

Celebrant marks life's major turns

Personal approach lent to milestones

By Jennifer Fenn Lefferts
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After a grueling adoption process that dragged on for more than a year, Dan and Jessica Mercier couldn't wait for the day when Eva would officially become their daughter. But instead of celebrating, the Merciers spent that day in a courtroom being grilled by lawyers and signing documents.

"It was about as anticlimactic as going to the registry to renew your license," said Jessica Mercier.

The Merciers missed out on a traditional baby shower and are not religious, so they started looking for another way to recognize the addition of their 1-year-old daughter, who had been in their foster care since she was 3 days old.

"There isn't much tradition around adoption, and that's what we were seeking to do — find some ritual that addressed how our family came about," said Mercier, of Leominster.

That's where Boxborough resident Cindy Matchett came in.

Matchett is one of 350 celebrants in North America, including six in Massachusetts, who are trained and certified by the Celebrant USA Foundation and Institute to perform ceremonies that help individuals, couples, and families mark life-changing events or decisions.

Matchett, 38, is an artist who has been performing unique ceremonies for residents throughout New England for two years. Though her specialty is weddings, Matchett also creates ceremonies for divorces, adoptions, baby blessings, home blessings, new jobs, birthdays, anniversaries, and corporate and civic events.

She recently held a ceremony marking the fifth anniversary of the Inn at Robbins Brook, a senior living community in Acton. She also performs ceremonies for individuals who want to mark major

decisions. One couple held a ceremony after deciding not to have children; another held one after starting fertility treatments.

Matchett said it is important for people to note milestones in their lives other than major events like weddings and graduations. She said a ritual can bring resolution to one chapter and be the start of a new one.

"As a culture, we don't let ourselves experience things as much as we used to," said Matchett, who is married and has an infant son. "It can lurk in us if we don't acknowledge the big changes we went through. This gives people a way to acknowledge change has happened."

Matchett meets with her clients and talks to them several times before the ceremony. She peppers them with questions and asks them to fill out a questionnaire. To make the ceremony genuine, Matchett said, it is important for her to know what makes the couple tick.

"The core of it is getting to know the clients themselves," Matchett said. "We try to use their words and philosophy as much as we can."

Matchett said many couples want to personalize their ceremonies to reflect their personalities, customs, and beliefs and not be tied down to a scripted service or held back by religious customs.

"There are no surprises," she said. "They are empowered. It's about them."

Waleed and Paula Meleis of Lexington wanted a unique wedding that would bring together their Muslim and Christian backgrounds and reflect their own relationship.

With Matchett's help, Paula Meleis said, the wedding included a preceremony for their parents and close relatives during which the couple signed a marriage contract — a tradition at Muslim weddings.

Instead of the bride's father giving her away, each parent presented the couple with a flower



JOHN CHASE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Celebrant Cindy Matchett helps residents at Inn at Robbins Brook celebrate the assisted living facility's fifth anniversary.

and a blessing. And during the ceremony, Matchett incorporated many personal stories about the couple, including how they met swing dancing and Waleed's selfless trips to the store late at night to fulfill Paula's chocolate cravings.

"Instead of it being a familiar set of vows and readings, she allowed us to personalize it," Meleis said. "It was incredible. People were coming up to us after the wedding to say how moving it was."

Matchett last weekend presided over a wedding at Fruitlands Museum in Harvard for a couple that featured yams and olives rather than something like a traditional unity candle.

Emily Royce and Kevin Burke of Hudson were out at dinner two years ago when Burke challenged Royce to eat some yams. Royce, who hates yams, agreed, as long as Burke ate something he detested — an olive.

Royce held up her end of the deal, but Burke never did. For their wedding day, Burke agreed to eat an olive and Royce, another yam, as a sign of their commitment to compromise.

"I didn't want a so-called cookie-cutter ceremony," Royce said. "I wanted something that was personal to me and Kevin, and more handwritten about us."

The celebrant profession started in Australia in 1973 as the country was attracting more people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, said Charlotte Eulette, who founded the New-Jersey-based nonprofit Celebrant USA Foundation in 2001. There are now celebrants in 37 states and four Canadian provinces performing 3,000 ceremonies a year.

"The reason it's become so popular is people need to have their stories told," Eulette said.

Matchett said she became interested in how people deal with change and transition after she decided to get married. She was working on a piece of artwork that symbolized transition when she came across the website for celebrants. She was immediately hooked and decided to apply and go through the eight-month program.

Since then, she has been working to bring people together through her work.

"It's a successful ceremony if it feels like something happened to everybody — if they were touched or connected in some way," Matchett said. "They'll have shared that experience that they'll have forever."

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