

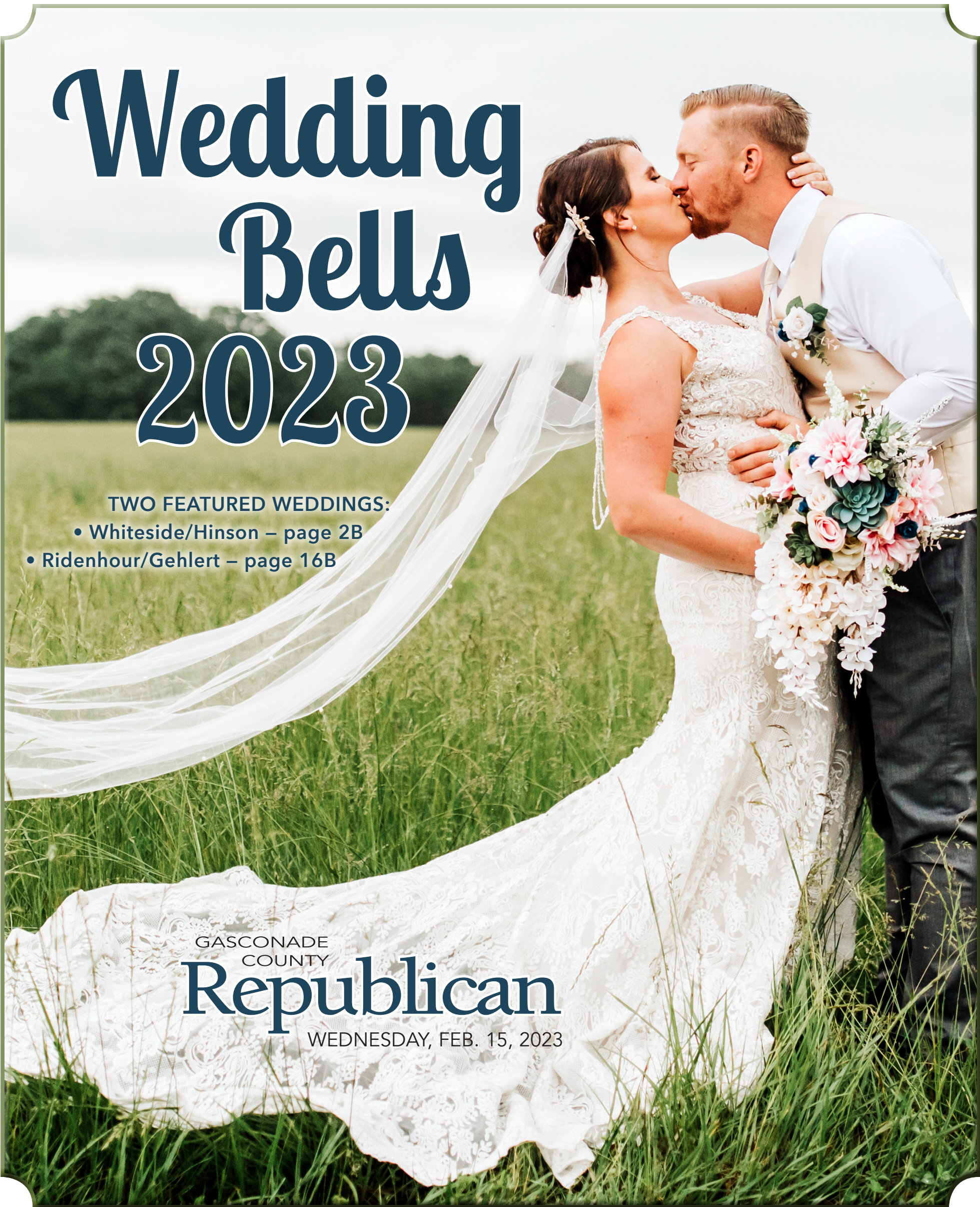
Wedding Bells 2023

TWO FEATURED WEDDINGS:

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GASCONADE
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Republican

WEDNESDAY, FEB. 15, 2023



An everlasting love song to you

Len and Toni Whiteside, May 21, 2022

by Roxie Murphy, Gasconade County Republican Feature Writer

This will be the one I've waited for...

In 2008, Len Whiteside would meet the love of his life at the United Methodist Church lock-in in Leslie — he was 14-years-old and she was maybe 12-years-old. “We then realized we went to school together,” he said.

Toni (Henson) Whiteside says the meeting was purely coincidental since neither of them actually attended the Methodist Church.

“I was there with a friend and he was there with a friend who was also my cousin,” she said. “But I have had a crush on him since I was 12 and saw him in gym class doing pushups. I thought, ‘yep, that was the man I was going to marry.’ It took 10 years before anything actually happened. I was pretty sure he had no clue who I was.”

After that fateful meeting in 2008, the two remained fast



friends throughout their high school careers until Len's 2012 graduation from Owensville High School.

“Then I went to the military and she went to college,” Len said. “We started writing letters.”

“I wrote, you never wrote back,” Toni clarified.

“I lost my stamps,” Len said.

They lost touch for a few years until Len was honorably discharged from the service in 2018.

This will be the first time anyone has loved me...

Len admits that his “girlfriend experience” before Toni was limited; Toni jokes that he asked for her hand in marriage because he didn't want to go through the dating process again. From whether or not their “first date” was in fact a “first date” to if she really was his girlfriend, Len kept Toni on her toes.

“He was finally out of the military and home for good,” Toni said. “Our first date was in late November of 2018. We went on a date and spent the whole day together — zoo,

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Wedding photos by Beloved Photography - Sarah Louise McDaniel photographer

