

# Tying the Knot



PHOTO/LOUISE KRAFFT

Alison McKeever and Elizabeth Henry McKeever.

## *the* MUPPET *and the* MONK

BY DENISE DUNBAR

When Elizabeth Henry McKeever left Little Rock, Arkansas for college in North Carolina in 2004, she left behind a large circle of high school friends, many of whom stayed in state for college. A number of those friends attended Hendrix College, a small liberal arts school about 35 miles north of Little Rock.

At Hendrix, Alison McKeever got to know many of Elizabeth's old high school friends. Though it took seven years, that overlapping friend group ultimately

brought the two together, and Alison and Elizabeth married in 2014.

Though they didn't go on their first date until 2011, Elizabeth and Alison had heard of each other through those mutual friends for years.

"All of my high school friends became all of Alison's college friends," Elizabeth said. "So, we'd always heard about each other because they'd say, 'Elizabeth, you remind me so much of Alison.' [And to Alison], 'You remind me so much of Elizabeth.'"

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“I said, ‘Why do they keep talking about this Elizabeth girl?’” Alison said.

They said their paths had crossed a few times before they became a couple, but neither remembered much about the other from those encounters.

“We think we went on a hiking trip together,” Elizabeth said.

“Yeah, we think we met multiple times,” Alison said.

About that hike, Elizabeth said, “You totally were not there.”

“Yes, I planned that hiking trip,” Alison said.

Another time, they individually attended a party given by mutual friends.

“Someone said, ‘Everyone get together [for a picture],’” Elizabeth said. “And we were



**Left:** Alison and Elizabeth’s wedding bands were made by Elizabeth’s mother from her original engagement band and Alison’s mother’s wedding band. **Right:** For their engagement, Alison made a book that marked the milestones in their life together.



PHOTOS/LOUISE KRAFFT

the only people who didn’t know each other. They were like, ‘Put your arms around each other,’ and we were like, ‘Who are you?’ I can’t remember when that was though.”

“I think it was 2009,” Alison said. “[But] you made no impression on me whatsoever

at that time,” she laughed.

In 2011, the two finally got together.

Elizabeth had returned to Little Rock after living away for seven years attending college, then working in the non-profit world.

“I had just moved back to

Arkansas and was living in my parents’ attic,” Elizabeth said. “It was sort of sad. But I thought, ‘I’ll move back to Arkansas and give it six months, and if I don’t find a job, I’ll move to D.C.’ I had tons of friends in D.C. at that point.”

Alison was working as the summer director at Camp Mitchell – the camp for the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas that Elizabeth had grown up attending. Alison was about to leave the area to attend

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graduate school in Fayetteville that fall, but after years of hearing about Elizabeth and how much they had in common, she was determined to ask her out.

"I had just been trying to work up the courage to ask her on a date, and it didn't happen until my last week in town," Alison said.

They had seen more of each other during that summer as part of the larger group, and Alison had jokingly already asked Elizabeth to help her chaperone a youth group on a trip to Florida.

"We saw each other in July at a birthday party," Elizabeth said. "And you had asked me to go to Disneyworld with you, and I was like, 'No, I don't know you.'"

"I was not being serious," Alison retorted.

"No," Elizabeth agreed, "but I didn't know that. Alison was chaperoning a trip to 'Harry Potter World.' ... I was like, 'I don't think I'm going to go with a bunch of teenagers to Orlando, but thank you.'"

When Alison finally did ask Elizabeth out for drinks, Elizabeth had just finished her first week at a new job.

"I was like, 'Great, I need some friends,'" Elizabeth said. "She had been deathly ill."

"I had bronchitis," Alison said. "I went to the doctor and got a steroid shot, so I could go on a date."

"You were late for the date to get [the] steroid shot," Elizabeth said. "Because you were like, 'This is my last chance.' And then we got drinks and I was going to someone's birthday party and Alison was like, 'OK, I'll come too.'"

