

together for life

HONEST, INTIMATE SNAPSHOTS OF WHAT MAKES MARRIAGE WORK AND WHAT DOESN'T

'For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer.' The traditional marriage vows are a good guide to a successful marriage, but it does leave out some important issues, such as mutual trust, emotional support and, of course, who does the dishes. Meet five couples who knew that love was only the beginning on the day they said 'I do'.

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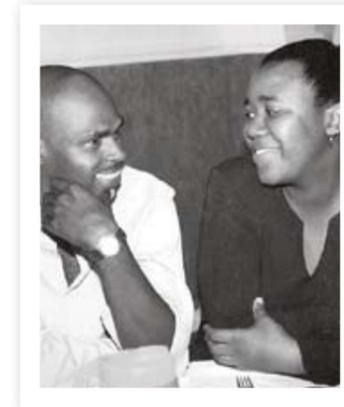
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marriage milestone | 4 years

Kholeka Zantsi Mabeta (32) and Sipho Mabeta (36)



HOW THEY MET: In 1999, Kholeka taught at Luhlaza High School in Khayelitsha. She shared a flat with a friend, Nombulelo, who played an unwitting part in Kholeka's happiness when her boyfriend stopped by with Sipho in tow. The two met and soon agreed on a date at the movies. 'We don't remember anything about the film,' smiles Kholeka. 'We were far too interested in each other.' That very evening, in the relative privacy of the theatre, Sipho opened his heart to Kholeka. 'It's the first time a love declaration made a deep impression on me,' recalls Kholeka, who was drawn to Sipho's forthrightness. 'After that, we spent all our free time together.'

Though the pair had teaching in common, they were also attracted to each other's differences. 'Sipho is always joking around and loves playing the fool,' says Kholeka. 'It's easy to laugh when I am around him. But he also struck me as being kind and sincere, and that's what I fell in love with.' Equally smitten, Sipho was drawn to Kholeka's spontaneity and assertive nature.

MARRIED LIFE: In 2004, three years after the birth of their first daughter, Lerato, the couple were married at Home Affairs in Cape Town with minimal fanfare. 'I was keen on a big wedding, but I let him win that argument,' smiles Kholeka. 'We both returned to work the same day.'

The first few years of marriage were quite an adjustment. 'To me, slotting in with Kholeka's way of doing things felt a bit like reporting to my superior,' admits Sipho. 'His friends call me *die regering*,' laughs Kholeka. 'While we were dating and enjoying each other as buddies, our differences weren't as noticeable.'

The couple reached a point where they fought a lot. 'We had career, family and personal demands,' says Sipho. 'We were both stubborn and proud, and we separated for a while,' says Kholeka. 'The time apart was tough on both of us, unbearable really, but the experience has taught us to communicate better, discern our more vital personal needs, and not take each other for granted,' adds Sipho. Since then, they fight less. 'I don't take everything to heart any more,' says Kholeka. 'Sipho's love of golf is a chance

for me to see my girlfriends.' They give each other space after a disagreement until both are ready to talk. 'We've also come to the conclusion that sarcasm is a big no-no. Criticism is good if it's constructive,' says Sipho.

Another area of common ground is their work ethic. Kholeka moved from teaching to publishing and now runs her own fledgling business publishing school textbooks. Sipho heads up a programme for the Department of

Economic Development and Tourism, which for now has taken him to Beaufort West, while Kholeka remains in Cape Town with seven-year-old Lerato and Thabile, their three-year-old daughter. 'It's not easy, but we're keen to forge ahead in our careers,' says Kholeka.

Being a working mom with a husband who is far from home is hard. 'In the week, I see to the girls and help with homework. I'm required to be there for them emotionally, but Sipho helps by calling them every day,' says Kholeka. When Sipho's home, he's a hands-on dad. 'I tend to overcompensate,' he admits ruefully. Blessed with a kind spirit, Lerato takes after Sipho, while the spontaneous and headstrong Thabile mirrors Kholeka. 'Our kids have helped us to understand our own personalities better,' says Sipho. Weekends and holidays are when the grandparents allow the couple to spend quality time together, though Sipho and Kholeka are careful to keep boundaries clear. 'In African tradition, in-laws can get very involved, so we like to keep a healthy, respectful distance,' says Kholeka, who nonetheless is grateful for the baby-sitting her sister offers, allowing the children time with their cousins, and the many hours of care that her parents and Sipho's mom provide over school holidays.

