

Honesty, communication, respect led to 73 years of marriage, Hudson couple says



Bob and Bessie Bianchi, ages 95 and 92 respectively, will celebrate their 73rd anniversary Sunday. After growing up together in New York, Bob joined the Marines and moved to Virginia. There, he wrote letters to Bessie. In one, he wrote, "I won \$76 in a craps game. I'm coming home, and we're going to get married." And they did — on Nov. 22, 1942, in New York City. BRENDAN FITTERER | Times



By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

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HUDSON

On the love seat in their Hudson living room, Bessie and Bob Bianchi tell their story.

She is 92; he is 95.

They met as neighbors in a Washington Heights apartment building in Manhattan. He was 15 and played jacks and hopscotch with her. She was 12 and didn't like him.

But "I told my mother, 'I'm going to marry that girl,'" Bob said.

And he did — 73 years ago Sunday.

She lived upstairs; he lived downstairs.

"We used to communicate by the window shades," Bessie said. "When I could get out, I put the shade up. When I couldn't, I put the shade down."

They had mutual friends who — before they dated — referred to them as "Bessie and Bob," Bessie said. "More or less, we were thrown together, and I really got to like him."

He had always liked her.

"I thought you were a good-looking girl," he told her in their living room last week. "I set my eyes on you; that's all."

She smiled.

"And then, we fell in love," she said.

True love, Bob added.

"I'll tell you what true love is," he said. "The coldest nights in winter and the hottest nights in summer, we used to walk with each other.

"We didn't have a nickel to go to the movies and 3 cents to get a soda in the candy store. So, all we did was walk around the block, holding hands, sneaking a kiss every once in a while."

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On July 2, 1942, Bob joined the Marines. He moved to Quantico, Va. He wrote letters to Bessie. In one of his notes, after they had dated for three years, he wrote a line that would change their lives.

I won \$76 in a craps game. I'm coming home, and we're going to get married.

And they did, on Nov. 22, 1942, in the rectory at a Catholic church in New York City, without her parents' blessing.

"My parents were against it," Bessie said, because she's Greek, and he's Italian.

Plus "it was wartime, (and) he was in the service," she said. "They figured, 'Suppose he doesn't come back.'"

Bessie also had that concern when Bob fought at Iwo Jima.

"War brides whose husbands were in battle had no idea whether their husband was dead or alive," Bob said. "Every day, my wife got up and thought about that because communications were nil."

But Bob came home and grew on Bessie's parents. When he was stationed in California, she lived with her parents and collected tips as a waitress — \$2,800 over time — so she could take a bus there from New York with their firstborn son to see Bob.

Their marriage continued long distance, thanks to the service, for two years.

How did the relationship survive?

Fidelity, Bob said.

And "you just lived day by day, praying he was okay," Bessie said.

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When Bob was discharged from the service Jan. 6, 1946, he went to work for the New York Central Railroad.

"I worked on the railroad 42 years," he said. "I was a switch tender, a break man, a conductor, a yardmaster, a trainmaster. I ran the whole gamut."

Bessie worked odd jobs and raised four children — two boys and two girls.

They moved to Florida in 1981, where before Hudson, they lived in Tampa, Holiday and Port Richey.

There have been trials, involving finances and health. There have been joys — 10 grandchildren, three great-grandchildren and another on the way.

For 73 years, the couple has defied the odds.

When they got married, "everybody said it ain't gonna last," Bob said.

But it did.

"We just got married, and it all worked out," Bessie said.

The couple did acknowledge a few things that led to longevity.

"Always do what your wife asks you to do," Bob said. "Otherwise, you're in trouble."

The couple laughed. Then, they listed what has helped make their marriage work: honesty, respect, communication.

"You have to build it," Bessie said. "Two strangers get together. I don't care how long we went with each other. You have your ways; I have my ways. You have to work at it."

Marriage, she added, is better when you "believe that there's somebody up above. Who brought you here? Who makes day and night?"

Marriage also takes authentic commitment, Bob said.

"Believe that marriage is a sacred act," he said. "Believe the vows. You give those words, and you've got to live up to it."

When asked what made him live up to his commitment, Bob turned to Bessie on their love seat.

"Because I loved you," he said.

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