

# When Love conquers all

Both Debbie and Ben Katz have Down syndrome, but that hasn't prevented their love from prevailing. **Chantal Abitbol** speaks to the newlyweds about their love story.



Debbie and Ben Katz on their wedding day last Sunday.

Photos: Ingrid Shakenovsky

**L**IKE other couples who have lived together for years, newlyweds Ben and Debbie Katz have got their own routine. Ben makes his wife her favourite honey tea when she's not feeling well. She worries about his waistline and nags him about eating too many chips and doughnuts.

They take turns cooking dinner, call each other "cutie" and "honey", and enjoy socialising with friends at the Maroubra Surf Club every Saturday night.

But they're also unique. Both Debbie and Ben have Down syndrome, a chromosomal abnormality that causes lifelong developmental delays and other problems.

Despite their disabilities, their love has prevailed. And after more than 15 years together – the majority of which they have spent living together in a two-bedroom Randwick flat – the couple finally tied the knot in a Jewish ceremony at Bonnie Doon Golf Club last Sunday.

Before 120 of their closest family members and friends, Debbie, 33, walked down the aisle in a white organza wedding dress to meet Ben,

43, under the chuppah in a ceremony officiated by Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins.

"He's kind, tactile and sexy," enthuses Debbie about her new husband. "He helps me cook; I like what he has to say."

Ben is equally besotted. "She's a good listener," he says, pinching her cheeks. "We play games, go out to dinner. She's so lovely."

To emphasise his point, he throws his arms around her and plants a long kiss on her lips.

The couple met at a community centre in Woollahra 15 years ago. Debbie was only 18 at the time; Ben was 28. The age difference wasn't an issue.

Debbie, who had had a previous boyfriend, made the first move.

Ben – the shy half of the couple – was more than happy to let her take charge. "I wanted to be with him all the time," Debbie recalls.

In 1992, they both began working at JewishCare's Print35, where they still work today.

Print35 employs people with disabilities, and working and spending all their free time together, their relationship flourished.

At Debbie's 21st birthday bash held at the Hakoah Club, she jumped on the ballroom stage, grabbed the microphone and proposed to Ben in front of the guests. It was an offer he couldn't refuse.

A year later, they moved in together, renting a flat in Randwick, which they were able to secure with JewishCare's help through NSW's public housing department.

Both of their parents supported the move.

"I had always envisioned her moving out," says Debbie's mother, Bella Sharp-Collins, 65. "The fact that she was only 22 took me a little by surprise. It's a little young for any so-called 'normal' children. But from the day they moved in together, they were so free and easy with each other."

For Ben's mother Rachel Katz, 82, who was already friends with Sharp-Collins after meeting her at a parent support group decades earlier, it also came as a relief.

"When Ben's father was still alive, we were starting to worry about what would happen to Ben. I'm not going to be here forever," she says. "I thought it was lovely that he could have a partner and be together for all those years."

She also recognises the positive influence Debbie had on her son.

"Before he wouldn't have been able to go into a shop by himself; he was too shy. But now he'll do it. Debbie made him come out of his shell."

Making the leap, however, came as a bit of a shock for the pair. Neither had many day-to-day skills and had to learn the basics – cooking, shopping, cleaning and managing money.

Initially, they needed full-time support. But these days, they get by with only part-time care and live fairly independent lives.

Five days a week, they take public transport to their jobs in Darlinghurst, and on the weekends they like going

out to catch a movie or for a bite to eat.

But despite their new-found freedom and getting engaged more than a decade earlier, the couple had kept deferring taking the final plunge to marry.

Finally, last year, Debbie said enough was enough. It was time.

"Her dream was to be a bride and I thought 'why not?'," recalls Sharp-Collins. "They've lived together for 11 years now, and every woman wants to be a bride. She deserves it, too."

**T**HE couple are not the first with Down syndrome to marry in Australia.

Down Syndrome NSW CEO Steve Clarke says there have been several couples to tie the knot in Australia in just the past year. But he adds it isn't that common.

"There are a number of barriers to overcome, such as family resistance and sometimes the lack of accommodation and support," he says. "There are also no role models in the community, which also reinforces itself."

Marriage offers the same benefits to Down syndrome couples as it would to any other couple, he says. But it's a prickly issue when it comes to couples starting a family. "It has to be handled on an individual basis," Clarke says. "There are many difficulties in terms of fertility. But it's not unheard of. So long as the couple is able to get proper counselling and advice, that's not going to be a particular issue."

JewishCare CEO Claire Vernon says the organisation encourages and supports its clients with intellectual disabilities to live independently if they wish to do so.

Currently, the Katz couple is among 15 adults who receive support through JewishCare's Beit Chaim Community Living Program, which provides training and support for adults with low to medium needs.

"Each client has a case manager and at least one support worker," says Vernon. "Clients also have access to a 24-hour emergency on-call number. [The] goal is to maintain their independence."

But it doesn't come cheap. Beit Chaim clients generally receive support for 15 hours per week at a cost of \$18,000 annually.

Vernon says many clients could benefit from extra support and demand is high, but it comes down to money.

The Jewish Communal Appeal provides some help, but the main source of funding comes from the government.

"With more money, JewishCare could help more," she says.

Sharp-Collins says she knows all too well the hardships of finding the right assistance, and she is grateful for JewishCare's services.

"A lot of my friends who aren't Jewish and have Down syndrome children are quite envious," she says. "Ben and Debbie are not the highest functioning. A lot of Debbie's friends are higher, but they don't have the life that Ben and Debbie have. They don't go to work every day and have a companion."

She says she would like Ben and Debbie's love story to be a lesson to other parents in a similar situation.

"This can happen. There is light at the end of the tunnel."