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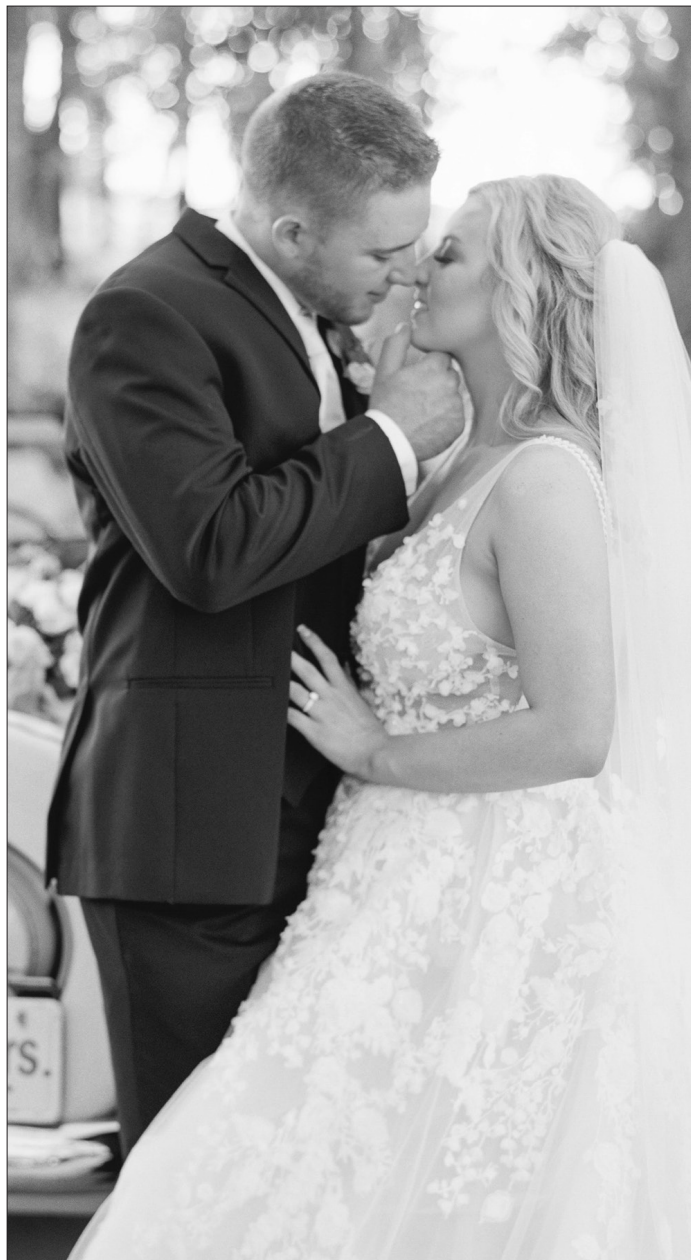
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Ridenhour/Gehlert Wedding
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A special thanks to these couples for sharing their stories.

Whiteside

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ice cream, Christmas lights at the brewery, back to the parking lot of my apartment. He so sweetly says ‘thanks for hanging out with me’ and leaves. No handshake, no hug — just thanks for hanging out. It would be two weeks before I got confirmation that it was a date!”

Len says, in his defense, Toni was only his second girlfriend.

“I guess that is why he asked me to marry him,” Toni jokes. “He figured he is in too deep now, no backing out!”

The next day after their outing, Lenn went on a two-and-a-half-week road trip with a fellow military buddy.

The confusion over whether or not their outing meant what she hoped it meant came at the worst time. Toni was attending school at Maryville University in St. Louis to be a nurse and between wondering about Len, she was trying to study and take her finals.

“I had finals and I am trying to study and take tests and the whole time I am confused about whether that was a date or if we were just hanging out,” Toni laughed.

When Len came back from his trip he acknowledged that their outing was definitely a date.

“We hung out a few more times together,” Toni said. “Movies. Dinner. Driving around looking at Christmas lights because it was December.”

Len said Toni had never seen the

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THE NEW couple (above) pose for a photo with the grooms family. Len (right) dances with his proud mother.



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Anheuser Bush Brewery lights, so they made it a stop. Two months into the relationship, Toni wasn't sure what word defined her relationship status with Len.

"After Christmas, we were going to his mom's house and on the way there he was like, 'hey, do you mind if I introduce you as your girlfriend?' And me just being casual was like, 'sure, if that was any easier,'" Toni said. "And his mom was like, 'girlfriend! I didn't know you

were dating anyone!'

"And a week later he changed his relationship status on Facebook to 'in a relationship.' I was like, 'oh, ok!'" Toni said.

"I had never been in a relationship so I figured maybe I ought to try this," Len said.

Len enrolled in school for the spring 2019 semester.

See **Whiteside**, Page 6B

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A LIGHT rain didn't put a damper on the wedding parties celebrations.

Whiteside • from page 5B

"I was going to SIUE in Illinois," he said. "While we were both in school, we saw each other every weekend and did stuff together. We were both active about trying new things, going out to eat, and going places — we took a lot of hikes that first year."

Toni said 2019 was just dating, getting to know each other. Len was friends with her cousin and some of her family members, so he already knew most of Toni's family.

Len was sure he knew what he wanted for their future, and began searching for the perfect ring.

I'm so glad, you found me in time...

Toni's birthday is in October — a month whose Zodiac sign features an airy Libra and an opal gemstone — which Toni wanted to include in her future wedding ring.

"She said she didn't want a diamond," Len recalled. "Her favorite stone was opal and that isn't something you could go out and buy anywhere. I found her ring on Etsy."

Toni says most of their wedding was Etsy-inspired.

"Most of our wedding should be sponsored by Etsy," Toni joked. "That is where I found a lot of things!"

Len said he had a budget in mind, but everything he found was less than half of his budget. Opals are not nearly as expensive as diamonds.

"I sent a few ideas to her best friend," Len admits. "Her friend was living in Texas at the time."

Despite not being able to find what he

wanted in a local jewelry store, Len said didn't feel right about purchasing a wedding ring off the internet.

"I felt silly ordering a wedding ring online but I couldn't find anywhere else and I didn't want to get her a ring off the shelf like a vending machine," Len said.

He ordered from EJ Collections, an Etsy store located in Los Angeles.

"It was several months before I was plan-

See **Whiteside**, Page 7B



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and the table and the bedroom set.*

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Whiteside • from page 6B

ning to ask her,” Len said. “I sent her a message and asked for the measurement of the ninth finger from the left. Fun fact, the ring is too big. I subtly asked her what ring size she was. I asked and she gave me the wrong size.”

Toni disagrees. She says the ring fits beautifully on the middle finger of her right hand, Len tucked the ring away and waited months until Toni’s birthday in October 2020.

You’ve given me the thrill of a lifetime...

Toni’s birthday consists of a trip to Oktoberfest in Hermann each year for a weekend of wine hopping.

“She does a trip to Oktoberfest in Hermann for her birthday every year and invites friends, her sister, her mom, and family,” Len said.

One of Len’s best friends, John Behrens, works at Stone Hill Winery and arranged to get Len a reservation for Toni and her birthday guests. Behrens’ wife Melonie was among the partygoers.

“I had an inside guy,” Len laughs. “John got us dinner reservations, and Mel, who was pregnant, volunteered to be our designated driver. We always went to different wineries and made sure to end at Stone Hill because that was where I planned to propose.”

Toni had planned on a smaller group of people because of COVID but said more people kept getting invited.

“I didn’t know that all these people knew,” she said. “I just knew that it went from a small gathering to everyone.”

Everyone present knew Len was planning to propose. Len’s stepmom had cookies and cups made that had the word “fiance” scrawled on them in celebration of Toni saying yes.