"That's also less creepy than it sounds," Alison laughed.

Elizabeth agreed, "Little Rock is a small town, and she



PHOTO/KATI MALLORY

Alison and Elizabeth married in D.C. in September 2014, and then had a blessing ceremony in their Arkansas church in October.

knew all these people. She was like, 'Oh yeah, you're going, that sounds great, I'll go too.' ... Then we went back and met up with our mutual friends at the same bar where we had started. And I thought, 'She's not leaving. Maybe this is not just a friend date?'"

After that first date, they decided to continue seeing each other while Alison was in graduate school.

"We were like, 'Why don't we try this out and see how it works.' And it kept working," Elizabeth said.

One of the many things the two had in common was a strong attachment to the Episcopal Church. Alison had grown up in Stillwater, Okla-

homa, where her English parents had moved in the 1980s so her father could teach at Oklahoma State University. She had grown up attending the Episcopal camp in Oklahoma.

Elizabeth also grew up attending church. She said, from an early age, the priesthood was on her radar.

"When I was in high school, I was one of those weirdos who really liked church and really felt like there was an important message of hope and redemption and light in a world that's really dark," Elizabeth said. "I was in the nonprofit sector before following this

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COURTESY PHOTO

Alison and Elizabeth with their son James near Halloween.

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call, and I thought, 'If there's any nonprofit institution that I care the most about, it's the church.'

Alison's future vocation as a children's librarian also became clear to Elizabeth during one of their early dates.

"Alison wooed me with a documentary she had been watching about the pedagogy behind Sesame Street and how it was designed to bring preschool to low income children," Elizabeth said.

That, combined with Elizabeth's call to the priesthood, led some of their friends to call them "the monk and the Muppet."

The Episcopal church requires pre-marital counseling, and when the two realized marriage was likely in their future, they decided to go through the counseling before making a commitment.

"By the time you decide to

get married, you need to have already talked through all of the things you talk through in premarital counseling," Elizabeth said. "So, we actually did our premarital counseling before we got engaged. We thought we needed some help talking through things like kids and family and what do we even understand marriage to be in this new age?"

Their counseling done, Alison and Elizabeth set an official engagement date, and they each planned a special surprise for the other.

"My part of the proposal was we went up to the camp ...," Elizabeth said. "I had a friend hide [a] picnic in the trunk of our car while we were at church so Alison didn't know."

Alison made a book of photos and captions that marked the milestones in their life together to that point and had it printed. It's called, "My Bee Charmer: An Engaging Story" because Elizabeth is a bee keeper.

The couple were married in D.C. on Sept. 6, 2014, and then had a blessing ceremony in their Arkansas church on Oct. 25, 2014.

"Instead of rushing to the courthouse [in Arkansas] and having our marriage contested, we knew if we got married in D.C. we could file our taxes together and all of that stuff," Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth's mother, who does metalworking as a hobby, made their matching wedding bands.

"She took the gold from her original engagement band," Elizabeth said.

"And my mom gave us her original wedding band," Alison added.

Elizabeth's mother melted down the rings, did the calculations to find the right composition and cast the rings, then stamped the insides with

their initials.

The two decided they wanted the same last name, and settled on McKeever for several reasons.

"We knew that I was likely to be the biological mother of our children," Elizabeth said, "So we thought it would be nice for our children to inherit my genes and Alison's last name and a strong link to her British heritage. Alison is also the last McKeever in her family line, so the name would have died out in her generation."

Having the same last name also made things easier from a practical perspective.

"I decided to change my name because I wanted to have the same last name as the rest of my future family, especially in a part of the country [Arkansas] where same sex families are still relatively uncommon," Elizabeth said.

They wound up in Alexandria after settling on the Virginia Theological Seminary as the place for Elizabeth to attend seminary. Alison took a job with the city as a librarian and works at the Duncan branch.

