

# MAKING *it* OFFICIAL

For some couples, commitment comes first  
— marriage comes later

BY CAROL JANKOWSKI

When a couple lives together for a decade or more, even their families stop hinting at marriage.

Later, however, some longtime couples surprise everyone by deciding to make it official. And as two area couples describe, the marriage ceremony has a profound effect.

Kitchener-based musicians Justyna Szajna and Lance Ouellette met on the University of Toronto campus in 1996. He can still picture the day, sitting on a bench listening to a friend talk about a second-year piano student who needed an accompanist, when “just then she walked by in a nice skirt, heels, carrying books.” They became friends, then “more than friends” as Szajna puts it, yet 18 years went by before they married.

High school teacher Kelly Wood and Kitchener firefighter Mike Zarzycki met in 2004 when he dropped off a couple of Wood’s friends at her house. There may not have been an instant connection, but there was enough spark that he asked a mutual friend to find out if Wood would go out with him. He had tickets to see “Mamma Mia!” in Toronto and wanted to take her.

Wood said yes, partly because she had noticed that he had liked her dogs, two

Airedales and a Norwich terrier.

“It wasn’t a done deal” at that point, she recalls. Zarzycki was separated, not divorced, and had two children, now 20 and 23. It would be 12 years before they got married.

The career focus and lifestyles of these two couples are different, but there are common elements as they talk about why they got married.



PHOTOGRAPHY • GREG MCLAUGHLIN



PHOTOGRAPHY • TOMASZ ADAMSKI

Retired Kitchener firefighter Mike Zarzycki and teacher Kelly Wood have owned their property on the Conestogo River since 2009, but a wedding wasn’t in the cards until last summer. At left, they arrive for the wedding celebration in an antique firetruck.

The “Mamma Mia!” date went well for Wood and Zarzycki. They began spending a lot of time together.

Five years passed. They travelled and shared a large circle of friends. In October 2009, they both sold their houses to buy one overlooking the Conestogo River and settled in. Marriage was never really mentioned, although Wood remembers a holiday when, sitting beside him to watch the sun set over the Grand Canyon, she thought: “He should ask me right now to marry him.”

It didn’t happen. Zarzycki’s thinking at the time was: “Kelly’s a great girl, we’re very compatible. Let’s just live together.”

It would be several years before he really took to heart what she had missed by not marrying or having children, and how important marriage was to her.

On a cruise to St. Maarten with her parents, he said, “Let’s go shopping” and they chose a diamond ring together. Still no proposal, however. Was the ring a pretty piece of jewelry, but nothing more? Wood

wondered.

When they returned to the ship, Zarzycki asked for her father’s approval of a marriage. They even explored a wedding at sea with the ship’s captain presiding. Then they learned the cost of that romantic notion: “They give you a bottle of wine and a couple of pictures and it costs US\$6,500,” Zarzycki says.

Getting married at home became more appealing. Although there never was a formal proposal from Zarzycki, “he did take the reins on the whole wedding thing,” Wood says.

Having already renovated the inside of their house, they worked hard last summer to finish landscaping the quarter-acre property, planting gardens and building an outdoor stone fireplace, underlit waterfall and L-shaped granite-topped outdoor bar.

Some 150 friends and family were invited to a party in July 2016 for which Zarzycki hired a band, arranged for serving staff, obtained a noise exemption until midnight

and rented a big tent. Knowing their septic system couldn’t handle so many celebrants, he also brought in a nicely finished air-conditioned trailer outfitted with hardwood floors and three separate washrooms. At the last minute, he ran out to buy a huge tarp to provide a covered walkway in case of rain.

Wood’s friends volunteered their creative services, decorating a carrot cake and arranging swags of white flowers and hosta leaves around the property. Her dad made the wine.

Not everyone knew about the rest of their plans. The day before the party, close family members watched as the couple exchanged wedding vows by the outdoor fireplace, Wood in a wedding gown. Guelph officiant Don Perron told guests: “We’re here to celebrate what is, not what will be.” A gourmet food truck catered.

At 7 p.m. the following day, the party guests gathered on the road outside their home to watch the newlyweds arrive in an antique firetruck. Overhead, a friend’s

drone videotaped their entrance.

Wood’s cousin, a Peterborough caterer, presided over a carving station to serve beef on a bun. A moonlighting bus driver shuttled guests back and forth to hotels in St. Jacobs until about 1 a.m. It was 4:30 a.m. when the last guests left.

“Four or five years ago, talking about if we were going to do this, Kelly said, ‘Let’s just go to Vegas to get married,’” Zarzycki recalls. “But I wanted something more special for her.”

Zarzycki, 60, retired from the fire department last June and is now focused on his home and commercial sprinkler business. For Wood, 53, this is her final year of teaching art and photography, and she’s open to whatever possibilities retirement brings. She will continue breeding Norwich terriers and occasionally train and exhibit show dogs for other owners.