Sipho and Kholeka's strength lies both in a shared belief system and in compromise. 'Life is moving fast and I support Sipho emotionally, but he doesn't get away with everything,' chides Kholeka. Sipho agrees that their success is due to their ability to accept each other's differences while celebrating common goals, not to mention a healthy sense of humour. 'Lose some arguments,' he advises, 'learn to tidy up after yourself, and let her give you driving directions, even when you know your way.'

marriage milestone | 19 years

Ilaria Chisin-Louw (45) and Julian Louw (45)

HOW THEY MET: Soul mates do exist – it just took Ilaria a while to figure it out. ‘In 1988, we were both 26, and met at a mutual friend’s costume party,’ recounts Julian. ‘When I saw Ilaria in her mediaeval gown, it was love at first sight.’ But Ilaria didn’t warm instantly. ‘I didn’t think I’d ever meet anyone worth marrying, and had certainly never had a man woo me.’ A few days later, Julian asked Ilaria over to look at his party photos and used the opportunity to invite her out to dinner. ‘We didn’t have any money, but went to a fancy restaurant – every moment felt so wonderfully grown-up,’ Ilaria recalls.

They soon discovered they had similar lifestyles: ‘We were both waiting tables in the evenings, and after shifts we’d meet and go for a swim in the sea or spend the early hours of the morning chatting.’ During the day Julian, a self-taught painter, and Ilaria, who holds a qualification in fine art, would paint. Six months passed, and Ilaria became increasingly drawn to Julian’s friendly and polite manner, and his attentiveness. ‘Julian was visiting me one day and we were standing in the kitchen and made eye contact – and in that moment I knew that Julian was the man for me,’ says Ilaria.

By that time, however, Ilaria had already made plans to go overseas for a year with a girlfriend. ‘I hated leaving Julian, but I’d promised to go,’ she says. They kept in touch through letters, which they still treasure. In the time apart, Julian applied some skills he had learned from Ilaria, and by the time she returned he’d started a business doing paint techniques – and soon their joint business took off.

MARRIED LIFE: Early on, the couple made a decision not to have children. ‘People are usually surprised at our conscious choice. Almost all our friends have kids,’ explains Ilaria, ‘even those who said they never would, and our siblings have great kids, so we are very fortunate to enjoy quality family time without having children of our own.’ Over the years, their resolve hasn’t wavered. ‘We’re sticking to our decision because we want a totally spontaneous lifestyle. We often travel out of Cape Town for work, and our holidays frequently fall at odd times,’ explains Julian.



Their business has flourished, and the two eagerly throw themselves into work. ‘We really love what we do – it’s fun,’ says Julian, who acknowledges that sharing the business as well as a relationship requires attention on all fronts. ‘Because we work together, we are forced to confront each other’s strengths and weaknesses,’ shares Ilaria. A habit of theirs is to apologise quickly. ‘Whether or not it’s your fault,’ says Julian. ‘When we’re on site, we occasionally butt heads, but then we just take a breather and work apart for a day. Ironically, those days drag on because we’re missing each other.’

Their strong bond is buoyed by humility and support. ‘We’re not proud or inflexible about our artistic ideas. We tend to look out for each other on a job: if Ilaria’s having an uninspired day, I’ll come up and help her, and if I have a moment where I start worrying about paint that just looks wrong, she’ll remind me to stick with the process because we know it always works out,’ says Julian.

As complementary as Julian’s expressive, ever-practical nature is to Ilaria’s calmness and eye for detail, they have their disagreements. ‘Petty as it sounds,’ says Julian ‘we fight about what to keep and what to throw out. We both love artefacts, but Ilaria is more of a hoarder. So while she’s at yoga I rearrange the furniture and clear out the studio.’