They decided to go ahead and start their family before Elizabeth began seminary. Their son James, now two-and-a-half, was born in 2016, just a couple of months after they arrived in Alexandria. Both Alison and Elizabeth said it's been wonderful to have a young child on the VTS campus, with its supportive community and acres of open space.

Elizabeth is a third-year student at VTS and is set to become a deacon in March, then graduate in May. While the McKeevers don't know what their future holds, they're excited to begin their next chapter, whatever and wherever it may be.

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PHOTO/LOUISE KRAFFT

## POLITICS AND IMPROVISATION: Mayor Justin Wilson and wife Alex weather the unexpected

BY DENISE DUNBAR

It likely comes as no surprise that Alexandria Mayor Justin Wilson met his wife, Alex Crawford-Batt, at a state Democratic convention while they both were in college.

They married three-and-a-half years later,

just four days after the 9/11 attacks. Politics and unexpected adversity would be a recurring theme for the couple.

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PHOTO/LOUISE KRAFFT

Justin Wilson and wife, Alex Crawford-Batt, at a scholarship fund gala.

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In March 1998, Justin was a student at Virginia Commonwealth University, while Alex attended the College of William & Mary. The first-year students were attending a Virginia Young Democrats convention in Richmond.

"We had a friend of ours who was a classmate of mine at VCU," Justin said.

"Who I became friends with at the convention," Alex added.

The friend decided to introduce the pair, thinking they might hit it off. They did, and a few months later, Alex was in Richmond for a meeting and she and Justin met for coffee.

"... I guess that was sort of our first official date, at a scuzzy diner in Richmond," Alex laughed. "We had a lot of weird coincidences, because we both grew up in [Northern Virginia] and knew a lot of the same peo-

ple at the same time but in different circles. There were a lot of parallels."

### A lot in common

One significant parallel was a connection to U.S. Rep. Don Beyer, who was Lieutenant Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia while they were in high school.

"I think our biggest commonality was that she babysat for Don Beyer growing up," Justin said.

"I babysat for his kids, while he was lieutenant governor," Alex interjected.

"And I was his page in the Virginia Senate," Justin continued.

"At one time, I remember [Beyer's] wife saying, 'Oh, you should meet his page some time. He's really cute,'" Alex said.

"It was one of the things we had in common and we were able to talk about it in the beginning," Justin said.

They also had places

with significance to their families in common. Justin had grown up mostly in Springfield and Alex on Duke Street in Alexandria. Both families loved Duck Chang's, Chesapeake Bay Seafood House and other Northern Virginia institutions.

"The hushpuppies," Justin said. "I miss the hushpuppies."

Another connection is that Justin lived with his parents in the same apartment building where good friends of Alex's parents lived. Alex said she visited the building frequently as a child.

"We were crossing paths there," Justin said.

Both Justin and Alex had been interested in politics from a young age.

"I've been working in politics probably since I was 10, working in polls and on campaigns," Justin said.

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“Ironically enough, both of my parents were federal employees and so that was back in the old days of the Hatch Act when it was a lot stricter. When my dad left the government, he got a little bit involved, and he brought me to a few things early on and that’s what got me involved.”

Alex became active in politics during high school.

“I was in T.C. Teen Dems at the time, and so I continued that in college with the Young Dems,” she said. “The irony is now that I work for the federal government, I don’t do anything political.”

Their political beginning and background helped Alex adjust when Justin was elected to Alexandria’s city council at age 28. Prior to running for council, Justin had been involved with the Del Ray Civic Association and the DASH board.

“It’s not like the campaign came out of the blue, or it wasn’t like a sudden thing that he was suddenly gone in the evenings,” Alex said. “It was kind of a transition that was sort of expected given that he’d already been so involved at that point. ... I can’t say I didn’t know what I was getting into when I started dating him, [because] we met in a political environment.”

## Quickly a couple

A few weeks after the date at the Richmond dive, Justin came up to Northern Virginia, and they went out to dinner in Old Town, though neither could remember where they went.

