



Mixed Emotions

Real stories of mixed marriage



Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

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We walked the walk

We walked the walk

Ruth is a remarkable 87-year-old widow whose husband Pat died nine years ago. She lives in a bungalow overlooking the centre of the new city of Newry and despite facing heartache as a result of her mixed marriage, found forgiveness and happiness in more than 58 years of marriage.

I was shunned by family, friends and neighbours when I chose to marry Pat”, says Ruth. “But we put our trust in God and he looked after and cared for us and our children through all our years together.”

Ruth was born, the first of twelve children, on a farm near the border in 1924. “We were a happy, hard working family”, she says. “My mother and father were good, decent people who set us a fine example and though the work was hard and we all had our chores, we always had plenty of food, even during the shortages of the 1930s’ depression and the start of the Second World War.”

“We were a Non-Subscribing Presbyterian family, my father was an Orangeman and the church, the Order and the neighbours were our community. And a close-knit community at that.”

Ruth had Catholic friends as a youngster and had the rare chance, at that time, of going on to further education at the local technical college. “It was mixed” she says, “I really enjoyed it and looked forward to staying longer,

but, after two years, it was decided that I would take a job as clerk in the administration section of the Armagh Down Creamery. I had no other choice.”

“Again, I was part of a ‘mixed’ workforce and got on well with everyone, but there was little time for socialising in those days with so much to do at home.”

Ruth’s life was to change dramatically when she met Pat. He had been born and bred in Jerrettspass and lived in a lock house on the canal. His father laboured in the local quarry, while his mother worked the lock itself.

Ruth says, “Pat was already working at the creamery when I joined and we got talking, became friends and, eventually, started going out together. I suppose it was a normal girlfriend, boyfriend sort of thing, except that I couldn’t tell anyone about him.”

“We went out together for almost two years, but it was a very secretive romance, as I knew that my parents would not have approved of him. But, Newry was a small place in those days and somehow the news went round that I was intending to marry a Catholic. The first I knew about all this was the night that the local Worshipful Master of the Lodge came to our house fairly late on. I was ordered from bed, interrogated and accused. I was terrified. A young girl facing the full wrath of a man of authority. I denied everything and thought I had got away with it. The following evening, at around the same time, our Minister, who ‘had it on good authority’ that I intended to marry a ‘Papish’, cross-examined me and made me promise to break off the relationship. I still remember his words,

‘May God direct you’. But he was the one doing all the directing, as well as encouraging my parents to take the same stance.”

Ruth was told that she would be confined to the farm ‘for good’ if she did not end the engagement and she agreed to this in order to be allowed to go to work.

“I then wrote a 12 page letter to Pat, which I hoped his sister would pass on to him but, as luck would have it, I bumped into him that very day and told him everything. From that moment, I was never to return home again. We decided there and then to get married as quickly as possible.”

Ruth, who had been taking instruction in a local convent for a year, had already been received into the Catholic Church.

“From then on, things moved very fast. We took a taxi to Dundalk, met with a local priest and, eventually, got the Cardinal’s permission to marry on the 26th June 1943, despite the fact that I was only 19 and legally two years under the age of consent. Pat’s family were very supportive, but I know that my name was never mentioned again in my mother’s and father’s house after I left.”

“We had one day for a honeymoon and then back to Newry on the Sunday for work on Monday. I had only the clothes I stood in and, it’s funny now, but I was able to borrow a uniform from Pat’s sister who was a nurse.”

Ruth’s and Pat’s troubles were only beginning. Both found themselves without their respective jobs because

of the marriage. On Pat's return to work at The Provincial Coal Company – Fisher's Coal-yard – he was told that his services were no longer required, while Ruth was strongly advised by her employer at the creamery not to recommence work as her family were pressurising them to dismiss her. Pat then had to travel to England to get work. "We wrote to each other daily", says Ruth, "as that was our only means of communication". That first Christmas, 1943, husband and wife were apart and Ruth's parents returned her greetings card and present unopened. Family disowned her and former neighbours ignored her. "As everyone had ration books at that time, I had to go to my family's grocer, Bob Mitchell, to claim my allowance. They fulfilled my order, but the transaction was conducted in silence and I was not acknowledged."

"Later, when I went to buy my first pair of new shoes in Kennedy's, our family shoe shop, they refused to serve me even though I had the cash in my hand. I felt humiliated and shocked as my family had always been regular customers."

"My father told me that I should have kept my own religion. That was it. I was no longer part of their family. They were good people, but, at that time, they wouldn't, or probably couldn't, step outside their community, with all of its constraints, to show acceptance of what I had done. I suppose that, given all the circumstances, they felt they had no other choice. I was never back in my parents' home again and did not even get my belongings."

Ruth was stopped from attending her father's wake and funeral, which she watched from a garage door in the town, and only got to see her dying mother in hospital

after being smuggled into the ward. "Although my mother didn't speak to me that last evening", she says, "I did get the chance to tell her that I loved her."

Pat worked at several driving jobs, while Ruth reared their four children. Baby Ruth, their fifth child, survived for only one day. "Pat eventually went self-employed as a taxi driver, I got a job in the local credit union when the children were at school and we were able to build up our home and care for our family."

Ruth and Pat had a very active retirement, travelling to California several times and Australia, Lourdes, France, England, Wales and all over Ireland. "We used to walk a lot around Warrenpoint, Rostrevor and Omeath, talking a lot and reminiscing about our past lives, our children, our grandchildren and our great grandchildren and thanking God for all his blessings and for the good friends who stood by us during our married years."

"As I said earlier, we put our trust in God and he looked after us and our family through our married life. We had struggles and triumphs, but were happy and so much in love."

"A school friend, whose brother had married my sister, finally persuaded her to visit me when my last child was born. I was twenty years married at that time. On another occasion, Pat saw another sister downtown with her husband whom he knew and Pat suggested that we say 'hello'. Since that day, we have continued to stay in touch."

Ruth's three brothers and their wives went against the family's shunning and visited Pat when he was ill in hospital. "It was wonderful to see them and, thank God, we have maintained that contact over the years."

"I would advise any couples thinking about marrying to be true to themselves, to talk to each other and to work together. Pat's favourite sayings were, 'Ups and downs we've had a few, but here we are again', 'We walked the walk and talked the talk,' and 'We'll stick together like the ivy on the old garden wall'. We did it all together and, despite everything, I would do it again tomorrow. Times have changed for the better, but love doesn't change and that's the important thing. Oh, and by the way, the Worshipful Master who terrified me way back in 1943 – his granddaughter has married a Catholic!"



Pat & Ruth



All love stories are unique and these ten accounts of mixed marriage are no exception. Each story is shared with openness and courage and, stretching back nearly seventy years, the collective experience on offer reveals much about the attitudes of the day, showing how society has changed and, yet, how it remains the same.

Their experiences show how relationships can be made to blossom, even when it is made most difficult and we should be thankful that they have also shown us how, in the face of adversity, we can aspire and achieve far beyond our common divisions.

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