Outside Weddings

OPTIONS TO THE TRADITIONAL CHURCH CEREMONY.

by Eric Qualheim

On a clear August day, two people step onto a tiny island in a decorative pond teaming with bright orange fish; these two will be married among the gentle chanting of the assembled guests. A traditional wedding it isn't — the bride wears white, the groom wears Birkenstocks.

When Shanti and Caspar Zimmermann decided to tie the knot, the pair knew they were going to need something a little different in terms of their wedding ceremony. Walking down the center aisle of a stuffy church wearing a dress covered in lace was not Shanti Zimmermann's vision of the most important day of her life.

For Zimmermann, there was only one aspect of traditional weddings that appealed to her: being surrounded by friends and family on the big day. Family from as near as Oregon and as far as Switzerland flew to Van Nuys, Calif. for the wedding. The ceremony took place in the back yard of a friend, and was officiated by Linda Lavaneri, a member of the Eckankar clergy. Eckankar is "the religion of the light and sound of God."

"She could do the ceremony legally," Zimmerman says. "And I was absolutely happy with the way it turned out."

The Zimmermanns chose Lavaneri because she is a close friend of the bride's mother, and as Zimmerman points out, "She is a beautiful person who I look up to and admire for the person that she is."

For many people, the personal touch of being married by a family friend or relative is an important part of the wedding process. Today there are more choices than ever for those looking for someone to officiate at their wedding. "If a church wedding with your family minister is what you want, go for it!" she says. "But there is a choice."

Marle Hoehne, clerical supervisor of Lane County Deeds and Records, explains that several types of people are authorized to perform weddings. First, any judicial officer of the state may perform a wedding ceremony. This includes judges, justices of the peace and county clerks, as well as their deputies. Lane County clerks can perform civil ceremonies weekdays at the Lane County Courthouse for a modest fee. Services can be scheduled when a couple applies for their marriage license.

Religious congregations and clergymen from any religious organizations may also solemnize a marriage. According to Hoehne, his office receives marriage certificates from weddings officiated by all kinds of people. However, Oregon law states that if a marriage is not performed by a state official, the officiate must be connected to some type of church. "If a person presents themselves as clergy, or their religious organization says they can perform a marriage, you're probably all right," Hoehne says.

This sets the stage for those wanting a friend or family member to perform the ceremony. The Universal Life Church (ULC) will ordain anyone with a few free minutes to fill out the online form. Since 1959, ULC has been remotely ordaining people, first through the mail and now over the Internet.

"I don't make any judgments on the validity of the church," Hoehne says. However, some states do take issue with ULC. North Carolina is just one state where people ordained by ULC cannot legally perform marriages. However, the ULC, whose slogan is "To Live and Help Live," is currently a recognized religious entity in Oregon.

PHOTO BY JON ANDRESS

Reverend Joan Mawhirter, an ordained minister of the Church of Religious Sciences, isn't fond of ULC either. "They don't always know what they are doing," she says. "They are making it harder for the rest of us." Mawhirter worries that more restrictions on who can legally perform weddings will make it difficult for people to marry.

Of the nearly 3000 ceremonies she has performed, many of them have been for immigrants and people without church homes. At the Springfield Creative-Mind Science Center, Mawhirter provides an excellent alternative to anyone looking for a simple ceremony. "People can't afford the big church weddings anymore," says Mawhirter. She believes that anyone who wants to get married should be able to do so, as long as they go about it legally and through all the proper channels.

Occasionally, a couple will be ineligible to be married in their own church for one reason or another. Weddings On Call is another company Mawhirter works with that is dedicated to providing a less expensive alternative to traditional officiates and services. Weddings On Call allows couples to be married legally by an ordained reverend.

"If you come to me and want to get married, I feel that if you want to be married legally and in the eyes of God then no person should be in your way," she says. ew

Joan Mawhirter knows a little something about officiating at weddings. Mawhirter, a Reverend ordained by the Religious Sciences Church in Springfield, is the driving force behind Weddings On Call in Springfield.

Mawhirter estimates that in the 12 years she has been officiating weddings, she has performed more than 2,600 ceremonies. And she's seen everything.

Sitting in the shared offices of the Springfield Creative-Mind Science Center and Weddings On Call, Mawhirter recalls the time after performing a ceremony that the bride went home with someone other than her new husband.

"Weird things happen," she says.

Since she began her career as an officiate, Mawhirter has performed ceremonies everywhere from mountain tops to airplanes. "One popular spot is the lighthouse at Heceta Head," she says.

Some advice she offers to those planning their weddings is to reserve their locations — and the person they want to officiate — well in advance. Her summer schedule is already filling up. "Everyone will tell you June is the busiest month," Mawhirter says. "But it's August."

Another busy time is a little more surprising. "Everyone wants to get married on Halloween," Mawhirter says. "Halloween through Christmas is a busy time."

All kinds of people come to Mawhirter to get married. It's just as likely she'll marry a young couple as a pair of senior sweethearts. Lately she's seen a lot of young servicemen getting married before shipping out. "Especially the ones with babies," she says.

Mawhirter and the other officiates at Weddings to Go offer a wide range of services. A no frills, no reception wedding ceremony can cost as little as 30 dollars for those who bring in their marriage license on Mondays and Fridays between noon and 3 p.m. The on-site chapel holds up to 100 people for those wishing to pay for a larger ceremony.

Weddings On Call is located in Springfield at 130 N. 5th, or you can call (541) 747-7513.

— Eric Qualheim

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