“I don’t think it’s a place that still exists, but I don’t remember,” Alex said.



Justin Wilson and wife, Alex Crawford-Batt, talk — and laugh— about their journey as a couple.

PHOTO/LOUISE KRAFFT

When school started back up for their sophomore years, they spent most weekends together.

“He had an apartment and I had a ... dorm roommate, so I usually ended up going to Richmond,” Alex said. “The Williamsburg weekend scene was not the most exciting if you weren’t involved in the Greek sorority scene, so I usually ended up taking the Greyhound Bus or Amtrak to Richmond for the weekend. There was a lot more to do.”

Justin’s studio apartment was just off campus at the base of The Fan, a lively neighborhood in Richmond centered on the VCU campus.

“[It was] in The Fan when it was on the edge of being cool,” Alex said.

“I was next to Monroe Park,” Justin said. “At the time, it wasn’t such a great place. I was just down there recently and was marveling at how Monroe Park is just this beautiful, amazing space now. It was not that

way. The mid-90s it was more of an open-air drug market.”

## After college

Alex graduated a se-

mester early, in Dec. 2000, but Justin had already left school that May, at the end of his junior year.

“I had a job offer to come back up here,” Justin said.

“So I worked out a deal with the school of business where I took my last 12 credits at George Mason and transferred them back. So I ended up officially graduating from VCU in August of ’01.”

Wilson went to George Mason at night to finish up his degree in business information systems, while working at Qwest Communications during the day.

“My mom would have hunted me down and beat me if I didn’t finish my degree,” Justin said, laughing.

Meanwhile, Alex immediately started working for the federal government after receiving her degree in international relations from William & Mary. She later did a part-time master’s program through her job.

“I graduated in December, had Christmas with the family and then started working in January,” she

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said. “I work for the Department of Defense. I’m an analyst at DIA.”

While neither remembers one particular “aha” moment, Alex and Justin were aware early on that they were very compatible.

“We both realized we would not be able to out-nerd each other,” Alex said. “We generally have very different geeky interests, but there’s definitely overlap when it comes to some of the policy.”

“Honestly, we have some pretty geeky conversations, and we always have,” Justin said. “She’s literally in the weeds on issues – she’s a big gardener now.”

They got engaged in Alexandria in December 2000, the weekend before Alex’s finals at William & Mary.

“We were living in a townhouse in Fairfax. I got a limo for the night – she still thinks it was a ridiculous purchase,” Justin said.

“They took us on a tour of all the Christmas lights in D.C.,” Alex said.

“So we went to the na-



COURTESY PHOTO  
Justin Wilson and Alex Crawford-Batt married on Sept. 15, 2001, four days after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

“When friends get married and freak out about minor details, I just shake my head and say, ‘You know what, it’s all going to happen and if you have friends and family there, then the color of your flowers really doesn’t matter.’”

– Alex Crawford-Batt

had pre-staged everything at the hotel and I proposed there and we went home the next morning on the Metro.”

## A memorable wedding

The date they picked for their wedding was Sept. 15, 2001.

“I was supposed to start a job at the Pentagon on Sept. 10, but luckily I had asked to postpone until after the wedding and took a training class instead,” Alex said. “So, that worked out. It [9/11] definitely made for interesting wedding logistics.”

Alex said the experience of scrambling to still hold the wedding in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks gave her a better perspective.

“When friends get married and freak out about minor details, I just shake my head and say, ‘You know what, it’s all going to happen and if you have friends and family there, then the color of your flowers really doesn’t matter,’” Alex said.

Some people weren’t able to attend their wedding because of the disruption from the attacks, while others who had thought they’d

have to miss the ceremony because of other travel were unexpectedly available.

