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Wednesday, February 13, 2008

Neal Rubin

The politics of love



She's for Hillary, and he's for Mitt. Was for Mitt, anyway, when he was still running for president, and that's why Ron Davis went to see Candidate Romney speak last February at the Detroit Economic Club.

Barbara Rom went because she likes politics -- she's on a fundraising committee for Candidate Clinton -- and because Romney looked like someone to watch out for.

As frequently happens, she was the only woman at a table with nine men in dark suits. Everyone chatted politely, and then Romney spoke, and then she left. And that was that.

At least, it was for a week. If that was really the end of things, Barbara Rom and Ron Davis wouldn't be in your newspaper, especially not the morning before Valentine's Day.

Advertisement

What happened was that Davis, the dark suit on her left, sent her a Valentine and a letter. An excellent letter, she says, from which she can still quote several passages.

So she called him. And they talked. And they went on what turned out to be a nine-hour date -- dinner at Mosaic in Greektown, a musical at the Fisher Theatre, mojitos and salsa dancing at Vicente's Cuban Cuisine downtown.

And, ultimately, they married. But that's not the end of things, either.

It's more of a beginning, and a reminder of several timely concepts, like how you don't have to be the same to be right for one another. How the written word still means something. How civility still has a place in political debate. And how you can still shock your mom when you're 59 years old.

Similarities

Davis grew up in Huntington Woods and went to high school at University of Detroit Jesuit, which was in Rom's neighborhood. She'd walk by his school on her way to the one the U. of D. kids called "Our Lady of Mumford."

That astounds her, how they could be so close geographically in the mid-1960s and meet only because of a random seating assignment more than 40 years later. There are other parallels, too, like loss (she widowed, he divorced) and a bout with cancer (both thyroid). But the easy list to make is the one with all the differences.

He was captain of his high school football team and will, at 58, spontaneously break into pushups. The closest thing she gets to exercise is telling him to hit the deck and give her 30.

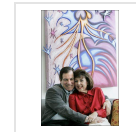
He went to Xavier University in Cincinnati, hoping to become a doctor, and it still mystifies and even rankles him that he didn't get into medical school.

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While Ron Davis and Barbara Rom are opposites in many ways, they still find common ground. (Robin Buckson / The Detroit News)

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Now he's a successful contractor, working mostly at ground level, focusing on foundations.

She stayed home for college -- University of Michigan and then Michigan law -- and became a recognized expert in Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Now she's the partner in charge at Pepper Hamilton, with a river view at the Renaissance

Center, 37 floors up.

He's a devout Catholic who attends Latin mass and finds a church when they're out of town on vacation. She's a not-thunderously-observant Jew.

He owns a 150-year-old farmhouse near Milford, though he mostly uses it these days to store his heavy equipment. She, and now they, have a prosperous-lawyer-sized home in Bloomfield Hills.

Back on the farm, he has six cats. She has a Havanese dog named Lola, a gray-and-white furball, and it's unanimous: Every female in the house loves Davis.

"She's very possessive," Rom says. "If I go to kiss him, she works her way between us."

Power of the spoken word

There had been another man in Lola's life. Marty and Barbara Rom were married 36 years, until that day in November 2006 when she left for work before dawn, and he was still in their bed when she came home. It was a heart attack, at 60, and she hadn't begun to think about dating three months later when she went to hear Mitt Romney.

Then her secretary called to her a week later, on Feb. 14, as she was sorting through the day's deliveries: "You've got a peculiar piece of mail in here."

Davis began by re-introducing himself. He made it clear that he did not mean to put her on the spot, and she was not obligated to respond.

"I know you recently lost your husband. I don't know if you're ready to venture out socially," he wrote -- Rom is reciting this from memory -- "but if you decide you are, I hope you will give me the privilege to accompany you."

"That's the line," Rom says, and she taps her chest.

Out with friends Arthur and Beverly Liss that Valentine's night, she recounted the letter. "You're going to put your toe in the water one of these days," Beverly said. "Why not with someone so thoughtful?"

Rom called him when she got home. It was a victory for eloquence over speed, for pens over keyboards. While Rom is spot-welded to her BlackBerry, Davis doesn't even have an e-mail account. To get her work address, he'd used a computer at the public library.

E-mail is "the death knell of human interaction," he says. "Vocabulary, prose, all of those things are headed for the wayside."

Had to be love

Davis still only uses a PC sporadically. "Once my computer gets a turbodiesel engine," he says, "I'll understand it better."

He has, however, purchased a tuxedo, size 40R. Rom's job and interests once put him in black tie three times in one weekend.

Bless his heart, she says, he went willingly.

Bless her heart, he says, she'll strap on high heels and climb into his Dodge Ram. "The first time she was ever in my pickup in her mink coat, I said, 'There's got to be a country song in here somewhere.'"

Rom's best friend since kindergarten, State Sen. Gilda Jacobs (D-Huntington Woods), says she figured out how in tune Rom and Davis were on a just-girls trip to Russia in July. They had wanted to be out of town for Rom's first anniversary as a widow.

"Barbara went through these emotional highs and lows," Jacobs says, "crying about missing Marty, then wanting to be able to talk to Ron." Ultimately, Rom found herself eager to get home.

Two-party marriage

Rom's nephew lives in Philadelphia, and that's where her family gathered for Thanksgiving. She and Davis had been talking about getting married, and now they had a location -- and a secret.

Until a few days before the event, only Jacobs knew. Then Jacobs told her husband. Everyone else walked into a hotel restaurant the night before the holiday expecting a normal dinner.

The Four Seasons found a priest and rabbi willing to perform an interfaith wedding. Rom went online and

ordered the chuppah, the canopy under which the ceremony takes place. Then Rom's mother, Mollie Kahn, walked in and noticed a different piece of fabric: "Why is Ron in a tuxedo?"

Jacobs was assigned to Kahn, "to make sure she was OK with this whole thing." Initially, the senator detected elements of apprehension. "But by the end of the night," she says, "her mom was making toasts."

Their first anniversary will be Nov. 21. As for their other significant date, it's Feb. 7 -- the date Romney spoke in Detroit, and the date a year later he suspended his campaign.

Davis would still rather buy an iPhone than throw his support to Clinton. On the other hand, he's told Jacobs that if she ever chases a statewide office, he'll run her campaign in Milford.

Mary Matalin, who along with James Carville forms the nation's best known two-party marriage, has developed a standard line about how she deals with their differences. "I don't listen to him," she says.

Wrong approach, Rom says.

"We still have spirited discussions," she explains. "We just don't have *mean*-spirited discussions."

For all the ways they're different, that's the bedrock of their common ground.

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