As for what marriage changed, Wood gives a light-hearted reply: “I never knew how to introduce Mike. ‘Boyfriend’ seemed wrong

for a middle-aged man and ‘hubby’ didn’t quite work either. Now I like being able to say ‘husband.’ ”

Lance Ouellette and Justyna Szajna saw each other around campus and played sonatas together, but it was a year before they paired up. Then Ouellette moved to the United States to study and they all but lost touch. In 2000, he came back, they began full-on dating and eventually moved in together.

Music is their life, and they work hard at it. “You have to be competitive to be a musician,” Szajna says. “I find I’m always struggling to be my best self.”

In 2002-03, they came to Waterloo to take a post-graduate artists’ diploma as a piano and violin duo. Ouellette joined the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, and he and Szajna started travelling abroad for performances and competitions. Both are on the music faculty at the University of Waterloo’s Conrad Grebel College.

For two years, Szajna commuted to Western University for a master’s in music, and she is the founder of a Yoga for Musicians program. Musicians are prone to repetitive strain injuries. “I went on a tour with Lance and it was taxing,” she says. “On the bus, on the road, play the concert, back on the bus and on to the next city.”

They both teach private students at their home, and Szajna also teaches at the Beckett School of Music at Laurier. “I like the interaction with students,” she says. “I think I’m good at what I’m doing with the kids. Constant practice is lonely, and I need the social interaction of teaching.”

Their hobbies are solo pursuits in which they compete against themselves to always do better, including fly-fishing, golf and backpacking. Ouellette also plays table tennis.

Over the years, they’d talk about marriage, but Ouellette felt strongly that he didn’t want to marry until they could cover all the costs themselves.

Szajna wondered what type of wedding



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PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS  
Musicians Lance Ouellette and Justyna Szajna have been in a serious relationship since 2000, but it wasn't until 2014 that they made it official, complete with a celebration on a Puerto Vallarta beach.



PHOTO • EVA SICA, AVE SOL PHOTOGRAPHY

would suit them. A simple city hall ceremony didn't feel quite right, and they both wanted to travel more.

By 2013, Szajna, secure in their commitment, had stopped talking about marriage. Ouellette noticed, and that's when he found himself thinking: "Things in our life were settling down, everyone in our families is healthy, so why not make it official?" For him, it got to be: "Why wouldn't we be married?" instead of "Why would we?"

He chose a ring and spoke to Szajna's father about marrying her. By the time the family gathered for Christmas dinner in 2013, everyone at the table except Justyna knew he planned to propose.

His proposal was formal: "One knee, the whole nine yards," Ouellette says. "For me it was really important to leave no stone unturned." He popped the question in the kitchen the morning of New Year's Eve. Szajna thinks she was probably wearing pyjamas.

They agreed they didn't want stress or drama. They decided on a beach wedding Dec. 30, 2014, in Puerto Vallarta. Twenty relatives and friends would be their guests

### CHANGING TIMES

Pat Fretwell, owner of Feelings From the Heart Wedding Chapel in Kitchener City Hall, has been marrying people since 2002, but it was 2016 when she noticed an increase in bookings by people who had been together 10 or 20 years.

She doesn't keep a lot of statistics, nor does she ask a lot of questions, but she's happy to muse about the topic.

"Perhaps it's the state of the world today that they just want to be sure their commitment is solidified," Fretwell says. "They want to have a piece of paper to show it. Common-law doesn't seem like quite enough."

And for such couples, her service includes an extra few words: "We are not here to mark the start of a relationship, we are here to recognize a bond that already exists ..."

for a week, and Szajna made all the plans by talking to just two people: a hotel staffer and a photographer.

Not wanting the trouble of translating Mexican documents, on Dec. 18, 2014, the couple went with their witnesses to the wedding chapel in Kitchener City Hall for an official Canadian ceremony. The wedding in Mexico would be the celebratory occasion their families had waited for.

Szajna ended up with three wedding gowns. The first didn't seem right once she had it at home and alterations made it even worse. The second was to be the dress she'd change into after the ceremony. In the end, she loved the third dress so much she didn't wear the second one.

Ouellette waited until a week before the wedding to look for his outfit and couldn't find a traditional store that carried white suits in December. That's when he walked into a small shop on King Street East in Kitchener and walked out \$300 later with three three-piece suits in white, tan and black. He'd wear whichever one looked best with Szajna's gown.

For an hour prior to the ceremony, the hotel turned off its usual beach music so a recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations could be played. Afterward, as the photographer led them along a public beach, Mexicans cheered, shouting "Beso. Beso."

Their relationship now feels "more traditional," Szajna, 40, says. "It has deepened, strengthened our connection. We've been best friends for a long time, but it's not just music that binds us." Before, not wanting to disrespect the institution of marriage by referring to him as her husband, "I wondered what I could call him. Now I really like introducing him as my husband."

"There is a difference, a certainty about it," Ouellette, 38, agrees. "Everything seems more concrete."

It took time for Szajna to get used to playing the piano with a ring on her finger. She still tells students to keep their fingers bare, but when one challenged her, she had to admit she doesn't take her ring off.

"The ring is a symbol of everything we've been through together," Ouellette says. 

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