“We kept getting calls because my parents knew I was supposed to start a Pentagon job. ... They got a couple of calls from close family members saying, ‘Is Alex OK? And we can’t come to the wedding because everything’s cancelled,’” Alex said. “Fortunately, the venue [in Clifton, Virginia] was really flexible with us and said, ‘Whoever comes, comes and we’ll work out the numbers later.’”

Some friends and family members made extraordinary efforts to get to the wedding.

“We had the best man trapped in San Francisco and the maid of honor trapped in Minneapolis,” Alex said. “A God-sister driving across the country from Tucson with her cat in her pickup truck. Just all kinds of crazy stories. Your aunt and uncle had a tree on their house with the hurricane and then drove up with your grandmother and had to pick up your cousin at college – all in a minivan together.”

tional Symphony Orchestra’s Christmas pops concert. ... We ate somewhere in D.C., came back to the Embassy Suites in Old Town and that’s where I proposed. She didn’t know what we were doing for the night,” Justin said.

“I’d checked in in the afternoon and come back home,” he said. “Honestly, I was looking for a Metro-accessible hotel because at the time the townhouse we lived in was right next to the Franconia-Springfield Metro and so I was like, ‘Where could we go for the night so that we could get back in the morning?’ So I



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The maid of honor barely made it.

"Her maid of honor landed at Dulles, because we got married in Clifton. She landed at 11 and the wedding was like at noon," Justin said.

"She got dressed in the back seat of her friend's station wagon and then comes running across the field as soon as we finished doing the group pictures almost like slow motion out of a movie, [yelling] 'I made it. I made it!' I was like, 'Wait, get another picture with her,'" Alex said.

"If you look at the pictures, [the best man] is completely bleary-eyed because he had literally driven through the night from At-

lanta in a rental car," Justin said.

"You know who loves you [when they go to those lengths]," Alex said.

The uncertainty about who was going to show up lasted right until the wedding started.

"There were a few folks that his mom worked with and she wasn't sure if they were OK until they showed up at the wedding," Alex said.

"It was an interesting time to get started," Justin said.

A toast by Don Beyer at the reception was a special part of the wedding.

"Don was there and that was good," Justin said. "He kind of brought it all together."

Justin said many people

asked him during the week after 9/11 if the wedding was going to take place.

"I was like, 'Of course we're going to go forward.' Why would you cancel a wedding?" Justin said.

"Everyone was glad to see each other and everyone needed to be with friends and family I think at that time," Alex said.

"It was the happiest thing anybody did that week for sure," Justin said. "The weather was perfect. It was one of those things that everything that we were worried about was fine. Everything that we never could have imagined, happened."

They were able to depart from Dulles the next morning for their honeymoon in Aruba, which was unexpectedly deserted.

"... Aruba had just gotten all the people who had been stranded there off the island and then so many people cancelled and there weren't many people there," Justin said. "So we'd go into these restaurants and they'd be so happy to see us. ... It was a little sobering, because the hotel had New York local TV for whatever reason, so we're just sitting there in the hotel watching the local New York affiliate."

"You didn't want to watch, but you couldn't not watch," Alex said.

## Another surprise

They bought a townhouse in Del Ray in April of '01, just a few months prior to the wedding.

"She made it clear we were coming to Alexandria," Justin laughed.

Their first child, Eli, was born in Dec. 2004. The delivery was slow, and everything went without a hitch. Alex was pregnant with their second child during

Justin's campaign for and victory in the special election for a city council seat in 2007.

A few months later, they experienced what Alex called "another chaotic, yet joyous occasion:" the birth of daughter Lena.

"... I kept saying, 'I think we need to go. I think we need to go [to the hospital]. I don't think he realized I really meant, 'We need to GO,'" Alex said.

"So, he called my mom very calmly to come over and watch our three-year-old, Eli, and she shows up with no sense of urgency since he made it sound like we had all the time in the world," Alex said.

