



Mixed Emotions

Real stories of mixed marriage



Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

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Go for it and be happy

Go for it and be happy

Katherine is a former nurse who lives in the County Armagh countryside outside the border village of Forkhill. She is a widow in her mid-70s, but with the vim and energy of a much younger woman. They are attributes that stood her in good stead in the past.

Neighbours and acquaintances had a lot to say about Katherine's budding relationship with her future husband back at the start of the 1960s. "It seems that just about everybody had an opinion about what I was doing," she says, "from the wee Catholic woman who called at my mother's house when the hairdresser's next door was shut with her comment 'Get the holy water missus for your man is as black as a pot', to the Protestant neighbours who wrote to my future mother-in-law to say that they 'had heard the dreadful news' and 'this would never have happened if her husband had been alive.'"

That annoyed me a lot as the last two had said to my face how pleased they were and that I was a 'lovely girl'. But I suppose that when it comes down to it, there's no limit to hypocrisy in this country. Especially back then."

Katherine and her late husband James (Junior) struggled against the intransigence of the Roman Catholic hierarchy for five years before finally being 'allowed' to wed in 1965. "We went through a heck of a lot and persevered to get married in the first place back in the 1960s", she says, "but I can tell you now that I would not be dictated to again and say to today's young people to go for it and be happy."

Katherine was born on Merseyside where her father and mother had gone in search of work, but, from the age of three, she and her four siblings, lived in the predominantly Roman Catholic village of Forkhill in South Armagh. "I went to the local Catholic primary school, then on to Sacred Heart Convent in Newry and I can remember clearly that, from my earliest days, I wanted to be a nurse. I even used to use a pillow as a patient for heaven's sake."

Katherine's dreams of a nursing career took a knock when she was struck down with rheumatic fever at the age of 15. "I was very ill for a time, but remarkably, I recovered well and, thank God, have never had any problems related to my heart." As soon as she was 18, Katherine took the boat to Liverpool to train at the city's Walton General Hospital. "It was three years of intense training", she says, "very hard work and long hours, but it was what I wanted to do and I enjoyed it." Her second spell on Merseyside, ironically the same length as her first in childhood, came to an end with Katherine qualified and going on the hunt for a job.

She says, "Those were difficult times for Catholics and, despite my seniority, I was forced to accept a temporary position at Daisyhill Hospital in Newry. That lasted three years, during which I had few rights and no paid holidays, but, eventually, I was appointed to a permanent position. It was worth the wait."

James or Junior, as he was known all of his life, died more than eleven years ago, but his memory is very much alive in the bungalow where he and Katherine spent most of their married life.

“Junior came from farming stock. They owned a place just outside the village of Forkhill and were Church of Ireland people. He worked the farm and as well as working with Catholics – it would have been practically impossible not to in this part of the country - he also socialised with them. He was well-known and well-liked and cared not a scrap about anyone’s religion. He liked a drink, a dance and a bit of craic and even played football regularly across the border in Dundalk.”

Katherine and Junior’s paths first crossed at a dance in the neighbouring village of Jonesborough. “I’d seen him before of course, but never took any notice. Yet, that night, we just clicked and began going out together.” Their courtship, however, was somewhat different from normal. “Aye, we used to meet up on the other side of the border away from prying eyes and wagging tongues. All the time, my mother knew I was seeing someone, mothers always do, but she never imagined it would be a Protestant. ‘Wait until your father comes home’, she said, and sure enough his contribution was short and not so sweet; ‘You finish with this character or your clothes will be left at the corner’. I was 24 years old, had a very responsible job and everybody, but me, knew what was best for me.”

Katherine and Junior even split up for nearly two months as a result of the pressure of the situation. “We thought it best at the time, but met up at a carnival one evening and that was that. I went home that night and told my parents, ‘I’m back with James (Junior) and I’m staying with him’. Their faces were a picture, but they knew I meant it and that was the end of the opposition as far as they were

concerned. I'm afraid I couldn't have said the same about my future mother-in-law. She hardly spoke to me, even when we got engaged after two years. That was when the nosey neighbours came into their own, but even the two who wrote the infamous letter I mentioned earlier were left red faced when I told them 'Our first-born will be called Paisley'. One local wag, a real old bachelor character joked about Junior turning his religion, but I told him, 'The only turning he'll do will be in bed' and we all had a good laugh."

Unfortunately, neither Katherine nor Junior had much to laugh about after that. They approached their local parish priest and requested the permission that would allow them to marry. "First of all, he assured us that there wouldn't be problem", she says, "but then told us that the new Archbishop of Armagh, Cardinal Conway, had turned us down. I met privately with the Cardinal and soon discovered for myself the cut of the man. 'You'll never get the dispensation', he said, 'so go home, find a Catholic fellow and forget about this one'. I told him that I would travel to England to marry and he said that he would stop that as well. Eventually, he relented, if you can call it that, saying that the marriage could take place in Liverpool, but I dug my heels in and kept pressing for a wedding in my home village. The best the good cardinal could say was, 'I'll remember you in my prayers'."

Ironically, if Katherine had fallen pregnant at any time during those long five years, the local hierarchy would have removed all obstacles and married them immediately. "They said that would be an 'excuse' to get married", she says, "I knew I didn't need an 'excuse'."

Eventually, with the help of a priest in Carrickmacross in Co Monaghan, the couple were granted the permission. "It should have been the happiest of times, but once again, the Cardinal attached impossible conditions. Only four people would be permitted to attend the wedding – that was us and the two witnesses – there was to be no publicity, no photographs and no music. We were devastated, but, thank God, the local priest allowed all of those and we made the best of the day, despite the fact that we were married 35 miles from home and at a side altar." Katherine and Junior had a great day with family and friends in attendance, although Katherine's mother-in-law didn't travel for health reasons. "Six months after our wedding", says Katherine, "a mixed couple from this diocese were allowed to marry in Dundalk Cathedral without any problems at all, but I think that money did more than a little of the talking in that case."

"We were blessed with four daughters who were raised Catholic, which was what both Junior and I wanted, although, disobliging to the end, the Catholic Church prevented my late husband's brother from being godfather to even one of his nieces and we were told that 'No Protestant would be allowed to stand for a child in this parish'."

Katherine and Junior were married for 35 years until he passed away eleven years ago. "Even then, we had a very ecumenical funeral. My late husband, at his request, was buried in our plot in the Catholic Mullaghbawn cemetery after a packed service in the local Catholic church at which his own Church of Ireland rector delivered the

eulogy. We may have been dictated to at our wedding, but the celebration of Junior's life went exactly as we wanted."

Katherine is still a regular mass-goer despite the bigotry, as she calls it, toward her marriage by many clergy. "They were arrogant, very narrow-minded and determined to get their way and it seemed to me that things could only be different if you had money, but we were just as determined, thank God, and fought for our happiness and to a great extent, apart from the odd exception, we were accepted by all. I would say to any couple thinking about making a mixed marriage to go for it, make it all you can make it and be happy. We did and I'm proud to say that."



Katherine & James



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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