

MAY 2024

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MEET THE Vestals

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RESIDENTFEATURE

THE VESTALS:

Our Journey to Find our True Selves and Happiness

BY SYLVIA KARCZ

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Not many couples can attest to a love story that transcends centuries, but in Margaret and Jimmy Vestal's case, one could debate that their connection, somewhat literally, began in another era.

Picture this: Margaret, regal in a billowing 18th-century gown and custom bonnet, and Jimmy, donning breeches and a long, tailored coat, ponytail flowing out of a tricorne hat. It was Colonial Williamsburg in the 1990s, and Margaret, fresh out of Western Carolina University with degrees in English and Public History, chose the renowned living museum in Virginia for her Master's internship. As serendipity would have it, she stayed longer than planned, taking a job as a costumed interpreter after her school requirements were complete.

Meanwhile, Jimmy landed in the same small training class as Margaret, albeit for different reasons. He was a self-described wanderer; traveling around and living in different cities—from Greenville and Charleston to New York and Richmond— and dabbling in everything from film production and ministry to a short stint with a dog grooming business. "I was a farm kid up until college, then left and never really looked back," he says. "Traveling gave me a chance to experience life in a completely different environment."

They had an instant connection and immediately became friends. Both were North Carolina-born and bred, after all —Margaret hails from the mountain town of Sylva, about 50 miles from Asheville, while Jimmy grew up on a tobacco farm in the Piedmont area, just outside of Winston-Salem— and they bonded over their similar values and love of nature and exploration outdoors. In Jimmy's eyes, Margaret was intelligent, loving, patient, and knock-out gorgeous. For Margaret, Jimmy was easy-going, nurturing, and compassionate, always boosting her morale; the kind of good-hearted soul that will fire somebody from a job and get thanked by them for it.

Though it admittedly wasn't much of a career path, both stayed at Colonial Williamsburg for about five years. They relished in the unique day-to-day interactions with visitors and colleagues alike, soaking in invaluable lessons and perspectives. "I mean, there was one guy who worked for NASA and helped put a man on the moon!" Margaret says of the perks of the job, including fascinating break-room chats. "But there was also the interesting history we were sharing with people."

After their Colonial Williamsburg time ran its course, they went their separate ways to different parts of North Carolina. Distance, however, only made their bond stronger. "He eventually started visiting me in Asheville, and then one day he said: Hey, do you want to get married? And now, it's 26 years later," Margaret says, smiling over at





Jimmy. "Kind of like 'When Harry Met Sally.' Which, funny enough, was the first movie we ever watched together."

"In one statement: I married my best friend," Jimmy adds. "And to this day, she remains my best friend." It's a recipe for success, in many ways; this base of mutual respect and admiration. Their longstanding friendship was grounds for a harmonious marriage capable of ebbing and flowing with life's changes and all the new endeavors that came their way. In Jimmy's case, that meant finding a calling within the church, as a pastor, for well over a decade. His capacity for compassion and empathy for the many faces of struggle also led him to work for a non-profit Christian ministry in Asheville, assisting homeless neighbors, the uninsured, and veterans, amongst others.

Margaret, on the other hand, stumbled upon the roller-coaster world of real estate. "It turns out that you cannot do anything, as they promised, with a liberal arts degree. They do not come knocking at your door," she laughs, adding that her "southern-girl lack-of-filters" made certain jobs a bit more complicated than ideal. When the pair settled in Asheville in 2000, though, she found herself

becoming more and more enthralled by housing market talk, listing trends, and all things real estate. So much so, that the idea of taking a real estate licensing course seemed like a natural progression, even though the cost was a fortune for them at the time.

"My mom basically told me: Shut up, I'll pay for it. Just take the class. She says it's the best investment she ever made," Margaret recounts of her humble beginnings, which have grown into two decades worth of helping property owners buy and sell homes. "And ironically, it's the one career where having no filters works in your favor. Because your clients actually want you to tell them exactly what you think."

Margaret still counts her blessings for being able to truly love and be prosperous in her line of work, despite the unpredictable, demanding, and often tumultuous nature of real estate. It's a journey of constant learning and relearning; adaptability at its core. And while she claims she has no secrets to her success—other than having amazing clients, and not coming across as somebody who's trying to overly sell or cover something up—her humble, honest, and unabashedly genuine nature no doubt is part of the equation. Those she works with consistently sing her praises and send more buyers and sellers her way.

Jimmy relates her role as a real estate agent to a ministry. "She is really helping people," Jimmy says. "Particularly

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with selling houses, it's not always for the best of reasons. Sometimes it's a death, a divorce, or financial problems. Aging out has also been a big one lately. But she is always so patient, understanding, and supportive of people and their circumstances."

It's a character trait that she credits, strangely enough, to her and Jimmy's earlier years in Colonial Williamsburg. Wearing a thick costume in sweltering 98-degree heat and calmly talking to an assortment of people about history leaves its mark, after all. "That experience taught me so much about customer service, about relating to people, and calming people down; all the skills I need for real estate."

From talking to the Vestals, however, you can't help but feel that these skills wouldn't be quite as honed if it weren't for their ability to recognize the expansive potential—and awe—that lies within the seemingly ordinary. It's a fine-tuned appreciation mindset that embraces all the complex puzzle pieces of life, and fosters inspiration from the day-to-day which

surrounds us. A little piece of paper on their fridge with a George Eliot quote reminds them of this constantly. It reads 'It is never too late to be what you might have been.'

"I cut that out in my 20s and it's traveled with me ever since," Margaret says. "I don't know why it resonates with me so much because I'm not consciously trying to be something different or get to somewhere different. But it just always makes me think that life is a journey, and it's never too late on that journey to try something new or have a new experience."

Jimmy adds that self-realization is a large part of that journey, too. "For a good bit of my life, I think a lot of what drove me to jump around jobs was trying to find out who I was meant to be. And I realized that I found it. All of those experiences were me, and still are," he says. "I think we discover ourselves whether we realize it or not sometimes."

Also part of that self-discovery? Being grateful for exactly where they are and what they have, in this very moment.

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"Always at my back, I hear, 'time's a winged chariot hurrying near.' So I have this sense of how short life is. Every day is just precious, and you've got to do what you want to do while you're here," Margaret says, noting that especially living in the Biltmore community, there is no shortage of inspiration in the nature around them. "When we get out there and breathe in that air and walk through those trees, it settles and invigorates in a way that nothing else does."

Jimmy couldn't agree more, adding that there is endless exploration to be had in their very own backyard. "Whether it's hiking out to a waterfall or going up to the Blue Ridge Parkway and finding trails that take us to coves and sites we've never seen before, every bend you turn, you're going to encounter something special," he says. "Every season is different as you hike through the mountains, too. It just never gets old."

And while their wish list of places to travel and things to experience in the coming years is a long one, the Vestals are keen to take it one day at a time, savoring the present, their relationship, and the life they've created.

"Recently I feel this incredible peace that if I never do anything else, I'm completely happy with where I am. Which is probably part of finding yourself, too, and finding your happiness. Like, I live in the most amazing place. I can walk out my door into the national forest. I can go sit by a creek in my front yard. What more do you need?"

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