road trip back from California, a circuitous route that included camping and hiking, along with stops at nine college campuses, making it a busman's holiday.

"We realized if we could survive driving through New Mexico and Texas in an overpacked Ford Explorer without air-conditioning, without killing each other, the relationship was meant to be," Mr. Dunne said.

The trip was a success, but Colby, without Mr. Dunne's attention, was not meant to be; the fish had died back home.

Still, Mr. Dunne was slow to act in the relationship, and with both deans now back at work in Princeton it would be almost two more years before he proposed. Once, while visiting the Brackens' home in Sparta, N.J., Mr. Dunne asked Patricia and Thomas Bracken, why his picture wasn't included in the family's photo gallery. Mr. Bracken, a retired assistant prosecutor for Sussex County, pointed to a blank wall and told him: "I'm saving that wall to hang pictures of my son-in-law and future daughters-in-law."

Mr. Dunne finally proposed on St. Patrick's Day 2005, in the East Pyne Courtyard at Princeton. The day was significant for the couple, whom Mr. Dunne called "100 percent Irish," and for Mr. Dunne, because it was the birthday of his late father, Robert Dunne, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army. His mother is Geraldine Dunne of Sherrills Ford, N.C.

After so much delay, Mr. Dunne moved into high gear, aiming to marry by last August. Instead, the couple spent the next 17 months — in between orientations, graduation and campus tours — planning their wedding.

"Tom is one of those people who brings everybody together into his world and treats them the same way, from the electricians to the president of the university," Ms. Bracken said. "So when it came time to getting access to places we wanted, there were people who wanted to help us."

The wedding, on Aug. 19, took place in Princeton University Chapel, officiated by the Rev. Thomas Mullelly, a Roman Catholic priest. Following the ceremony, a bagpiper led the wedding party to East Pyne Courtyard, where a dinner reception was held under massive magnolia trees lighted by white paper lanterns. Following their honeymoon in Tanzania, the couple will return to the campus and town they call home, where the bride will be known as Mrs. Dunne.

In his toast to the couple, the groom's brother, Kelley Dunne, described his new sister-in-law as "the gatekeeper" and Mr. Dunne as "the shepherd" at Princeton. While the couple's impact on students has been significant, so too has been the school's impact on them.

"Princeton means something different to us than to Princeton alumni," Mrs. Dunne said of herself and her husband, who graduated from the University of Detroit and received a master's degree from [Boston College](#). "When you do the work we do, you couldn't work at a better place. And to be able to share this place together means so much."

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