Toni’s mother and sister who were present thought that the proposal wasn’t supposed to happen until later in the evening when they were expected at a friend’s house for a bonfire. Len said the bonfire was the reason he kept moving up the dinner reservations at Stone Hill Winery from 7 p.m. to almost 4 p.m. that evening.

“I made it hard on him,” Toni said. “We kept telling everyone that if they didn’t want to go to the wineries we would have everyone at Stone Hill later.”

“The whole day she was like ‘let’s go to Stone Hill’ and Melonie was like, ‘no.’ I kept watching the time and moving up dinner reservations for 14 people,” Len said. “I was like listen if we move the time again we are gonna get in trouble.”

“At Stone Hill, we always take this picture on a hill with the city skyscape in the background.

“We are about to take a picture and he starts to kneel down,” Toni said. “I am thinking ‘what is he doing?’ And then he proposed!”

Toni, of course, said ‘Yes!’

And made me believe you’ve got more thrills to spare...

For the past year, Toni and Len’s love story has been saturated with perfect timing, but

See **Whiteside**, Page 9B

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TONI PRESENTED her parents, Tony and Michelle, (above, left and center), with a small gift before the ceremony. The bride, along with her brother and sister (photo far right), Bryce Hinson and Jessica Warden pose for the photographer. The two flower girls for the wedding were (photo right, from left) Angela Arens, Toni's god child, and Kaylee Warden, her niece.



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SYMBOLIZING THEIR union the couple poured two bottles of unaged corn whiskey into a special oak barrel from Pinky Bend so it could “age together” like the bride and grooms life as a married couple.

Whiteside • from page 7B

the COVID-19 Pandemic was about to put a hiccup in their wedding planning. Their parents and an honorary parent have professional backgrounds in the medical field and each one advised them not to attempt to get married in 2021 during the pandemic.

“It was 2020 so we were like ‘we will give the world time to calm down,’” Toni said. “Everyone said ‘don’t do it in 2021’ but no one remembers saying that.”

Plus, they were both still in college.

The longer-than-usual engagement didn’t stop the couple from jumping on board the wedding planning train.

They set a date the very next day — May 21, 2022.

Toni purchased a dress that was nothing like she thought she wanted.

And the couple discovered their theme.

“That was the theme of our wedding,” Toni said. “Unique and steeped in —,”

“Etsy,” Len said.

“— Tradition and sentiment,” Toni countered.

Champagne, ivory, and lace dress

“One of the first things I did was get a dress about a month after we got engaged,” Toni said. “When I bought my dress, I had my mom sister, and niece. We went to Goddess Gowns (formerly Margos) in Union.”

Toni thought she knew what she wanted — a princess gown full of fluff and tulle — but they made her try on the exact opposite.

“I wanted a big, fun, twirly ballgown and they put me in mermaid style with lots of lace and sequins,” Toni said. “It was on sale so that made it better. Champagne, ivory, complete with lace overlay and sparkles throughout. Lace sleeves and buttons down

the back. It had an open back with a beaded necklace that draped.”

The beads were an addition to the dress that Toni instantly fell in love with.

“It gave it an extra pop of flair,” she said.

A brief pause

After she purchased the dress, Toni and Len took a break from wedding planning as she was graduating from college and completing board exams, Len began a new job and they both eventually moved back home to Owensville.

They did manage to contract with vendors.

Beloved Photography by Sarah Louise McDaniel of Belle agreed to be the couple’s photographer; Melissa Scego, of Owensville, baked their cupcakes; catering by Front Street Catering, New Haven; DJ was Brenn Finely via Tyler Ahring, Owensville; videographer- Taylor Lionberger, TL Films and Videography; suits from Old World Creations, Owensville; flowers: Home-grown peonies from her parents’ flower beds; hair by The Emergency Rescue Squad — Christy Moody Aberle, Karrin Nettles, Kymberlyn Davis, and Taylor McClure; make-up: Britni Echols, Owensville; and Nails: Great Reflections Owensville.

“The DJ accidentally double booked between his band and DJ services, but he had a backup that did a great job,” Toni said.

Location, location, location

It was the location of their wedding, which Len and Toni decided should be outside, that took the longest amount of time to decide. They decided on Sweet Clover Farm near Hermann.

See **Whiteside**, Page 10B

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Whiteside • from page 9B

“We spent a long time trying to find a venue,” Toni said. “We toured four or five and all had one day of availability and they were expensive.”

The big-name venues near Owensville didn’t provide the couple with the exclusivity and privacy that they wanted for their event.

“We were looking for outdoor and unique,” Toni said. “Sweet Clover Farm wasn’t a place everyone we knew had already been to. It was affordable. We came across Sweet Clover Farms and loved it, loved the packages available, loved that we could choose how long we wanted it for for the weekend, they supplied some decor, we could choose our own vendors and they had separate rooms for the bridal party and groom to get ready.”

You’ve brought a lot of sunshine into my life...

The morning of May 21 dawns rainy with dark clouds.

“It was raining,” Toni said.

“I was late,” Len added.

Toni said God was testing Len’s resolve.

“He said he wasn’t going to show up if it was raining,” Toni laughed. “God was saying, ‘how much do you want this?’”

The rain was only the first part of it though.

“My hairdresser didn’t show up,” Toni said. “There was a miscommunication, she wasn’t aware we were confirmed for that date. It was 9 in the morning and nine of us needed our hair done.”

Luckily the bride’s sister is a barber and recently began working at Great Reflections.

“She called in an emergency team that consisted of everyone who was available. My best friend Carly called her stepmom, Christy, who was a hairstylist. We called everyone and said to bring everything! Bring curling irons and bobby pins and hairspray.”

Melonie Behrens had agreed to be Toni and Len’s wedding coordinator for the day.

“She made sure nothing got through to me,” Toni said. “I thought hair was the only issue. But apparently, Mel did such a

good job.”

Melonie bounced between the bridesmaids and groomsmen to make sure everyone was where they needed to be for pictures and set up.

Toni was finally getting ready. Britni Echols was in charge of makeup.

“The girls were frantically getting hair and makeup done and the guys were drinking beer, moving benches, escorting guests through the river of the parking lot,” Toni said. “Everything went smoothly aside from the rain and hairdresser.”

Len claims the groomsmen had better luck than the bridesmaids, however, he said the shirt that came with his tuxedo was too small.

“I wore it,” Len said. “They had to help me put on my vest because I couldn’t reach the back to put it on.”

Once the bridesmaids were dressed, each with a different color palette and hair finished, Toni said it was a scramble with three different people trying to get her ready and into her dress on time. Just as they were ready to walk from the bridal suite to the main event, a deluge of rain fell from the sky.

You’ve filled me with happiness I never knew...