"And then we were leaving the house and I said, 'I don't think we're going to make it.' And you said,

'Don't worry we'll make it.' And we got in the car. And I said, 'We're not going to make it.' And you said, 'Don't worry, we'll make it.' And I said, 'No, we didn't make it - she's here.'"

At that point, Alex calmed down because Lena was crying and seemed fine, but Justin was the one who got excited once he realized the baby had been born. He called 911 and was told to pull over, but they were in possibly the busiest intersection in Alexandria - where Braddock, Quaker and King streets come together - in the middle of morning rush hour.

"One of the medics was the father of five or seven and he knew the drill," Justin said. "It was quite a morning: Oct. 15, 2007."

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COURTESY PHOTO

Justin Wilson and wife, Alex Crawford-Batt, with their children Eli and Lena.

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PHOTO/MISSY SCHROTT

## A 20-YEAR ADVENTURE

*The journey of Gregory and Cheryl Hutchings includes two children, three graduate degrees and six moves*

BY DENISE DUNBAR

When Gregory Hutchings and Cheryl Carter locked eyes across the room in a Norfolk restaurant in 1999, neither could have imagined the incredible adventure the next 20 years would hold.

Gregory, now superintendent of Alexandria City Public Schools, was at the time a self-described super senior at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, while Cheryl was a recent William & Mary graduate working for PricewaterhouseCoopers. The two were in the restaurant Benigan's, Gregory with a group of fraternity brothers and Cheryl with her sister and some friends.

They agree there was an immediate connection.

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"I kept seeing this woman across the room staring at me. And I was like, 'Do I know her?' And it was like an hour that we kept looking at each other," Gregory said. "Not the whole time, but our eyes kept meeting."

"He was staring at me," Cheryl countered. "I was like, 'Why is this man staring at me?'"

Gregory realized after a while that the woman sitting next to Cheryl was someone he knew from college. Seeing his opening, he walked across the room and began talking with the friend.

"I was like, 'Hey, how's it going?' and 'What's your friend's name?'" Gregory said. "She told me her name was Cheryl. Her sister happened to be with her at the dinner. And her sister asked me a thousand questions about who am I: What do I do? Do I live with my mom? Do I have a job?"

After getting the third degree from her sister, Gregory gave Cheryl his business card. Although still in school, he was an admis-



**Left:** Gregory and Cheryl Hutchings talk about their journey as a couple in their family home.



COURTESY PHOTO

**Right:** Both Gregory and Cheryl kept mementos from their first date. While Cheryl kept the dress she wore, Gregory kept the paper tablecloth from the table where they dined.

sions counselor at Old Dominion.

"I was like, 'Here's my business card. Give me a call sometime.' Because we didn't have cell phones," Gregory said. "And then Cheryl called me the next day and I didn't answer the call, because I saw caller ID and I said, 'I need her to think I'm busy.' So I looked at the phone and let it go to

voicemail and I called her the next day. And then we went on our first date and the rest literally was history."

## An immediate connection

Their first date was so memorable that they both saved mementos from it – souvenirs that they still have.

"Our first date, I knew she was going to be my wife. That was June 26, 1999," Gregory said.

"And you went home and told your roommate," Cheryl added.

"I went home and told my best friend Simon, he was my roommate as well and he was from Alexandria. I was like, 'I just went on a date with my wife.' And he was like, 'Yeah, right whatever.' And my black book was gone after that. No more dates [with other women] for me. This is it," Gregory said.

Cheryl didn't make such emphatic statements, but also felt the connection.

"I didn't go home and say,

**"I felt vulnerable, and I normally have a wall up for people. And for her I just felt like I was completely comfortable and I could talk with her about anything. There was no judgment. We just had that spark."**

– Gregory Hutchings

"This is my husband' but I think I loved Greg from the very beginning. I did," Cheryl said.

Cheryl still has her dress from that first date, while Gregory kept the tablecloth they dined on.

