

Sisters couple marks long road to 50 years

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

Bill and Zoe Willitts celebrated 50 years of marriage on November 24. They'll be the first to tell you, the long road has not been an easy one.

"It's amazing, because we shouldn't be married!" Zoe told *The Nugget*. "Everything we did, we did backwards."

The couple sat down with *The Nugget* last week in hopes of providing a little encouragement to other couples — on the theory that if Bill and Zoe could make it work, despite obstacles of circumstance and temperament, others can, too.

Bill and Zoe met in high school in San Anselmo when she was just 16. They shared a driver's ed class, and a friend of Bill's — posing as Bill — called Zoe and expressed interest in asking her out. After that, Zoe couldn't figure out why Bill wasn't paying more attention to her. He thought she was flirting with him.

"He wasn't really that interested in me, actually," Zoe recalled. "But I really liked him. I thought he was really cute."

The turning point came when Bill was supposed to fight a college boy in a classic off-in-the-hills showdown. Things looked bleak for young Willitts as dozens of kids gathered to witness the donnybrook.

"Here comes this big

bruiser and he's gonna hit Bill," Zoe recalled. "So I jumped on his back 'cause I thought that would help Bill."

Bill describes that fateful leap as resembling "a feral cat." The fight fizzled and the relationship took a spark.

But that tendency to do things backwards kicked in right away. Bill got Zoe pregnant — and, man, that was all she wrote. Initially, they gave their daughter Shannon up for adoption, but the foster family that was supposed to adopt got cold feet and they ended up taking her back. Shannon would be the first of five children.

The couple got married. Zoe was 17; Bill 19, and still full of wild oats.

"I was playing house," Zoe recalled of those early days. "I just wanted to get married and have kids."

Bill was still sowing those wild oats, and he was often in petty trouble. He was working as a plumber, before joining the family business, Willitts Designs and Collectibles, which he would eventually turn into a major designer and importer.

Success came, but the marriage struggled. There was a lot of passion there, but it was often expressed as anger in what Bill describes as the typical arguments over finances and time.

The couple separated for nine months, and actually filed for divorce. But the divorce did not work out.

Why? They're not entirely sure.

"I just think there's something magical," Zoe said. "I don't know."

"I really couldn't find anybody like her," Bill said of the months apart. "She's a bit unplugged, but she's authentic and she's fun. I'm still very passionate about her. I love everything about her."

Some dear friends made a significant impact for the couple.

"The mentors came and we were just smart enough to pay attention," Bill says.

Jim and Jeanette Turrini modeled success as a couple and Bill wanted to know the trick.

"They gave us the trick," Bill said. "And it's so simple: Never give up. I needed their wisdom. It's just too easy to throw up your hands... I think it's just too easy to give up."

He falls back on one of his mother's favorite sayings: "The sugar is at the bottom of the cup."

Another turning point came through the radio, from a country song — "Meet in



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Over 50 years, Bill and Zoe Willitts have learned to "meet in the middle."

the Middle."

Bill acknowledges that he wants to get his way and that he can flash angry when thwarted. He realized that he didn't always have to be "right," and that he was "sick of having the same five

arguments."

He and Zoe took the song to heart and Bill began to work on meeting in the middle, "instead of selling my side and pushing it on her and

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