“We had to wait for Len to go down the aisle before we walked out in the rain,” Toni said. “There were umbrellas around me and in front of me so Len couldn’t see me. It was pouring rain on a tin roof and no one could hear the music I spent hours picking out.”

She walked down the aisle to the instrumental version of *Flightless Bird* by American Mouth

“It sounds pretty and I wanted a romantic sound, original that no one else has done,” she said.

Len said his first thought when he saw her was, “She looked beautiful, but I think that all time.”

“The look on his face was really happy,” Toni added, like Len’s expression reflected their day. “He didn’t cry, I noticed that. I cried, but I knew I would.”

“I think she was relieved when she saw

me after all the hair atrocities and planning problems were over with,” Len said. “Or maybe she was thinking ‘he is still here.’”

Toni’s aunt, Barb Loyd, was the couple’s officiant.

“I was her flower girl so she got to be my officiant,” Toni said. “My niece got to wear the flower girl dress that I wore at my aunt’s wedding. My flower girls’ basket had flowers from my aunt’s wedding, and parent’s wedding, and grandma and grandpa Schmidt’s vow renewal.”

Toni also wore her grandma Peggy Schmidt’s veil and a bracelet from her grandma Fran Henson.

Instead of a candle ceremony, the couple chose a whiskey ceremony.

“We took two bottles of whiskey and poured them into a barrel,” Toni said.

“We got two bottles of unaged corn whiskey, it is moonshine but legal to sell, and we poured it into our own oak barrel so it could age together like us,” Len added.

“People really thought it was creative and we wanted something fun, unique and usable for later,” Toni said. “We have tried it, it is delicious. It has aged and has a nice oaky taste from the barrel.”

The barrel is from Pinky Bend in New Haven.

The couple reversed the aisle to *Everlast-*

ing Love by Natalie Cole.

“Not that anyone could hear the music we spent hours picking out,” Toni said. “We did a walkout meet and greet with everyone, but it was still raining and no one wanted to go out on the back patio.”

You gave me more joy than I ever dreamed of...

Shortly after the ceremony, the group left with the photographer for pictures. The bridesmaids’ dresses stood out against the dreary day in pastel blue, ivory, pink, green and some gray.

“After the ceremony, before the dancing, we took pictures while it was still raining,” Toni said. “The boys helped hold up dresses and everyone had a different color umbrella. It was not planned, we stepped in a lot of puddles, and my shoes were wet.”

They also had the photographer take a picture of all the wedding guests.

“I even had the photographer do a photo of our entire wedding, of us, the wedding party and all guests,” she said. “It stopped being fun mid-way through when my feet were wet, I was hungry.”

Pictures were cut short as more rain

See **Whiteside**, Page 11B

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HINSON DIDN'T want a diamond wedding ring. Instead they chose opal, her birthstone for the main stone in the wedding band.

Whiteside • from page 10B

came in.

"I wanted interviews done in our video and Taylor Lionberger picked the right time in the evening when everyone was feeling good but still sober enough to speak and the interviews were funny and fantastic," Toni said.

A hot meal provided by Seitters Market - Front Street Crater offered two entree choices.

"They were flexible and affordable compared to others caterers," she said. "They were great to work with and everything was on time. One of the few things we weren't worried about."

A variety of desserts were next. Melissa Scego and her husband Nick made cupcakes as a wedding gift.

"She does it as a side business because she went to pastry school," Toni said. "My grandma made us a cake to cut into."

Len said they wanted their guests to have options, not just a pretty cake.

"We wanted some creative, fun options," Len said. "We had three. But really we wanted good-tasting cupcakes, not just pretty. Melissa does a good job at both."

This will be, you and me, yes siree, eternally...

"After the wedding, we went to the Piano Bar in Hermann when the reception and everything was over," Toni said. "The bridal party surprised us with a gift — a night at the bed and breakfast in Hermann."

The Owensville couple still has not taken a honeymoon.

"We want to," Toni said. "At that time he was trying to start a new job and didn't have vacation hours."

"We have a plan for a honeymoon," Len said.

The couple wants to go on a road trip to New Orleans, eat banyas and tour old plantation homes.

Now that the wedding is over and the wait is finally finished, Toni and Len said they can honestly advise other couples looking to tie the knot.

"Research how to change your name in advance," Toni said.

"I think everything for us went smoothly," Len said. "We had support from family and friends"

"I think I would try to have a smaller wedding," Toni said. "My best advice I have already passed along is to get a coordinator. Whether that is your best friend, or someone super organized in life. Someone who can handle everything."

Len said their friend Melonie should have gotten a raise.

"I asked if she would do that for me because I already had six bridesmaids," Toni said. "It was a more productive role and something she was excited to do. I told her she was like a bodyguard. don't let anyone get to me. I gave her free rein to deal with it. That is my biggest advice. On the day have a coordinator to filter out the problems you don't need to worry about. I felt like it falls on the moms, but my mom got to be with me the majority of the day."

Len said the coordinator gave their moms the freedom to drink, mingle and enjoy themselves.

"It was nice and good that someone was making sure things were done, not part of the wedding and stressed out," he said.

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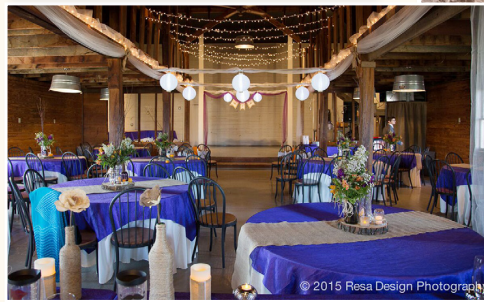
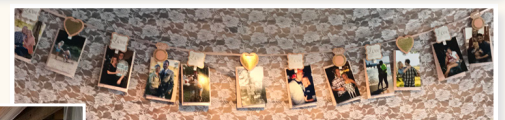
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A wedding party plays a key role in both the ceremony and reception. Participants do everything from helping couples make decisions to addressing invitations to providing emotional support. As so much is asked of the wedding party — particularly the maid/matron of honor and bridesmaids — it's customary to bestow gifts on those people who devoted so much time and effort to the wedding. These potential bridesmaid gifts can serve as a thoughtful and unique way to thank bridesmaids for all that they've done.

- **Photo books:** Gift the bridesmaids with photo books of carefully curated photographs taken throughout the wedding planning experience. Pepper the books with other photos, such as images of you with the bridesmaids at fun moments throughout your lives together.

- **Portrait wine or champagne glasses:** Beverage glasses customized with the bridesmaids' likenesses painted or printed onto them make for great gifts. Bridesmaids



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- **Birthstone jewelry:** Necklaces, rings or earrings become that much more special when they're customized to the recipients. Purchase jewelry with your bridesmaids' birthstones so they'll be as unique as each woman.

