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High school sweethearts celebrate day of love

by Tamar Rankins | The Saginaw News
Thursday February 14, 2008, 9:30 AM

The Revs. Ronald E. and Phyllis M. Chipp not only serve in the ministry together, they also share a love that blossomed in high school.



David A. Sommers | The Saginaw News

The Revs. Ronald E. Chipp, 51, and Phyllis M. Chipp of Saginaw have been married 30 years. They are with Faith Harvest Church.

The couple, pastors of Faith Harvest Church, 1734 N. Mason in Saginaw, met at their alma mater, Detroit's Cass Technical High when Ronald Chipp was a senior and the former Phyllis Martin was a junior. He graduated in 1974, and she graduated in 1975.

A mutual friend introduced the pair at a bus stop on their way to school 35 years ago. Today, Valentines Day, they join couples around the world in celebrating the bonds of love.

"We have always walked in a strong sense of agreement, even at young age," said Phyllis Chipp. "We had vision and talked about the will of God for our lives and for the future."

Classmates.com, an online social network service, polled its more than 40 million members and found that more than 90 percent of respondents think of their first love on Valentine's Day. In all, 20 percent of respondents met their first love in school.

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Unfortunately, love isn't all that's needed to keep a marriage intact, experts say. Couples must work on their marriage as they would any other relationship. Open communication and careful consideration of each other's feelings are two keys to a happy marriage.

While the Chipps, both 51, appreciate the celebration of Valentine's Day, they put more value on their everyday expressions of love.

"We're glad for Valentine's Day because it allows couples to focus on their relationships, but we do this all the time. Every day we do something special, and we have so much fun," Ronald Chipp said.

"We feel like teenagers. We enjoy the big and the small things in life," Phyllis Chipp said. "Being together makes life absolutely fun."

Their children are the Rev. Aaron Chipp, 22, a youth pastor at Faith Harvest Church, and Autumn Chipp, 20, a junior at Central Michigan University.

"I believe that our oneness affected the mindset of our children," Ronald Chipp said. "My son is engaged to his high school sweetheart, and my daughter is dating hers."

While the Chipps' romance started early, it has withstood the test of time. In September, the high school sweethearts, who live in Saginaw, will celebrate their 31st anniversary. Their secret?

"Over the years we have supported and watched out for each other's dreams. That has been vital in of our relationship. Because we placed God first and valued character, God gave us the grace to support each other and face anything," Ronald Chipp said.

Phyllis Chipp added, "It's important to see the good in the relationship; majoring in strengths and minoring in weakness. We see the humor in life even in difficult circumstances. The key is laughter. We're always laughing."

The couple studied engineering together at the University of Detroit, where Ronald Chipp received his bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and Phyllis Chipp received her bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. Both graduated in 1982.

They attended Word of Faith International School of Ministry in Detroit together, and started Faith Harvest Church in Saginaw together in 1995. Through initiatives aimed at global missions, the pair has preached in Paris, London, Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan and French Guiana in South America. They have established a medical clinic in Uganda and have churches in Uganda, Tanzania and French Guiana.

Encouragement keeps relationships healthy, said Shelly Schaefer-Hinck, a professor in the Communication and Dramatic Arts Department at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant.

"Satisfied relationships have the ability to engage in supportive communication and strategies that meet the need of the other individual," she said. "As relationships get older, they stay together because they're able to adjust communication strategies to meet the needs of the other partner."

Saginaw residents Ronald Stanley and Anesha Jones also caught the love bug at Saginaw High.

Stanley, 24, was a senior; Jones, 23, was a junior when they met. They started off as friends, which eventually led to their 2005 engagement. The couple plans to marry June 14.

"We really didn't notice each other in high school. When I found out who she was, I was really interested in her," said Stanley, who graduated from Saginaw High in 2001 and played professional football for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Now working as a youth counselor in Saginaw, he finds out Saturday if he makes



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the All American Football League supplemental draft.

"Anesha was different; she wasn't like all the other girls."

Stanley's involvement as a college and professional athlete and Jones' college responsibilities separated the couple, but the distance brought them closer, said Jones, a 2002 Saginaw High graduate.

Stanley graduated in 2004 with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Michigan State University, while Jones attended Delta College before graduating last year with a bachelor's degree in journalism from MSU. She bakes cakes through her home-based business, Sweet Creations Bakery.

"Absence really does make the heart grow fonder. We were patient enough to wait for each other," Jones said.

"We had two different paths, but we made it work. When we were together, we didn't have time to argue and bicker. We relished our time together and made it joyful because our time was precious."

Research shows that distance plays a role in relationship satisfaction, Schaefer-Hinck said.

"Before, it was more difficult to have long-distance relationships because people relied on phones and letters," she said. "Now it's easier to communicate because we have e-mail, cell phones and webcams. All of this helps couples stay connected with another."

Jones said prayer also helps sustain their relationship.

"We always pray together on the phone when we were away from each other," she said. "We put God in the center of the relationship, and He gave us a grace to get through things together. Our love has stood the test of time."

"I look back at how he was the varsity football star, and I was the varsity cheerleader. We had a divine connection even back then."

Now that Stanley has returned to Saginaw and Jones graduated from college, the couple is anticipating their upcoming wedding and are eager to celebrate Valentine's Day.

Stanley calls himself the "master of surprises."

"I always pull off something special when she least expects it," he said. "I might even do something the day before. I really get a chance to express my true feelings."



Jeff Schrier | The Saginaw News

Saginaw residents Ronald Stanley, 24, and Anesha Jones, 23, have been a couple since they were students at Saginaw High School. They are holding a small rug they had made during high school which Anesha keeps in a box of mementos and letters.

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