"It was ... paper and I wrote on it the date, our first date, and I drew this picture and it has spaghetti sauce on it, but I kept it," Gregory said. "I forgot that I kept it, honestly, but I framed it for Mother's Day or your birthday or something. And

Cheryl, she actually kept her dress from the first date. That's why it was meant to be. ... It's meaningful. I didn't [keep a memento] for every date."

They immediately felt at ease in each other's company in a way that was special.

"I just liked talking to Greg," Cheryl said. "A lot of dates when I went out with people, it didn't inspire me to engage as much. I'm not always talkative. But when

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# Tying the Knot



Gregory and Cheryl Hutchings on their wedding day.

COURTESY PHOTO

## HUTCHINGS

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I'm with Greg, I ... just like talking to him. I like being with him."

"I think we just connected," Gregory said. "I felt vulnerable, and I normally have a wall up for people. And for her I just felt like I was completely comfortable and I could talk with her about anything. There was no judgment. We just had that spark."

"Our first date lasted until like 3 in the morning. We talked, then we walked along the beach. Then we said, 'It's 3 a.m.! We've got to go to work tomorrow, so I'll see you later.' And I did not kiss her on the first date. ... I think I tried to do everything right. And I wanted to do everything right," he said.

### Path to the altar

It wasn't a direct line from that amazing first

date to flowers and wedding cake. It took three years and a cancelled first wedding before Gregory and Cheryl were able to tie the knot.

Their main obstacle was where they were in their lives – just starting their professional careers. Because of those careers, they spent a fair amount of time apart in the beginning. Cheryl's job in the tax department at PwC took her to Arizona on a regular basis.

Gregory said he dealt with the extended absences at first, but he decided he wanted to propose once he finished his ODU degree. He worked out an elaborate plan for a proposal in May 2000, with scattered rose petals and a messenger jar filled with a special message.

"So I made these little small scrolls, these little pieces of paper, and I wanted her to have to piece it together, because she likes puzzles," he said. "So I had

each letter on the scroll and I burned the edges and then I rolled each one up and put a little ribbon on it and put it into the little jar. ... So when she came in I had these roses and she was like, 'What is all this? What's going on?'"

When Cheryl put together the puzzle, it read, "Will you marry me?"

"It was romantic," Cheryl said. "I don't like surprises, but that was a good surprise."

Their path was not without some drama, both before and after the proposal. Their first real fight came about six months after they began dating, at "The happiest place on Earth" – Disney World.

"It was because of the teacups," Gregory said. "This is what started the whole argument. We're on the teacups. ... I'm like spinning the teacup. She's like,

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# Tying the Knot

## HUTCHINGS

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“Stop spinning the teacup.’ And I’m like, ‘No, this is so fun!’ I was going faster and faster. And she was like, ‘Stop, stop, stop!’”

“He thought it was funny,” Cheryl said.

The fight began the second they exited the ride.

“She was like, ‘When I say stop, that means stop. That doesn’t mean keep going. And I don’t appreciate that you didn’t listen to what I said,’” he said.

The fight continued as they walked across the park and briefly got caught in the Remember the Magic Parade, which blocked their path out of the Magic Kingdom.

“Imagine that during your first big argument,” Gregory said.

They weathered the teacup argument, but a brief breakup months before their first wedding date almost ended the relationship.

“She was traveling all the time and by that time I was a teacher,” Gregory said. “So I was like, ‘OK, you’re in

Arizona and I’m in the D.C. area, and I don’t get to see you. I just don’t think this is going to work. You’re too far away.’ ... I was insecure. I was 23 at this time. I admit I was not expecting Cheryl to say, ‘OK.’”

They had just been about to mail wedding invitations and had made a deposit on the wedding venue. They had to call their families and tell them the wedding was off.

But the breakup proved to be short-lived: only about three weeks. Cheryl soon accepted a job back in D.C., which she said was motivated at least in part so they could be together. Once back together, they set a new wedding date of April 20, 2002.