Over the years, they’ve learnt to embrace each other’s quirks. ‘My relationship challenges are centred around control,’ says Ilaria, who admits she is resistant to change. ‘I’ve come to realise that not everything I say or want is right, and I try to let go of things that seem very important but actually aren’t. I have learned that Julian is a generous, involved, fun, naughty, honest, entertaining man, full of historical facts and fiction. He has taught me to be a better person.’ Julian, in turn, has learned to recognise his own shortcomings: ‘I’m an impatient person, and seeing plans unfold too slowly can aggravate me. I have a hot temper, which fortunately blows over quickly, but perhaps leaves Ilaria having to deal with the fall-out,’ he says. ‘She, on the other hand, is incredibly patient and has immense compassion for all living creatures. I look up to her, because she’s a deeply loving and spiritual person.’



marriage milestone | 28 years

Christiaan Merts (52) and Hilda Merts (52)



HOW THEY MET: Hilda could not help but notice rebellious Chris at Stellenbosch University in 1975 when he was asked to leave class for having a disruptive influence. 'We were both 18 and first-year students,' says Chris. 'The Afrikaans-Nederlands class was a group of about 400 students, but I had noticed Hilda despite her quiet and reserved nature.' One day, after a lecture, the infamous Chris asked Hilda for her notes. 'I didn't really need them,' admits Chris, who now holds a doctorate in didactics. 'I just wanted an excuse to invite her for coffee.' From then on they saw each other on a regular basis and spent several holidays together with Chris' family. 'I became one of them. I liked Chris' convincing, affirming character. He drew me out of myself, like he does with everyone. He was my opposite but complemented me well,' says Hilda.

MARRIED LIFE: The budget for Chris and Hilda's wedding was of the shoestring variety. 'Hilda's parents didn't have money and neither did mine,' says Chris. 'Our reception was at Wynberg Boys in Cape Town where I was teaching, and it was one of those really enjoyable occasions, with everyone contributing food or entertainment.'

Starting out with very little brought Chris and Hilda closer together. Their first car was a 1964 Mini, which Chris bought for R250, their first stove a gift from Chris' parents and the rest accumulated as they went. 'Ours is truly a marriage in community of property,' laughs Chris.

After further studies, Chris became a training officer for the navy. 'In 1994, we were set for our biggest relationship challenge,' recalls Chris. 'I was stationed at the Saldanha naval base, which is like a tiny village within an already small town. Hilda found it oppressive because it reminded her of the dead-end existence she'd had as a child.' She kept herself going by studying. 'When I was little, my parents didn't expect me to go to university; I grew up in Namaqualand, where a career for a woman might entail being a bank teller,' she says. With her uncle's encouragement, she put herself through university and now holds five degrees and two diplomas, including

a Masters in bibliotherapy, which entails therapy via literature.

In 1999 Chris was transferred back to Cape Town. 'Suddenly we regained a sense of freedom which was, and remains, so crucial to our relationship,' says Chris. The move also meant that they were located closer to important friends, a couple they had met at varsity, Chris and Laetitia Swanepoel. 'We've known each other for 30 years and regularly compare relationship

and life notes; it's useful to be able to ask another couple whether what you're going through is normal,' says Chris. 'Being close to them again was soul food for me,' says Hilda. 'Because Chris and I are different, we have to have room for individual exploration and expression but we also have ways to stay intimate. We spend every evening talking about the day and issues we're each grappling with. Those talks are so precious to me,' says Hilda.

With their work and studies taking centre stage, Chris and Hilda's decision to have children was delayed by a few years and at 19 and 16 respectively, their children, Marieke and André-Jan, are younger than expected. 'The births of my children were without any doubt the most defining moments of my life,' says Chris. 'The sense of vulnerability and responsibility that I felt when I held them for the first time strengthened my commitment to my marriage more than anything else has.' Chris and Hilda's different natures also contribute to their child-rearing. 'Chris is able to take teenage antics with a good pinch of salt and see the lighter side. That helps us all keep perspective,' Hilda says. Her own commitment to nurturing her children is evident in her involvement in their futures. 'I believe in exposing them to options, at the same time allowing them to make the final choice,' she says. 'After all, they must be happy.'