- **Friendship bracelets:** Gift each bridesmaid with beaded friendship bracelets that features all of the ladies' initials. Be sure to keep one for yourself, and you all can enjoy nights on the town showcasing your special bracelets.

- **Monogrammed robes or purses:** A customized pocketbook, robe or another item bridesmaids will use every day can make for an extra-special item that will serve as a daily reminder of how much you appreciate them.

Bridesmaid gifts are a great way for brides to thank their bridesmaids for all that they've done to make a couple's wedding day special.

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How to pick the perfect wedding dress

Planning a wedding requires making many different decisions. The choice of wedding attire is among the most crucial decisions that couples must make. Whether the wedding is traditional or customized to suit couples' personalities, brides and grooms want to look their best when they say, "I do."

Many brides-to-be spend a significant amount of time looking for their ideal wedding dresses. What defines the right gown depends on personal preference and is unique to the person doing the search. For example, a dress that sets a fairy tale scene for one bride may not necessarily align with the tastes of another. According to Bridal Atelier, the average bride-to-be tries on try three to seven dresses before finding the right one. The following tips can help those shopping for dresses find a look that makes their big day even more special.

1. Don't get hung up on perfection

Many brides get caught up as they search for the one dress they consider perfect. No dress is likely to check every box. Getting hung up on a desire to find a dress that has it all may make it hard to see the beauty in other dresses. Remember, with the talents of an experienced tailor or seamstress, most dresses can be tweaked to suit your vision of the ideal gown.

2. Consider the season

Getting married during the hazy and humid days of summer is an entirely different experience than tying the knot during the heart of winter. The fabric of the wedding dress should complement the season, whether

it's lightweight and breezy for a warm day, or more substantial and cozy when darting to the ceremony in snowfall.

3. Flatter your figure

Chances are brides-to-be know which cuts and styles are most flattering. Mimic those style choices in the wedding dress. If you want to take focus off of full hips, choose a basque or asymmetrical waistline. Gowns with substantial straps or higher necklines may be better if you have a larger chest. Sheath and mermaid style gowns are options if you are confident with your figure and want to show off your curves.

4. Try a bit of this and that

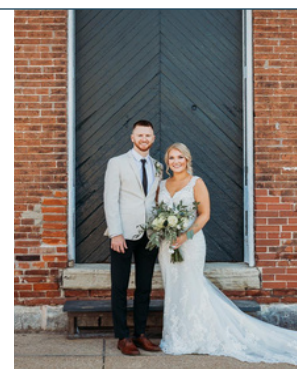
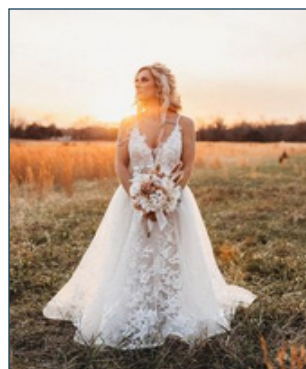
Don't go into a wedding dress appointment with firm parameters. Although you may have a ball gown style in mind, after trying on other options something with a less voluminous silhouette may actually catch your eye. Many brides also automatically defer to strapless gowns, when various straps and sleeves can be very appealing.

5. Arrive with a firm budget

Weddings can be costly. It's important to set a budget for the wedding dress just as you will with other expenses. There are plenty of dress designers across a wide spectrum of price points. A willingness to consider and ultimately purchase a less costly dress can help you stay on budget.

Browsing through magazines and looking online can provide wedding dress inspiration as well. Also, when in doubt, defer to the experts at bridal shops who have experience choosing dresses that brides are inclined to love.

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The tradition of raising a glass and toasting may be very, very old

If the ancient Greeks and Romans could be magically transported to modern times, chances are strong that much of our current customs would register as foreign. But one particular custom that's part and parcel of New Year's Eve celebrations across the globe might feel more familiar to our hypothetical time travelers.

Historians differ as to the origins of the toast, but the concept of toasting to one's own and others' health is evident in the ancient Greek author Homer's "Odyssey," which was written in the eighth century BCE. The "Odyssey" is considered one of the most significant works in the history of Western literature, and in it Ulysses raises a glass and drinks to the health of Achilles.

But the ancient Greeks were not the only ones to emphasize



toasting. In fact, during the reign of Emperor Augustus, who was the first official Roman emperor and reigned from 27 BC to AD 14, the Senate decreed that everyone must drink to Augustus at every meal.

Since ancient times, various traditions have incorporated raising a glass, whether it's filled with wine, champagne or another beverage. This tradition, now known as "toasting," might be employed to pay homage to a particular individual, wish goodwill upon an individual or individuals

(such as at a wedding) or simply in celebration of a special event or day, which is the case when the clock strikes 12 midnight on New Year's Eve.

Regardless of who was the first person to raise a glass to honor or celebrate a special individual or occasion, there's no denying this much-enjoyed tradition has a very, very lengthy history.

The tradition behind bridal veils

Though couples can plan wedding ceremonies and receptions how they see fit, many weddings are steeped in tradition, some of which may be more subtle than others. One longstanding wedding tradition revolves around a bride's attire. Historians differ regarding the origins of the bridal veil, but some trace this tradition all the way back to Ancient Greece. Others suggest bridal veils were first popularized within the Roman Empire by people who believed that the veil protected the bride from evil spirits as she walked down the aisle. Traditions surrounding bridal veils even differ within various faiths, so the veil may signify one thing at a Jewish wedding and something entirely different at a Christian ceremony. Veils also have long been seen by some as symbolic of purity. Despite their long-held position in wedding lore and tradition, veils are no longer seen as a must-have. Nor are brides who choose to wear a veil beholden to having it cover their face as they walk down the aisle. In fact, many modern brides now flip their veils over their head as they walk down the aisle en route to saying, "I do." Regardless of how brides who opt for veils choose to wear them, there's no denying the enduring popularity of this tradition.

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How to find the right wedding reception venue

Every decision engaged couples make in regard to their weddings is significant, but some may affect the day more than others. Perhaps no decision will help couples set the tone they hope to establish more than their choice of reception venue.

Reception venues are where couples and their guests will spend the vast majority of their time on the wedding day, which is why choice of venue bears such significance. With that in mind, couples can consider these tips as they look for the perfect place to host their receptions.

- Decide what you want out of a venue. Prospective brides and grooms may have vastly different ideas regarding how they want their weddings to go, and it's imperative that couples discuss their ideal weddings prior to looking for a venue. Do you want to get married in a place of worship? Or do you prefer a venue that can host both the ceremony and reception? Do you want an indoor, outdoor or hybrid ceremony and reception? Define what you both want before looking for a venue and make the necessary concessions if you have different ideas in mind.



