

They're happy they didn't meet until the right time

By KELLIE PATRICK GATES
Philadelphia Inquirer

Ashley Alibrando and Matt Chimento, now both 26, grew up hearing stories about each other. She lived in Mount Ephraim, he in neighboring Haddon Heights, but they had mutual friends, including Ashley's cousin Beau.

"There were probably times when we'd been at the same parties, or in the same group hanging out," Ashley said. None are memorable because they would not have had much to talk about back then.

She was a cheerleader who took the homecoming crown. He was a skateboarder who bleached his long hair blond.

"Thank God, we didn't officially meet back then - we would have probably despised each other," Ashley said. Matt agrees.

After graduating from Camden Catholic High School, Matt went to work as a building materials salesman. After Audubon High School, Ashley went to Rutgers University in New Brunswick to study business marketing.

On her 20th birthday, Ashley walked through her apartment door and into a surprise party. Diana, another mutual friend, had invited Matt, who brought his friend Ryan as wingman.

Matt "was sitting on my desk chair with the largest bottle of Grey Goose he could find," Ashley remembered. She recognized him, but he sure looked different. "He had a nice haircut, and he was dressed nice," she said.

They introduced themselves to each other and talked a little that night. The next weekend, Ashley was home for Easter when Diana invited her to a small house party. Matt had asked Diana to bring Ashley. "She's beautiful, and she just seemed like my personality type - very outgoing, very fun, very personable," he said.

"We all sat around and talked," Ashley remembered. "When we were going to leave, (Matt) walked me out and asked if we could exchange numbers."

When Ashley came down the stairs at the start of the ceremony, she was honored to hear her guests gasp. But Ashley wanted this moment to be special for her and Matt, so she asked the officiant to have the guests remain seated. She wanted to be sure she and Matt could see each other.

Part of Matt's sales territory was in North Jersey, and he called Ashley the next time he was near her college and asked her to lunch at Chili's.

"I thought I was so badass because I had a fake ID and was able to get a margarita," Ashley said. But her confidence wavered as she heard Matt's side of the sales calls he had to take during lunch. "He was a little more grown up than I was," she said. "He was someone who I was aspiring to be, a professional with a career."

Ashley could see why Matt is good at sales. He was easy to talk to and incredibly nice to be around.

She didn't eat much of her salad, so she asked for a to-go box. "I spilled the whole thing," she said.

"She got egg on me, and salad on herself and all over the table," Matt elaborated.

"He just laughed at me. And I laughed at myself," Ashley said.

"I wanted to get to know her more," Matt said.

Things went so well from then on that Matt moved in with Ashley during her last year at Rutgers. The summer after her junior year, she interned with a major pharmaceutical company. They hired her, and after graduation in 2008, the couple moved back to South Jersey. Ashley moved in with her parents, Mark and Cheryl, and Matt with his, Ron and Andi. But not for long. In 2010, they bought a home in Gloucester City.

How does forever sound? The couple spent five days at Disney for Ashley's 25th birthday in April 2011. The night they returned, friend Sean picked them up at the airport. The three walked into the couple's home to shouts of "Surprise!" from family and friends.

Everyone sang, and then someone brought out the cake, still in its box. Ashley opened the lid. Instead of wishing her a Happy Birthday, the icing script asked, "Will you marry me?"

Matt knelt beside her and held out the ring he had had made with her late grandma June's diamond. June had met Matt before she died, and she loved him - and his dark-eyed Italian good looks. She left Ashley her ring, and Ashley asked her mother to keep it so she wouldn't know when Matt asked for it.

Matt's and Ashley's mothers were in on the whole thing, and helped plan the party. "We're both close to our families, and so I wanted it to be a family thing," Matt said.

It was so them

Matt and Ashley held their wedding and reception for 175 at Cescaphe Ballroom. For two Italian Catholics to not marry in the church was "a little taboo," Ashley said. But they wanted to personalize their ceremony, and as a bonus, it meant less traveling for Matt's 96-year-old grandfather, Carmen.