Hilda and Chris apply the same principle to their relationship, believing that giving each other space to be who they are is integral to love. 'Chris is a people's person with lots of warmth. He has the ability to make one feel special, as if the next adventure is just waiting around the corner. He might not be the blond-haired young Stellenbosch rebel any more, but seeing his qualities reflected in our children is very special,' Hilda smiles.



marriage milestone | 43 years

Bhanoo Jaga (64) and Gunwant K. Jaga (66)



HOW THEY MET: Four decades ago, Gunwant spotted the then 21-year-old Bhanoo in Port Elizabeth in February 1965, at his uncle's wedding; he had driven up from Cape Town to attend. That very week, Gunwant and his mother called at the home of Bhanoo's parents. When Bhanoo was asked to make tea, she realised something was afoot. The pair didn't speak while the grown-ups talked. 'But I can remember to this day that when we walked out to Gunwant's car and he looked over the roof of the Karmann Ghia at me, I got a shiver down my spine.' Gunwant nods in agreement, 'Right then, I got exactly the same shiver.'

The next day the couple went for a drive. 'I was naturally shy. But when Gunwant started to ask me about myself and my family, I suddenly felt at ease.' Bhanoo and Gunwant were of the same caste, the shoe repair trade, which carried a tacit nod of approval from both sets of parents – and three days later their families hosted a big engagement party for more than 250 guests.

Gunwant and his mother continued their tour to Durban, and Bhanoo and Gunwant saw each other again over the Easter holidays. The wedding plans were being made for December and, separated by distance, the pair communicated in writing. 'Phoning was not acceptable for youngsters. Today, I still have all the letters,' says Bhanoo.

MARRIED LIFE: Ten months after their first encounter, and having spent little time together, Bhanoo and Gunwant celebrated their union with a Hindu wedding. They were the first couple in their community to go on honeymoon to Mozambique on a cruise ship. 'The night-life was exciting and unusual for me. Gunwant taught me how to dance, probably the start of my more outgoing self,' says Bhanoo.

Upon their return, Bhanoo moved in with Gunwant, who lived with his parents, younger sister and brother, the latter married with two children. All shared a modest dwelling above the shop in Wale Street. 'We were nine people sharing a kitchen and one bathroom, but there was never animosity or disharmony,' Gunwant remembers.

The prospect of cooking for a family who enjoyed meat dishes was Bhanoo's greatest challenge. 'I came from a

strictly vegetarian family; I couldn't even cook an egg,' explains Bhanoo who had no choice but to become accustomed to preparing chicken and crayfish. Cooking was the task of the two young women in the house. But when it was Bhanoo's turn, her mother-in-law would lend a hand. 'Gunwant's family was very patient,' says Bhanoo, who took a while to get used to new food flavours. 'I'd made up my mind that I would learn new

skills and that I would make a success of my marriage; to be open-minded is all it takes,' declares Bhanoo.

As for Gunwant, he was willing to adapt to Bhanoo's style of expression. 'At first, I couldn't understand why she had to make such a fuss out of birthdays and celebrations. But I came round to buying birthday cards and flowers,' laughs Gunwant. With his wife's support, Gunwant worked long hours, confident that Bhanoo was in control of the household and their three children. 'Gunwant is a perfectionist. I soon realised I'd married someone with my father's traits! He was strict with the kids and liked things to be orderly, believing that they should slot into our routine. In retrospect I'm so grateful for his approach because we all needed that structure to feel emotionally grounded, and it pushed me to define myself.'

As the kids grew, Bhanoo channelled her caring nature as chairlady of the Mahila Mandal women's society for 10 years. Today, their son Rajesh, 41, runs the shoe repair shop, Jayesh, 38, is a lawyer and Bhavna, 36, a teacher. Gunwant, with 45 years' experience, supports Rajesh in business. 'There's never a task too big for Gunwant,' says Bhanoo. 'When he starts something, he sees it through.' A life of hard work, without neglecting each other, has led them to an enjoyable life stage. 'We love people and we love travelling,' says Gunwant, listing numerous overseas and local trips the pair have embarked on over the years. 'The time we spend together on our travels rekindles our romance and gives us quality time,' says Bhanoo. And as for Bhanoo's culinary skills? What was an issue is now a talent – the couple hosts dinner parties for up to 20 guests. 'I compile the menu,' Gunwant says, 'and Bhanoo makes it happen, all on her own.'