- Consider picking a venue before setting a date. It can be wise to pick a reception venue first and then choose your wedding date based on the availability of the venue. This is especially important for couples who already have an ideal venue in mind, and it also provides some flexibility as couples search for the venue. For example, couples working within a strict budget may not be able to afford a preferred venue during the height of wedding season, but that venue could be less costly during slower times of year. By waiting to pick a date until you've chosen a venue, you're increasing your options.
- Consider your guests. Though couples,

particularly those footing the bill on their own, should prioritize their desires when choosing a reception, it's important they also consider their guests before making a final decision. A venue that's accessible and located near transit hubs like airports and train stations will increase the likelihood that more people can attend. In addition, if children will be invited, a venue that includes family restrooms, including at least one with a changing table, can make parents' nights much easier.

- Consider your budget. The Knot 2021 Real Weddings Study found that couples typically spend around 30 percent of their

overall budget on the venue, which makes this decision the biggest one in terms of the financial commitments a couple will have to make. Couples may be tempted to choose an awe-inspiring, costly venue for their reception, but they should consider how devoting so much of their budget to the venue will affect the rest of their big day. The best reception venue might be one that won't eat up too much of your budget.

- Consider the package. Venues vary in terms of their reception packages. Some may offer catering, including beverages, with each of their packages, while food and beverage might not be part of other venues' offerings. If you find a venue you love but it doesn't offer catering services, seek estimates from area caterers to determine how much it will cost to feed and serve your guests. Many couples find it more convenient and less stressful to pick a venue that offers on-site catering, though plenty of others have had no trouble after choosing a venue and separate caterer.

The bulk of a couple's wedding day and night will be spent at the reception, making choice of venue one of the more fun and important decisions they'll have to make.



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Carried away

Jat & Taylor Ridenhour, Sept. 24, 2022

by Roxie Murphy, Maries County Advocate Staff Writer

Taylor Gehlert and Jat Ridenhour's love story can be described as quirky, fun, exciting and without any dull moments — which he chalks up to her. This beautiful story could have had a very different ending if Jat's tenaciousness didn't eventually persuade Taylor to give him a chance.

My feet are planted firmly on the ground...

When Taylor first met Jat it wasn't love at first sight and she doesn't claim to know that he was the one.

"Quite the opposite in fact," Taylor said. "I knew who Jat was because my grandpa farmed his family's land."

It was a warm night in August 2017 when Taylor went with her friend Lauren to a river bottom party. They decided to attend the social gathering last minute and Taylor said she was having "the best time" when



Photos by Tonie Wieberg Photography

she first noticed Jat.

"I noticed this certain guy and I were always making awkward eye contact," Taylor said. "Every time I turned my head this guy was right behind me, to the side of me, and always within five feet from me. I finally had to ask who this guy was because it was starting to become creepy."

Creepy probably isn't a word one would want to be associated with by a love interest. Jat must have gotten the hint because he introduced himself. Then left shortly after.

"I remember telling Lauren on my way home how weird this Jat Ridenhour guy was," Taylor comments.

I get carried away by the look, by the light in your eyes...

With no face to the name, and the fact

See **Ridenhour**, Page 17B

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Ridenhour • from page 16B

that Taylor's family is not local — originally from Belle but living in Wardsville, the chance meeting at a river bottom party could have been a one-off event.

But for Jat, there was something about Taylor.

"When I saw her for the first time at the river, I couldn't help but think to myself how pretty she was," Jat recalls. "She most definitely did not act interested in me, however, which was disappointing. When I left that night, I couldn't get her out of my head."

Jat, who was attending Belle High School at the time, was interested in Taylor. As it turns out, an interested man is a resourceful man — much to Taylor's dismay at first.

"A few days go by and somehow he got my number and started messaging me," Taylor said. "I was so annoyed by him I gave him the typical one-word replies and contemplated blocking him. I had no intention of dating anybody at that moment with me starting my first year of college. I thought Jat was just a boy with bad intentions. He quickly proved me wrong."

Weeks went by and Taylor kept "coincidentally running into Jat."

"I was running into Jat more frequently thanks to some mutual friends who were giving Jat my location," she said.

She thought he was just a young high school teenager, but the more frequent the meetings, the more she began to change her mind. About a month later, Jat asked Taylor on a date. She finally said yes, and on Sept. 16, 2017, she let Jat take her to the Belle

Battle of the Bulls.

"He wanted to pick me up," Taylor said. "I said no." Taylor was determined.

"Leading up to our first date, I was so nervous, I remember but excited to finally take her out on a date," Jat said.

She met him at the event with her mom and by the end of the night considered it the best date ever.

Before I even realize the ride I'm on, baby I'm long gone...

"We had the best date and I left that night feeling giddy," Taylor said.

"What I thought was funny though about this date was that she left me to sit by her mom and towards the end of the night we were together again," he said. "Time went on and I was ready to make her my girlfriend officially. Although she made me wait longer than I had planned I was pretty confident that sooner than later we would be dating."

She loved spending time with Jat, but she still wasn't sure she wanted to date anyone — or that it wouldn't be just a summer fling. After all, he had asked her out twice and she told him no.

"It was not because I didn't like him, I just wasn't convinced I was ready for a relationship," she said. "He never saw the humor in getting rejected. I would tell him, 'ask me in a few weeks, I may change my mind.'"

When Jack asked, for the third time, on Oct. 18,

See **Ridenhour**, Page 18B



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Ridenhour • from page 17B

2018, she finally said yes.

“Every time I was around him, I would get the butterflies and I knew I had to say yes this time,” she said. “I joke with him now that the only reason I said yes the third time was because I felt bad!”

Nothing matters but being with you...

Between Jat graduating from Belle High School and Taylor finishing nursing school, it would be three years and three months later before the couple became engaged.

“There was absolutely no question that Jat was all in with me from day one — and he let me know it too,” Taylor said.

While she may have been more reserved initially, she admits that they clicked instantly after they started dating and she knew then that he was the one.

“I knew Taylor was the one for me shortly after we had started dating,” Jat said. “We became serious so fast and really hit it off instantly. I really knew she was the one when I looked at her not only as my girlfriend but my best friend.”

Although Jat knew it first, she wasn't too far behind him.

“I couldn't imagine my life without him in it,” Taylor said. “He was my safe space and my best friend and there was no way I



THE COUPLE rented this 1958 Nash Metropolitan for the ceremony.

could live this life without him in it.”

When Jat made up his mind to propose, he went all out, making sure Taylor had zero reasons to say anything but yes. Dec. 20, 2020, dawned chilly with a high of 51 and a low of 32 degrees — and Taylor was feeling slightly under the weather.

