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MAGAZINE

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ISSUE

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THE IMPROVISED WEDDING

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Rich proposed in March, the same day the College of Cardinals was selecting a pope. The new pope chose the name “Francis” for St. Francis of Assisi, known for his love of animals and nature. Many churches celebrate his feast day with a blessing of the pets. The timing was coincidence, but perhaps it was a sign.

This is a story about a wedding and a dog—a dog who was an essential bit of glue that helped bind together our blended family, which numbers six daughters between the two of us.

Zane, a German Shorthaired Pointer, could have been a show dog like his parents, except for the jagged ear he acquired while learning (the hard way) to read social cues in a dog park.

Back when we were newly engaged and fairly settled in our Brighton house, Zane was a year-old puppy, rambunctious and distractible, fearless and infinitely curious. Just ask the vet who pulled 25 porcupine quills out of his face. Best of all, he was everyone’s dog—a beloved pet to everyone in our blended household, a precious bond among us.

Two months after the proposal, some friends stopped by one evening, and as they held the door open, Zane dashed out. It happened so quickly. I was gathering treats and a leash to go find him when I heard the kids screaming.

It’s likely the driver never saw him.

My daughter Lucy stayed by Zane at the side of the road. I called Rich, who was working in New York that day, while another daughter, Sally, called our close friend and vet, Meg Brooker, at home.

Meg dashed over with her daughter and gently lifted Zane into the back of her car. She didn’t expect him to last the car ride.

She led us to Emergency Veterinary Services in Brighton. The doctor there explained that *if* Zane lived through the night, he’d need surgery to stop the internal bleeding. If he survived the first surgery, he’d need a second to rebuild his femur, which the vet described as “an unassembled jigsaw puzzle.”

Rich caught the last flight back to Rochester. Six of us huddled in the little examination room, where they let us wait in private. At 1 a.m., the vet suggested we come to the treatment area to see Zane, and then go home. Zane was on a high metal table with tubes and wires stuck in every paw. It felt like goodbye.

Zane survived the first surgery. For a week, Rich and I held it together, waiting for the second operation. Then the surgeon called to tell us Zane would be OK.

I can’t remember anything else the surgeon said, but I do remember the two of us finally breaking down in the East Avenue Wegmans parking lot. If you’ve ever lost a dog to an accident, you know how lucky we were.

We confirmed our commitment to Zane, verbally

and by credit card. “Whatever it takes,” we had said. Fortunately, we had been saving for a big October wedding. But we didn’t think twice about devoting most of that fund to saving our dog.

My original vision for our wedding was traditional and formal: engraved invitations, seated dinner at tables with white linen; a tux and a gown and, above all, dancing. Funny how quickly priorities can change.

Our wedding concept moved from traditional to improv. Some invitations were sent by postcard, others were made face-to-face. My husband invited his hockey buddies with the help of a teammate, who shouted out to the locker room, “LISTEN UP! Richie’s getting married!”

Instead of response cards with return envelopes, we bought a \$20 burner phone and asked guests to leave their responses by voicemail.

The rehearsal dinner was to have been an upscale event with open bar for family members and out-of-town guests. Instead, people contributed wine, champagne and stemware for a dinner at the relatively inexpensive French Quarter Café. Packed in at long tables, we passed pitchers of sweet tea and heaping platters of beignets between tables and over each other’s heads. We could barely hear over the din. It was perfect.

We had already committed to the Genesee Valley Club for our reception, but with our budget slashed, there was no way we’d be able to have a seated dinner there. Instead, we planned a family meal at home followed by the marriage ceremony.

My sister-in-law’s family came early and raked the yard (unfortunately, one cousin ended up with poison ivy as a wedding favor; fortunately, it didn’t bloom until after the party). The best man reset some wayward bricks in our walkway. Some nephews moved the living room furniture into the garage. We skipped salon services in favor of an intrepid daughter, Nina, with imagination and some practice with braids and bobby pins.

I had imagined a reception dinner of Beef Wellington served on fine china with white linen tablecloths. Instead, we put pans of sesame chicken and fried rice from Wegmans out on the kitchen counter and let our 50-plus family members who came for the ceremony serve themselves. It was chaos, and we really didn’t mind.

While the family finished dinner, we dressed for the ceremony. Rich’s daughter Caroline fitted Zane with a bowtie. His daughter Molly gingerly trimmed the lace neckline of my dress with nail scissors while Lucy pinned flowers in my hair.

The family crowded into the living room. Without an “aisle,” we simply made a relaxed entrance, hand-in-hand, through a dense cluster of smiling family. Cousins

were perched on the radiator. I kicked a damp cocktail napkin off my shoe.

Our ceremony was intimate and joyful. With Zane’s head resting on his shoe, my brother read the poem, “Falling in Love is Like Owning a Dog,” drawing laughs with the line “love makes messes” and misty-eyed grins at “you can never stay mad at love for long.”

The girls read couplets from Neruda, and my new sister-in-law shared Springsteen’s “If I Should Fall Behind.” The mother of our “seventh” daughter—an

exchange student—joined us from Spain via Skype. The service was capped by the voice of the young boy who lives next door, standing tiptoe and peering through our front window, shouting, “Something’s going on in there!”

It was the most fun I’ve ever had at a wedding ceremony.

Instead of a traditional Town Car and driver to get us to the reception, we borrowed the nicest car in the family, with our nephew Ernie as chauffeur.

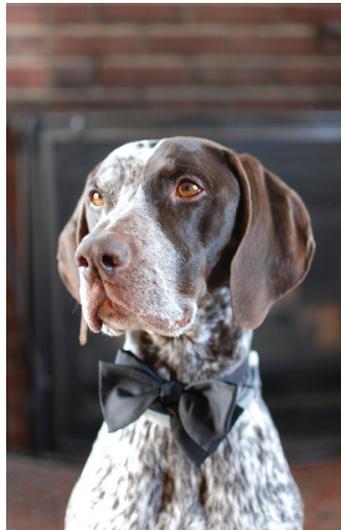
Our scaled-back reception allowed us one splurge—a nine-piece big band that can play anything and was happy to include us in the mix. Lucy sang a sweet rendition of “Here Comes Your Man,” and Caroline played an impressive alto sax with the band. A

friend rocked “Rescue Me” in a red dress, and the band backed up one of the hockey guys and the groom in a rousing appearance of the Blues Brothers.

As we were wrapping up, people at the Genesee Valley Club told us ours was unlike any other wedding they’d worked. Maybe without the assigned tables, we mingled more? Without the formal dinner, we danced more? It was on the dance floor that daughters and cousins came together and sealed their bond as a new family.

After Zane’s accident, many of the wedding niceties we thought were important just weren’t possible, and in the end they didn’t matter. No one missed the engraved invitations or formal dinners. We did fine without a salon, servers, linens or a limo. We had each other and the people we love; we danced with our children, our friends and our family.

And when we came home, Zane was there, waiting. **R**



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