### The wedding

Their wedding was a joyous occasion for the usual reasons – and some unexpected as well.

“We had a lot of stuff going on,” Gregory said. “Both of our grandparents passed away right before we got married. ... So our wedding was good for all of our families, because it was something ...”



COURTESY PHOTO

From left to right: Cheryl, Micha, Gregory Jr. and Gregory III.

“Positive,” Cheryl said. “It brought our families together in a happy way,” he said.

The day was beautiful, but it rained briefly just before the ceremony. Cheryl initially was sad about the rain.

“And then someone told me that thing about, ‘A wet knot stays tied.’ And I was like, ‘OK, there we go.’ It was good that it rained a little bit and then the sun came out,” she said.

It wound up being a wet wedding day in more ways than one.

“I started crying at the wedding,” Gregory said. “The doors opened up and I looked up and said, ‘She’s so beautiful.’ And I started crying. Because I’d never seen her dressed up like that. I mean you don’t see people in a wedding dress.”

Gregory’s tears proved contagious. His mother started crying as soon as she saw his tears, followed by his sister, followed by his nine aunts.

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“All my friends were like, ‘Get yourself together,’” he laughed.

## The road to ACPS

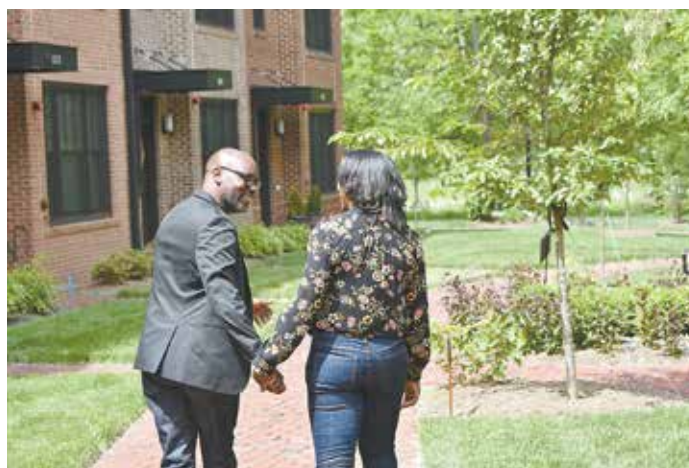
After the wedding and honeymoon in the Dominican Republic, they lived in Northern Virginia, and Cheryl got her MBA from the regional Virginia Tech campus. They then moved to Richmond so Gregory could pursue his doctorate at William & Mary. Their journey included five years in Nashville, where Gregory was offered the post of assistant principal at Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet School, which was the top-ranked school in Tennessee.

They had their daughter, Micha, just before moving to Tennessee and their son, Gregory, just after moving back to Alexandria in 2010.

Three years later an opportunity came for Gregory to become superintendent of schools in Shaker Heights, Ohio, near Cleveland. Gregory and Cheryl weren’t sure about the location – neither likes the cold – but felt it was the right move.

Five years later, when the superintendent’s job came open in Alexandria, Gregory and Cheryl pondered and prayed for a long time before deciding to apply for the job.

“There was a lot of prayer that went into this position, because we were content,” Gregory said.



PHOTO/MISSY SCHROTT

The couple’s move to Alexandria posed challenges, but ultimately was too hard to resist.

“We had no reason to leave Shaker Heights,” Cheryl said. “We had a nice life.”

But the lure of being

close to family, of their children being able to attend the same schools Gregory had attended – and the challenges that would await

him in Alexandria’s diverse school system – proved too much to resist.

The move back to Alexandria has also enabled Cheryl to start her own accounting firm.

“We’ve come full circle,” Gregory said. “Cheryl is now able to achieve her goals. And I know that she made sacrifices for my aspirations. ... I know at times it was about me and my career. She stayed by my side the entire time, and continues to. That’s what love is supposed to be about. You’re supposed to go through good times and bad times. And you should learn from all of those different experiences.”

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