“I knew I wanted to take the next step with Taylor, but knew I had to get her parents' permission before even looking at rings,”

Jat said. “I asked her dad fist and with a smile on his face he said, ‘I wouldn't want anyone else to marry her.’”

Taylor's mom was the hard one. She and Taylor were also together, so Jat had limited windows of opportunity.

“The only time I could get Taylor away from her mom was while Taylor was in the shower,” he said. “I walked into Tricia's room and she was in her pajamas getting

ready to go to bed. Her mom was taken off guard because of the bizarre timing and she was literally almost a sleep.”

Tricia gave permission and they arranged to go ring shopping at Vandeliect Jewelry in Jefferson City.

“I knew she wanted a halo,” he said, talking about the white gold band with a diamond halo around a blue stone.

“I found the one. It was a cushion cut with a halo. I couldn't wait to get down on one knee and show it to her.”

It might seem like an ordinary night...

“I knew that Jat was taking me to a “special place” later that day and I had to start getting ready,” Taylor said. “We had frequent conversations about becoming engaged so I had a feeling it would happen soon but didn't know when.”

When she got in the truck and they were on their way, Taylor said noticed an almost immediate change in Jat.

“I was excited to see what adventure he was taking me on,” Taylor said. “We didn't even make it off the gravel road and his demeanor started to shift. He started biting his lip and I could tell in his voice that he was nervous about something. Then he said ‘so when do you want to get engaged?’”

See **Ridenhour**, Page 20B

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Ridenhour • from page 18B

She started to become suspicious. Jat wasn't good at keeping secrets.

"As we are driving out of town he comes to an abrupt stop and pulls into Bob's Frozen Custard, a very popular date-night summer spot where we became daily customers and the workers would know our order before we got to the window," Taylor says.

She knew the restaurant was closed for the winter, but Jat convinced her they had reopened. She could feel him shaking as they walked up to the window to order.

"Seth, the owner, was there," she said. "He hands me my ice cream and as I turn around, I see Jat on one knee, proposing."

She began to cry and unlike the first few times he'd asked her out, she said yes immediately.

"I quickly said yes, without any doubts like there was when he asked me out years prior," she said.

Then she received her second shock of the morning.

"Close family and friends appeared from behind bushes and from the building to celebrate the most exciting moment in our lives," Taylor said.

But, darlin', when you come around...

All in, Taylor began wedding plans im-

mediately, and the one thing she absolutely would not compromise on was the photographer — which meant the couple would have a long wait.

"I had been told that 2022 would be a busy year for the wedding industry since so many brides had to cancel their weddings in 2020 and 2021 and reschedule," Taylor said. "I knew I had to book early to ensure I got the vendors I wanted. One person I was sure of was Toni Wieberg."

Taylor had followed Wieberg on social media and fell in love with her work. The photographer had two open slots in September 2022. The couple knew one of those dates would be theirs, they just had to line it up with a venue.

"My mom, Jat and I toured one place before Red Oak Valley," she said. "I absolutely fell in love with (Red Oak). It was everything I was looking for and matched my theme, which was Country Chic."

Red Oak Valley was filled with the rustic charm, wood walls and elegant lighting that she was looking for and the amenities such as the farmhouse for the bride and groom, the Hen House for the ladies, and Hayloft for the groomsmen to get ready topped the cake. Having a date open that worked with the photographer sealed the deal — and the couple booked both vendors for Sept.



THE FLOWER Girls for the wedding were the groom's cousin's, Amanda and Ariel Moore.

24, 2022."

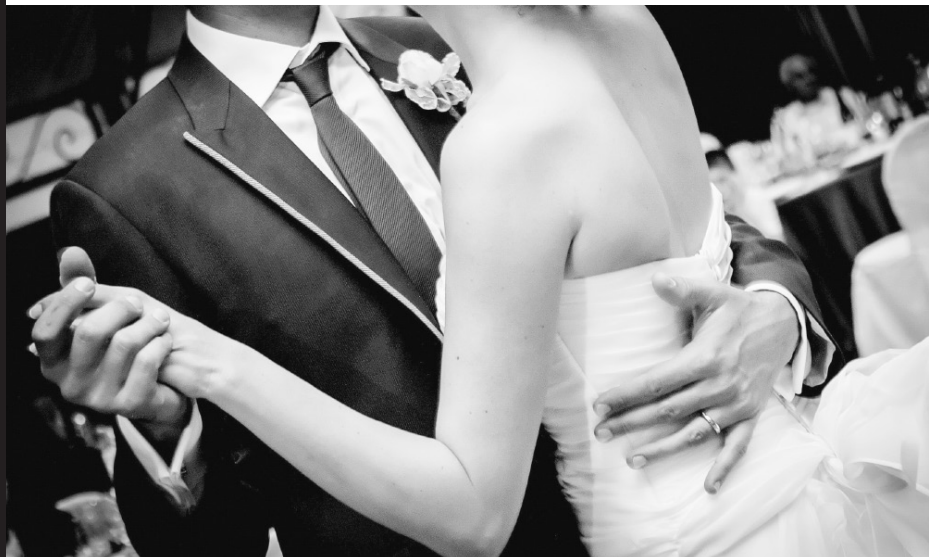
"Shortly after we booked the Red Barn at Red Oak Valley we were told about another barn that would be built and finished right before our wedding date," Taylor said. "I took one look at the design of the new barn and knew without a doubt that the new barn (known as the White Barn) matched our

theme perfectly."

The White Barn originated in Indiana and was restored on the property. It features dark wooden beams placed throughout, giving a modern rustic feeling that fit the couple's look.

See **Ridenhour**, Page 21B

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“Once we switched barns, I adjusted my colors so that they would complement the white and dark wood accents. My final color palette was blush and sage green with gold accents.”

After the venue and photographer were booked, the 21-month countdown to the wedding day began.

However, Taylor began nursing work on the night shift and found that by the time she woke in the evenings, most places were closed.

“It became challenging for me to be productive,” she said. “I came across Brittany Schaffer with Bridal Boss and quickly reached out to her for assistance.”

Schaffer is a wedding planner/day-of coordinator.

“I chose her highest package because I needed all the help I could get,” Taylor said. “Brittany was my go-to girl. She assisted with the vendor booking budget creation and tracking (my parents were all for this one), day-of coordination, and most importantly a day-of time line.”

Taylor knew what she wanted for her big day: a timeless, romantic, elegant feel. Space with soft lighting and intricate floral details. Candles incorporated throughout the venue.

“I wanted a romantic space that was an expression of us and our love for each other,” she said.

See **Ridenhour**, Page 22B

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Jat didn't have a vision of the wedding, only the woman who would be walking down the aisle, and gave her creative leeway.

"When it came to wedding planning, I had no vision at all," Jat said. "I let Taylor do everything and design it the way she wanted."