marriage milestone | 63 years

Freda Sacks (85) and Roy Sacks (87)



HOW THEY MET: In 1944, Roy and Freda moved in different circles in Cape Town. But, following a chance encounter at the Caledon Baths Hotel, it was first their parents who became firm friends. 'They both ran wholesale stores and one afternoon my mom took me around to Roy's dad's business – I was looking for a gift for my boyfriend. I bought a fountain pen... and Roy was working behind the counter.'

As the friendship between their parents developed, Roy and Freda suddenly bumped into each other quite often. On a weekend away in Stellenbosch with a group of friends, the penny dropped. 'About eight of us went to see a movie,' says Roy. 'Seven young men and me,' adds Freda. 'The show cost eight pence per person. The guys each gave a penny to pay for me, and Roy gave tuppence.' The gesture won him a seat next to Freda, and she invited him to her 21st birthday party. 'From that day on, we didn't see anyone else,' says Freda.

MARRIED LIFE: The reception after the wedding in the Hope Street Zionist Hall in Cape Town was packed with 500 guests for tea, followed by a family lunch for 120. Their honeymoon was a rail trip to the Wilderness. 'Not only because we found rail travel romantic,' explains Freda, 'but also because it was the end of the war, nylon stockings were like diamonds, petrol was in short supply and driving was out of the question.'

A year into the marriage, Freda and Roy were asked to move to Joburg to run the family business. 'It was a good test of our relationship,' recalls Roy. 'My uncle was the only family member I had in Joburg and though I looked up to him and we got on very well, Freda and I had to fend for ourselves.'

At no point was this more palpable than in 1977, when Roy was diagnosed with an extremely rare form of cancer, a liposarcoma on his knee. 'I remember the uncertainty and trepidation,' says Freda, 'because the doctors didn't know what it was.' The tumour had made his knee double in size, and Roy was told that a lot of tissue would have to be removed and that he'd have to wear callipers for the rest of his life. When Roy put his foot down at the prospect,

he was referred to another doctor who advised less extensive surgery as well as months of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. 'Because my strain of cancer was so unusual, the success of the treatment was not certain,' recalls Roy. 'I became a case study for doctors around the globe.'

On the home front, Freda prepared to help Roy through the challenge, finding her strength tested: 'When you're faced with something like this,

you have to find the inner reserve to pull through. I believe that in every life there is some type of trauma, and that finding the strength is possible. So even though this was a rare cancer, my role was not unique,' Freda says calmly. 'I kept our spirits up by not pitying myself, distancing myself emotionally to focus on the practical aspects. For an entire year, I drove Roy to Groote Schuur every month to be hospitalised for three days.' The situation was a test of Roy's character too. 'But I believed I would recover; I was single-minded about that,' Roy says. By his own admission, Roy is strong-willed, a trait that has served him well in business. 'Roy likes things to be done his way,' smiles Freda. 'I've learned to live with that. But if he doesn't like the way I wash the dishes, I tell him to do it himself.'

Roy and Freda believe their relationship works because they are quick to forgive. 'We don't hold grudges – as young people would say, we don't "sweat the small stuff",' says Freda. 'Talking to each other, sharing, even just our daily experiences, is important to us,' adds Roy.

Roy's family has a history of successful marriages. His grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters and cousins have all celebrated 50 or 60 years of marriage. 'We like to follow their good example, and we like to set one too. We don't believe in meddling in our children's lives, but it makes us happy to see our values reflected in them,' says Roy.

Their children, Jennifer, 62, Barry, 60, and Mark, 54, have brought four grandchildren into the world, and following were four great-grandchildren too. 'We make a point of seeing our children once a week,' says Freda, who adds that she and Roy spend little time apart. 'If I happen to go shopping without her,' says Roy, 'the shop assistants always ask, "Where is your wife today, Mr Sacks?"'