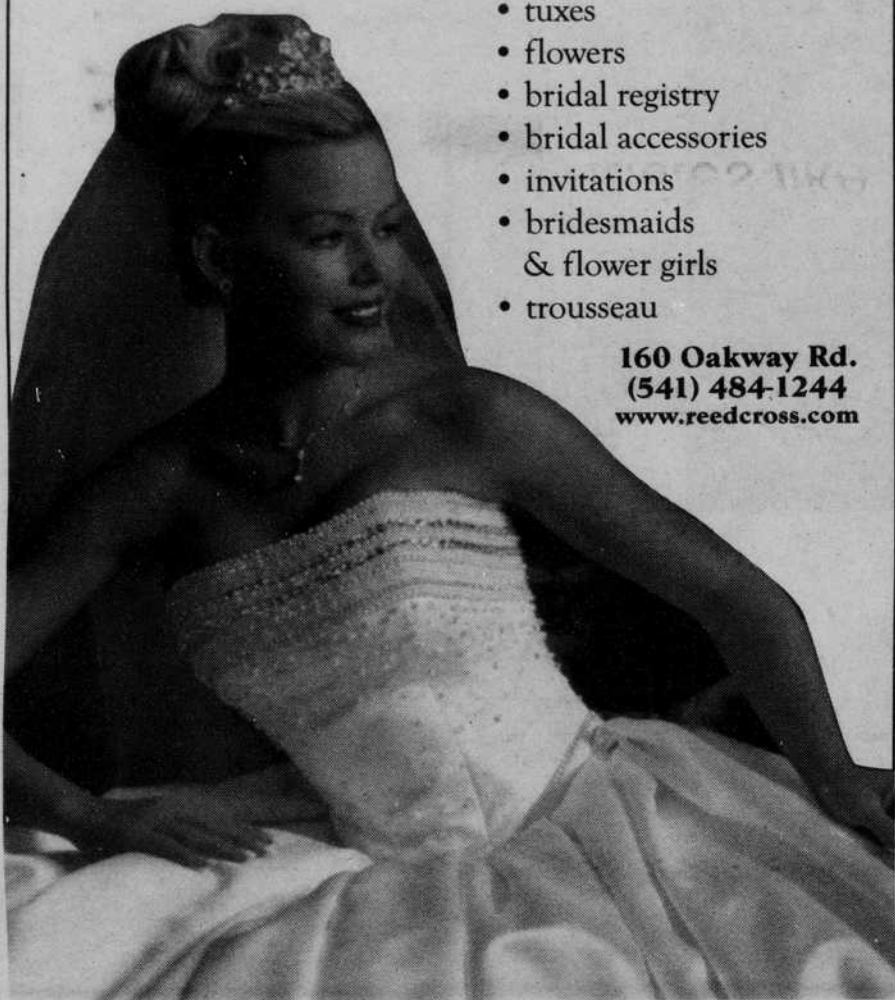


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Azle Malinao-Alvarez Emerald

Shasta Willson (left) and JuLeah Huckstep are planning a Sept. 9 wedding ceremony at the Campbell Senior Citizen Center on the Willamette River. The University students are shown here at one of their favorite campus locations. The women met four years ago at RideAble, a non-profit equestrian organization.

Wedding goes beyond traditional coupling

■ A local lesbian couple shares their plans for a Sept. 9 wedding celebration

By Jack Clifford
Oregon Daily Emerald

Shasta Willson and JuLeah Huckstep don't want to be perceived as trailblazers. The two University students also aren't rabble rousers.

And please, don't call the two women "spunky gals" — especially the highly active Huckstep, who gets around campus and town using a wheelchair.

No, these two women are just another couple in love, going crazy over the planning for that big day, their Sept. 9 wedding.

"We're not doing this for a tax break or to gain residency status," Willson says. "We're doing it because we want to very visibly make this commitment to each other in front of friends and family to express to them that this relationship is different than all of the other ones we've been in."

"Still, the next morning we're going to wake up, roll over, look at each other and go, 'You're my wife!'"

Of course, Willson, 29, and Huckstep, 31, won't be joined in legal matrimony. Although the Hawaiian and Vermont state governments have teased the gay and lesbian community with talk of legalizing marriage between two people of the same sex, the battle will only truly be won on the federal level.

"We fully intend to have a second wedding when it becomes legal, and we believe it will become legal in our lifetime," Huckstep says.

Until that day arrives, there's more pressing work to be done. Such as paring down a 300-name guest list to 150 people, picking out invitations, finding a photographer who is comfortable being involved with a lesbian wedding and every other planning task involved in the process.

In order to maintain a reasonable budget — "Martha Stewart has this plan on how to pull off a simple wedding for \$100,000 or less; that's not us," Huckstep says with a smile — the pair is taking a do-it-yourself approach. They'll grow their own bridal flowers, cook their own food for the reception and are gleaning tips from just about every bride's magazine available.

They have chosen the Campbell Senior Center on the Willamette River as the ceremony site, and a rabbi from Temple Beth Israel will perform the post-sundown Saturday service, avoiding conflict with Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath.

Candlelight is an important component of that day, so Willson and Huckstep have been busy designing their own.

"When we watch 'The X-Files' Sunday nights, we sit there with a pile of candles and dried flower petals, and we assemble candles," Willson says. "This whole

process kind of permeates our lives."

In some ways, both women say, this wedding seemed inevitable from the time they first met almost four years ago.

Huckstep, a senior in the Family and Community Services program, is a volunteer coordinator for RideAble, a non-profit equestrian organization designed to help keep folks with disabilities in the saddle. Until recently, Willson, who is nearing completion of her master's degree in computer information science, volunteered a lot of her time at the stable, grooming and exercising the horses.

An after-work date 18 months ago cemented the simmering love both women felt toward each other.

"For a long time, I thought that JuLeah was my newest best friend, and I thought that was what this relationship was going to be," Willson says. "Then one day it occurred to me that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her."

So, the two designed their own engagement rings, then drove to Mount Shasta in California last March for a preplanned proposal ritual. They officially announced their marital intentions to family members this past Christmas.

Both families have been supportive of the decision, and the couple has battled any obstacles society has thrown in front of them with an "Oh well" attitude. Not long ago, they point out, mixed race and mixed religious faith marriages were prohibited, so they know certain individuals will always be prone to narrow-mindedness.

"There are people who harbor prejudices and stereotypes, and I don't think it would matter much who we are or what we are, we would piss off somebody," Huckstep says.

Huckstep says her official diagnosis after a car accident five years ago was "multiple broken stuff," so her being in a wheelchair brings another complication to the relationship.

Neither woman sees this aspect as a big problem, however.

"JuLeah could have grown up in another country and speak another language, then we'd have a different set of issues to deal with," Willson says. "Every couple has something like that that they have to figure out."

Creating a family environment with Willson's son Slate, who's almost six years old, and party plans are the focal points for now. These do-it-yourself types have less than eight months to go before they can finally relax and maybe even enjoy a honeymoon on the Oregon Coast, riding horses and ordering room service.

"Shasta is very creative, very artistic, and we're going to rely on that heavily to get us through this," Huckstep says.

"And JuLeah is very good at actually getting things done, where I tend to fall down a little," Willson adds. "We make a good team."



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