Ashley wanted to create a feeling of elegance and luxury. Two huge, potted curly willow trees were filled with roses and crystals and lanterns hung everywhere. Guests walked in on a red carpet and were greeted by photographers. Ashley used the photos to make thank-you cards. Instead of a guest book, guests filled out wedding Mad Libs, with sentences like, "When I first heard this couple was getting married, I shouted _____."

A good number of people filled that line with something akin to "It's about time!"

Ashley's father, an avid guitar

rist, played "Make You Feel My Love" during the ceremony. To symbolize their union, the couple poured two glasses into one goblet, then both drank from the goblet.

Journeys of the Heart officiant Al Vernacchio asked Ashley and Matt to write down the things they love about each other and revealed them during the wedding. Ashley wrote that Matt makes her laugh and keeps her grounded. Matt wrote that Ashley is the most beautiful person he knows, inside and out.

Matt loves golf and the couple's signature drink was an Arnold Palmer spiked with vodka. A friend of Ashley's got Palmer himself to sign one of their wedding invitations as a gift.

When Ashley was born, her father wrote a song for her called "Ashley Rose." He made a record-

ing of it and they danced to it for the father-daughter dance. Matt and his mother danced to Carrie Underwood's "Mama's Song."

This was unexpected

After the couple was pronounced husband and wife, one man stood up among the guests and began to sing "Happy Together." Matt wondered what on earth was happening. Then someone else stood, and another and another. Soon the guests were dancing at their seats. Ashley had secretly hired West Chester's A Capella Pops.

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and Matt could see each other.

As Matt saw the details of his wedding day unfold, he was incredibly impressed with all that Ashley had done. "If she puts that much effort into our marriage, I'm going to be the happiest man alive," he said.

Discretionary spending

A bargain: Their photographer was relatively new to the wedding business and gave the couple a price that was less than half of what other photographers charged.

The splurge: The dress. Ashley saw a video of it being worn down the runway and had to have it. She met designer Lazaro Perez at a trunk show and he sketched her in the dress. She blew her budget by \$3,000, but recouped half the gown's cost by selling it to another bride.

Search for wedding venue begins

By OLIVIA HUBERT-ALLEN
The Baltimore Sun

And so the wedding planning process begins.

I told myself I'd wait until after the holidays to really start thinking about it. "I want to savor my engagement."

I replied to anyone who asked about a date and location. And, for a while, that worked. I decorated our tree without a wedding care, ignored dozens of bridal salons as I checked off every last person on my Christmas list and (what probably required the most will power) avoided the wedding section of Pinterest.

But when I talked with friends, it felt like I was in an echo chamber of anxiety.

"Venues book up so fast!" "You better set a budget!" "How many people do you plan on?"

"Where will the wedding be?"

All the questions stressed me out and turned this seemingly-manageable task into a gargantuan one.

I only know of one way to put my mind at ease when I get stressed (that doesn't involve a few shots of tequila, anyway), and that is to get to work. So I've been spending my free time recently doing extensive online research on venues. The only thing I've learned so far? Sam and I are a lot pickier than we like to pretend.

On the wish list: Somewhere with a nice ceremony space or in close proximity to the church I've been attending.

No ballrooms, unless it doesn't really look like ballroom.

Tents are OK, but we'd prefer the reception be indoors so

weather isn't a factor. (Which I realize is a bit of a contradiction with the "no ballrooms" request.)

The place can't feel like a wedding factory.

Wanted: Unexpected, modern or scenic spaces. Not wanted: Anything that feels cliché.

Reasonably priced. (Even if you've got the cash to spend, should you?)

It's a lot to navigate, especially considering many venues don't list prices on their website. And to make things even more tricky, there is a wide range of what comes included in the bottom line price. Linens? Chairs? Food? A wedding coordinator? A tent? One place I'm looking at requires you hire a parking attendant, while another spot includes everything but liquor in the base price.

My only piece of advice so far: Learn to love Microsoft Excel.



Dave Gardner
Stills Image

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