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JOURNAL-NEWS

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McCrabb: Man's first words to Franklin Twp. woman: 'Will you marry me?'

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By Rick McCrabb

Staff Writer

FRANKLIN TWP. — They took “love at first sight” to a different stratosphere.

The first time they saw each other — well, the first time since they exchanged photos that were taken 10 years before — he dropped to one knee, right there in the Dayton International Airport, and proposed.

And, of course, she said “yes.”

Otherwise, this wouldn't be a Valentine's Day story.

Tom Gilchrist said proposing the first time he saw Tracy Meehan was “a calculated risk.”

No, Tom, skydiving is a calculated risk. What you did was jump out of a plane without a parachute.

Who proposes before the first date? Whose ice breaker line is: “Will you marry me?”

But the Gilchrists have proved the doubters wrong. They have been married for two years, and they have added a 3-year-old daughter, Katie Mae, “a surprise baby,” to their blended family.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

To appreciate how Tom, 46, and Tracy, 42, became Mr. and Mrs. Gilchrist, we have to flip the calendar back to 1999. Tracy and her ex-husband have a daughter, Morgan, who was born with Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes a range of physical, cognitive and medical challenges. Tom and his ex-wife have a daughter, Maddy, who was born with CdLS.

There are about 200 known cases of CdLS in the United States and 2,000 around the world, according to the CdLS Foundation.

Since the disease was so rare, those families with children with CdLS participated in an Internet support group every Friday night. They gathered around their computers and communicated with other parents about their problems. They chatted about medical issues, challenges raising a child with CdLS, and celebrated milestones and birthdays. The sessions were part medical, part social.

“We were our own teachers,” Tracy Gilchrist said. “Doctors didn't know what to do. It was like we were on an island by ourselves.”

The support group lasted for years, and eventually Tom and Tracy divorced their spouses. They remained active in the support group until one week, Tom wasn't on the Internet. One week turned to one month turned to one year. Tracy figured something must have happened to him, so she dated other guys, but each relationship ended before it got serious.

“I couldn't share with those other guys like I could with Tom,” she said. “We had so much in common.”

Then one day, Tom called Tracy “out of the blue,” she said, and every day after that, without fail, they talked on the phone. Some of the conversations lasted six hours.

“And I don't like talking on the phone,” he said.

Wanting to finally meet the woman on the phone, Tom asked if he could visit her in two weeks. He wanted to fly from his home in Texas. Tracy said that'd be fine, though, now she admits she was worried about trying to lose 40 pounds in just two weeks.

It's a good thing she agreed because Tom had already bought his airline ticket.

So in September 2010, Tracy nervously drove from her Franklin Twp. home to the Vandalia airport to meet the man behind the voice. Tracy paced as his plane neared the gate. A security guard told her she needed to step back a few feet. As 6-foot-6 Tom walked off the plane, he could see Tracy, all 5 feet of her, standing there.

“He was gorgeous,” she said.

It was time to pop the question.

Now or never, he thought.

“I needed to get it out of the way,” he said. “I was confident because I could see her body language.”

“I don't have a poker face,” she added.

They drove to Tracy's parents' farm house in Franklin Twp., and after sharing apple pie and coffee, her father asked Tom his intentions.

“Well, sir,” he said, “I'd like to marry your daughter.”

The next sound had to be all the forks hitting the floor.

They were married on Oct. 20, 2012. They live in Franklin Twp. with Morgan, 16, a student at the Warren County Educational Services, and Katie Mae. Tom's daughter from his first marriage, Maddy, 18, lives in Texas with her mother.

So last night, their fifth Valentine's Day together, the Gilchrists stayed home and called Tom's daughter.

"People sometimes seem sorry for us because of our children," said Tracy Gilchrist, executive director of Progressive Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) in Monroe. "We don't. We truly feel fortunate to have them. Even more fortunate to know love in its purist form. We stopped comparing ourselves to others a long time ago."

Tom was asked what love lesson he learned from meeting and marrying Tracy.

"Love is very important," said Tom Gilchrist, who works at SunCoke Energy. "Without love you are only going through the motions, taking out the trash, paying the bills. That would be meaningless, kind of boring. Our lives are not boring."

Relationships that take off at airports rarely are.

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