



The Washington Post

On Love: 'I could see our lives working together'

By Ellen McCarthy and Erin Williams, Published: September 9

ONLINE PHOTO GALLERY: http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/on-love-i-could-see-our-lives-working-together/2011/09/08/gIQAeOyJIK_gallery.html#photo=1

Joshua DeFrain wasn't ready to leave his favorite Chicago night spot, the Hangge Uppe, when his friends put on their coats to walk out into the frigid air in February 2008. He decided to do one more lap around the multi-level, '80s-themed club and wound up dancing with an exuberant — if inebriated — young woman.

Which was fun — until his dance partner tried a new move and wound up clocking him in the face. Perhaps, he figured, it really was time to go.

"I've just got to say, I totally saw that," Julie Liu said as she walked past the slightly stunned DeFrain. Liu, a 27-year-old lawyer, had been dragged to the cheesy club for a friend's birthday and was amusing herself with people-watching.

DeFrain laughed and introduced himself before following her down to a quieter part of the bar. And after buying her a drink, he asked Liu if she wanted to go to dinner the next night.

Liu agreed. And as the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants who own Jenny's Asian Fusion on the District's Southwest waterfront, she was glad to see he knew what he was doing with a pair of chopsticks when they met up at a Chicago sushi restaurant.

But the conversation seemed to revolve around fraternity and sorority life and, soon, DeFrain admitted he was 23. Liu was thrown but decided, “You know what? Let’s have fun with this,” she recalls.

They laughed throughout dinner, and he kissed her in a parking lot near her apartment building, just out of sight of her nosy doormen. When she called a friend that night, Liu said she enjoyed her date but added, “my only concern is that his whole social life is still fraternity-related.”

It wasn’t really. That just happened to be the common ground DeFrain found to talk about, because Liu had been in a sorority. He was a graduate student at DePaul University studying technology and, as their dates progressed, he didn’t think much about their age difference.

“There was just this chemistry,” he says. “We got each other’s sense of humor — the sarcasm, jokes.”

But in the back of her mind, Liu was hesitant to invest too much into the relationship. “It was sort of like, ‘This is great but I don’t want to get really deep into this and have him be like, ‘Whoa, I’m only 23,’ ” she says.

When he graduated that June and had job opportunities in Chicago, Minneapolis and Los Angeles, she told him to decide without worrying about her.

He chose Chicago, told Liu for the first time that he loved her and asked her to meet his parents.

“And honestly when I met his family, then I was like, ‘I can see our lives working together,’ ” she recalls.

By the end of that summer, they were all but living together and the next January, he accompanied her family on a two-week trip to Taiwan.

But that March, in the thick of the financial crisis, DeFrain was laid off from his consulting firm. Three weeks later, Liu learned her law firm position was being cut. DeFrain was happy to have the opportunity to pursue his real interest, information security, but Liu was in shock and felt her life had been thrown off-track.

“Awesome,” said her sister, Joanne, when Liu called with the news. Joanne was in the midst of opening **Scion, a new restaurant near Dupont Circle**. “Come to D.C., help me launch this.”

Liu had never considered getting into the restaurant business; she knew the long hours her parents worked. But DeFrain wanted to be in Washington to establish an information-assurance career and the idea of working with her sister had a lot of appeal.

In June, the couple packed their bags and moved in with Joanne. The three spent long hours overhauling **Scion’s** P Street space before it opened at the end of the month.

By the end of the summer, DeFrain found a job with a technology company and Liu was hired as a lawyer with the U.S. Department of Education, though she continues to spend most of her nights working at **Scion** and is a co-owner of the restaurant.

“I’m more of a risk-taker. She’s definitely more organized. But I think we balance each other nicely,” says DeFrain, now 27. “Like moving to D.C., for example — if I didn’t push for it, it probably would’ve been delayed a little longer.”

Their families started spending every holiday together, usually celebrating at Jenny’s. By then, it was apparent that their lives were already joined. “When something happens, he’s immediately the person I want to share it with,” says Liu, 30. “We’re huge communicators. Mix that with the humor and it’s been such an easy ride. No matter what crazy [stuff] we’re going through, we just laugh about it.”

In October, just before a joint family trip to Las Vegas where everyone expected DeFrain to propose, he whisked Liu away to New York City for a few days. They stayed at the Trump Tower, and management gave him access to a penthouse deck with 360-degree views of the city. In the middle of a small garden there, he asked her to marry him.

On Aug. 20, the two exchanged vows in a private room at Arena Stage, across from Liu’s parents’ restaurant. DeFrain’s father officiated the ceremony, which the couple wrote. The celebration moved across the street to Jenny’s, where table numbers were flanked by pictures of the couple at each corresponding age. Their official introduction was preceded by a performance by dancers in Chinese lion costumes.

Looking back, DeFrain says, he knew within six months that he would marry Liu. “It was just her willingness to talk and communicate — I knew we could survive really tough life stuff that we’d see in the future,” he says. “And then, we just had a blast together.”

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