He wasn't thrilled that the main color was pink, but in the end, he would have the girl.

"I let her do her thing because I didn't want to disappoint her," Jat said.

Taylor decided hiring help was the fast, most effective way to get them where they needed to be.

"In order to execute my vision, I decided to hire a wedding designer instead of trying to create it myself," she said.

Her coordinator reached out to a wedding designer, Ab&Co. Taylor shared Pinterest pictures of her fairytale wedding and Abbie Clonts made it real.

"Abbie took a huge responsibility off of me and my family's hands.

Ivory, lace, floral appliques...yes, please

Due to the long wait to the big day, Taylor hired vendors before choosing a gown. In January 2022, eight months before the big day, she went to Breeze Bridal in Columbia to pick the perfect dress.

"On the drive up, I described to my friends and family what I was looking for," Taylor said. "Lace and sparkle, I told them."

Pulling up in front of the wedding boutique, Taylor caught sight of the dress in the window.

"It was exactly what I was looking for," she said. "An A-line stunner with ivory lace, floral appliques intricately placed throughout the gown. The skirt of the dress was pure sparkle leaving me speechless as I tried it on. The cascading train was a fan favorite by many. The dress is romantic and glamorous and fit the overall vision I had in my mind."

She was narrowed down the selection between two dresses, but the second dress didn't make her feel the same giddiness as the one in the window.

"Tears fled my eyes as I said yes to the dress and I knew it would leave Jat speechless when he saw it for the first time," Taylor said. "Wedding dress shopping was truly the most magical experience."

As they were leaving the boutique, Tricia saw the workers placing the same gown back on the mannequin in the window.

"I think my mom had fallen in love with my gown more than I had and quickly pleaded her case to the worker as to why a different gown should be on display. "The dress was still on display five months after we had purchased it. I joked with mom that she hadn't pleaded her case very well."

Same old stars, the same old moon up high...

The day of the wedding finally dawned. "After what seemed like years of waiting, Sept. 24, 2022, was finally here and it was the day I got married to my best friend," Taylor said.

She was calm when she woke, with the sun shining through the windows, showing what would be a perfect day.

Her wedding planner had the day's itinerary mapped out in 15-minute intervals, starting with the ladies reporting at 8 a.m. to the Bridal Suite to begin getting ready. Her ladies and her mom stayed by her side while the wedding coordinator handled everything.

"My job was to soak it all in and enjoy myself as I prepared for the biggest, most exciting day of my life," she said.

It had been 24-hours since the couple cut off communication with each other. Rather than a first look they exchanged letters.

"We wanted our first time seeing each other to be when I was walking down the aisle," she said. "I cried as I read his letter out loud for the videographer who was recording me to use as a voice over on our wedding video."

She later noted that a funny moment for her was reading Jat's letter — hand-written in both black and green ink. A vendor had informed her that he was writing the letter to her in his truck before he gave it to her. She said it was just like Jat to wait until the last minute.

For Jat, their wedding was nothing but excitement.

"I really wasn't nervous, but I just wanted to make sure Taylor had everything she dreamed of and that things ran smoothly," he said. "I couldn't wait for her to officially become my wife."

He had slept in late in the morning and when he woke, he immediately called his groomsmen to make sure everyone was on time.

"That is the last thing I wanted was for the groomsmen or me to be late," Jat said.

He wasn't taking any chances. After the pictures were taken, he hung out with his groomsmen to wait for his bride.

But when I see you standin' at your door...

At 4 p.m., Jat was waiting for his bride in the White Barn as *A Thousand Years* played and Taylor stepped through the entry way framed with stained glass windows in wooden doors.

"When the stained glass, wood doors opened, I saw Jat for the first time and everything around me became a blur," Taylor said. "I had my eyes on Jat and nothing else mattered to me at that moment. All my nerves had eased as I saw my future standing at the end of the aisle, waiting for me."

Jat had set aside his blue jeans and ball cap for a full tuxedo.

"I was speechless," Taylor said. "Seeing Jat in a tux was a different look than I had ever seen before."

She hadn't given him any hints about her dress.

"When I saw Taylor walking down the aisle I was shocked," Jat said. "I had no idea what to expect when it came to dress, but when I saw her I was speechless. At that moment, the nerves were gone and I was just ready to spend the rest of my life with her."

The rest of the evening was a blur, remembered in moments of emotion:

— Taylor gifted Jat with a handkerchief embroidered with her handwriting (in pink of course) that said "Love you always, T," before the wedding. He used to wipe his eyes during the ceremony.

— Being alone together for two minutes after they said "I do."

— Jat's letter in half-black and half-green ink.

— Jat forgot Taylor rented a pink convertible for pictures.

— Taylor's first look with her dad, telling

See **Ridenhour**, Page 23B



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him she isn't his baby girl anymore.

— Their surprise at seeing the reception area for the first time, completed by Abbie and modeled after Taylor's description of her perfect reception.

They danced to George Strait's *Carried Away*. Followed by a father/daughter dance to *I Loved Her First* by Heartland and a mother/son dance to *The Man You Have Become* by No Limitz.

"Looking back its so funny to me that we planned this big day for a year-and-a-half but when the day finally came it seemed like it lasted for only five minutes," Taylor said. "I hate how fast the day went by."

Nothing's ordinary anymore...

They were set to fly out to their honeymoon the following Monday morning. Taylor describes a funny moment when Jat asked her the night before they left for their honeymoon — what was the name of the country they were going to?

"He truly was just along for the ride," she said. "I love planning vacations and I was so excited to plan our honeymoon. Jat didn't care where we went so, of course, I chose the beach."

She Googled top-rated beaches in the world and Turks and Caicos came up in the top three.

"I ultimately chose Turks and Caicos because of the white sand beaches and turquoise water. We left the Monday after our wedding and stayed until the following Sunday."

The all-inclusive resort was the best and they spent every day relaxing on the beach and soaking in the quality-time together.

"Halfway into our honeymoon we were sent a preview of our wedding day from our videographer," Taylor said. "That was a special moment between us."

Like a feather flying high...

Five months after the wedding with time to reflect, Taylor says she would make some changes if she could do the whole thing over.

"It would be a smaller, intimate ceremony and then a big reception," she said. "I thought of that idea after the invitations went out and it was too late to change it."

Still, a big dream wedding with everything she wanted and only one minor hiccup —

"I misplacing my lipstick is the only chaotic story I can think of," she said. "I call that a win in my book if that was if that was the only thing that went wrong on a wedding day."

The couple is renting a house from Jat's grandmother, Janie, and plan to begin building on their property in Freeburg soon. She is a registered nurse at St. Mary's Hospital and Jat is a union electrician.





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