

VOWS Rochelle Lichtman and David Deckelbaum



Robert Stotank for The New York Times

MANHATTAN, DEC. 20 They met as college freshmen, going through friendship, courtship and breakups on the way to marriage. More Photos >

By DEVAN SIPHER Published: January 2, 2009

SOME might call David Deckelbaum a true romantic, but he would probably laugh at the notion. He's simply a man who knows what he wants. And he has wanted Rochelle Lichtman since the day they met.

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She was the exuberant girl with exotic eyes and a vibrant smile who dazzled him during their freshman orientation at George Washington University in August 1998. "I thought she was absolutely stunning," said Mr. Deckelbaum, now 28 and an associate research analyst at UBS in New York.

Within minutes they were sharing a flirtatious conversation as they strolled across the campus. Then they went their separate ways, and he vowed to find her when school began later that month.

As it turned out, he didn't have to search very hard. They were living on the same floor of the same dorm. It seemed like destiny. Except she had no memory of him.

"He would look at me in the hallway, and I didn't know who he was," recalled Ms. Lichtman, also 28 and now an account director in New York at an entertainment marketing subsidiary of Omnicom.

The blow to Mr. Deckelbaum's ego made him standoffish, so it was months before they were reintroduced. But once they were, she was charmed by his sarcastic wit and verbal

dexterity. "We were always one-upping each other," she said. They quickly became inseparable. But only as friends.

When it came to dating, her taste ran more to bad boys with nice cars. Yet he was the one she turned to whenever she was upset. "He was always the person who calmed me," she said. "He was there when other boys broke my heart."

He was also there when she was hospitalized with Crohn's disease their sophomore year and the medication she took made her overweight and depressed. He tried to convince her that they belonged together, but she resisted. "I didn't want to give up my best friend," she said. "I didn't trust myself not to hurt him."

One night, while he was making his case for the umpteenth time, she impulsively kissed him. They began dating, but eight months later she could no longer ignore her misgivings.

"I felt David was the right person for me, but I didn't feel ready to be with him," said Ms. Lichtman, who was not sure what she wanted. As the oldest of six children she was used to sacrificing what she wanted, and she was determined not to do that. Not even for someone she loved. "I wasn't going to be with him just because I was scared of losing him."

So she broke up with him.

He was devastated, but undeterred. "Though the situation was complicated, my feelings weren't," he said. "I knew how much I loved her. If we were just going to be friends, then I'm her friend." They were back together by the time of their graduation in 2002, and as far as both were concerned, this time it was for good. Her commencement gift for him was a scrapbook titled 500 Reasons Why I Love You.

They must have needed 501, because in January 2003 they split up again, and this time it was his doing.

"All through college I had the upper hand," she said. "Then out of nowhere I got dumped."

They had both moved to New York because "it was her dream," he said. But he found it noisy and competitive, and expensive. He was floundering at his job as a day trader working on commission, and he wished that he had pursued a position at the World Bank, where he had been an intern in college.

"I didn't feel good about myself," said Mr. Deckelbaum, who was used to offering a confident and supportive shoulder to others. With no money to pay his bills, he was embarrassed to share his problems with Ms. Lichtman. Instead, he decided to break up and move back to Washington.

Three weeks later, his panic was over, but so was their relationship. "What I did was the dumbest thing in the world," he said, but she did not want to forgive.

"He was the only person I thought would never do that to me," she said, still sounding a bit hurt.

Mr. Deckelbaum was back to where he started, and just as determined. "I told her how much I loved her and how much I wanted to be with her," he said.

As the years passed, friends told him to move on, and he dated other women. Still, her 500 Reasons remained in his nightstand and "even if my mind was moving on," he said, "my heart never did."

Then in May 2007, after four years apart, he asked: "How much longer are you going to make me wait for you?"

Something inside her melted. "I spent all these years trying to figure out who I was and who I wanted to be with, and all of a sudden it was right there in front of me," she said. "I was exactly who I always was, and I was home."

On Dec. 20, they stood amid a sea of flickering votive candles at the Angel Orensanz Foundation for the Arts in New York as Cantor Richard Botton led them in their vows.

"I had 500 reasons why I loved David, but I needed my heart to be in the same place that my head was," she said. "For his wedding present there's 500 Reasons I Said Yes."

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