

OCT 2023

BILTMORE LIVING



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MEET
THE
Mannings

It's easy to imagine the Manning family leading double lives as superheroes. The four of them huddling together in hand-painted capes when dusk falls, solving mysteries in secret languages or engineering a time capsule out of finely cut cardboard scraps. Fingers orchestrating ideas like wands; glitter and glue and melodic words on sticky notes garnishing tables, walls, their cats, each other.

The hyperbole comes as an effortless thought. The Mannings, after all, have a gift for sparking imagination. They're that artsy family on the block whose Halloween costumes you remember for years to come; the type of people that phase out their dining room to make a crafting room instead. Wandering through their house, you're apt to find towers of books, art supplies, collectible figurines, and fabric spiders with styled hairdos.

But none of this is really surprising. Matthew is a renowned comic book author, having published over a hundred works. Dorothy is an art director-turned-photographer and a 3-D production extraordinaire. Their two daughters, Lilly, 13, and Gwen, 10, are the perfect confluence of their fanciful brains and gentle hearts. And like all good superhero narratives, together, they compose one of the most brilliant character contradictions in storytelling: that at day's end, they're probably just like you or me. A tight-knit family of humble, neighborly humans that savor the simplicity of daily life and the connections it breeds.

It all begins as a love story in New York. Matthew and Dorothy met in college; two arts students with big dreams in the big city, a script fit for a movie. One year, Dorothy applied for a job at the Visual Arts Student Association, and Matt was one of her interviewers. "Your friend said I was cute and that you should hire me, right?" Dorothy smiles, looking over at Matt. The interview went well according to any standard. Dorothy was hired, Matt became her friend, and soon thereafter, they started dating. You can't help but wonder if

they endearingly finished each other's sentences then as they do now.

It was a formative time and place for both of them, and each brought different life experiences to the table. Dorothy grew up in New Jersey, with the city bustle at arm's reach. Matt, in contrast, was discovering it all wide-eyed, having hailed from rural Ohio. His high school was in the middle of three fields, and not many peers shared his passion for comics and art. Moving to New York changed all of that.

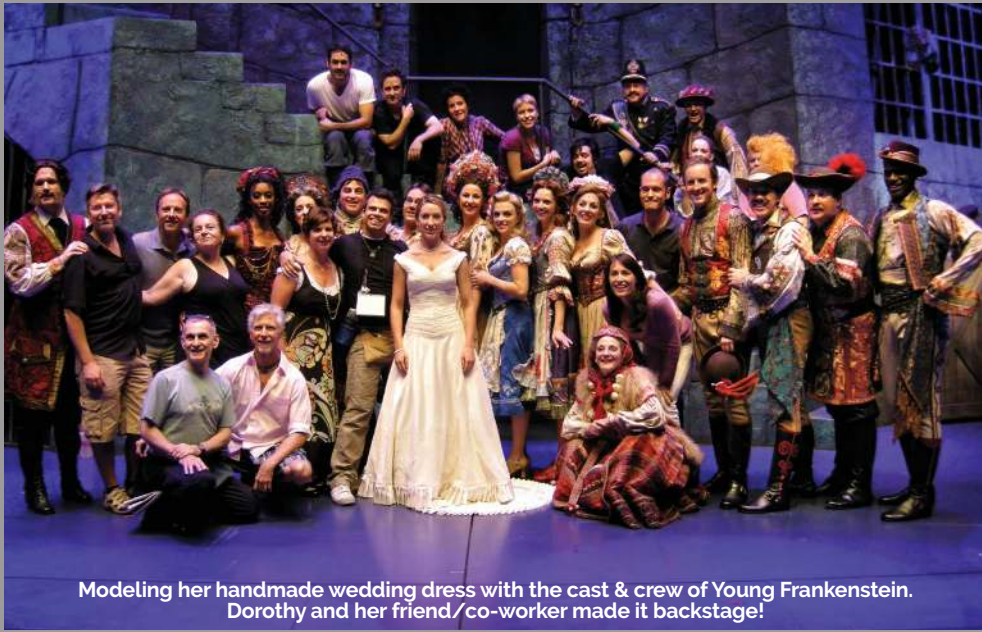
Luckily for Matt, he always knew that graphic novels were his path. He grew up reading the classics -Calvin and Hobbes, The Far Side, the Dick Tracy strips- and naturally progressed into writing his own comics. Then, in 1989, the Batman movie came out. He was in fifth grade. "That ruined my life forever," he laughs. "And I decided: I only want to do superheroes now."

He read everything he could get his hands on and began to hone the craft of writing as much as drawing. "In art

THE MANNING FAMILY: *Stretching the Imagination*



BY SYLVIA KARCZ
PHOTOS BY KATIE RICHARD PHOTOGRAPHY



Modeling her handmade wedding dress with the cast & crew of Young Frankenstein. Dorothy and her friend/co-worker made it backstage!



Lilly and Gwen always love joining Matt at comic conventions!

school, I met a lot of artists who draw like they need to draw. And I've always been like that with stories," he says of his penchant for storytelling, which found him focusing more and more on scriptwriting. His talents eventually landed him an internship at DC Comics. "And then I just kept bothering them until I got work," he laughs.

For Dorothy, New York was equally full of inspiration and opportunity. "It was very freeing to live there. Even just walking down the street and discovering new things was so exciting" she says. Her studies focused on 3-D design: the art of conceptualizing and building things that are three-dimensional. A knack for composition allowed her to rack up an impressive portfolio within New York's entertainment industry, from overseeing wardrobe for iconic Broadway shows to art direction on independent films. Professionally and personally, Dorothy and Matthew were thriving. Most of all, together.

By now they were engaged, living in Brooklyn, and their future was beaming. Yet every good love story needs a little complexity. "I got cold feet and we called the wedding off," Dorothy begins, but Matt quickly gives a nudging laugh. "Sorry...I called it off," she rephrases. "And I will never live it down." It's clear they appreciate a plot twist; and the wait was worth it.

After some time apart, they reunited and moved into a new apartment together. Dorothy made a plan to propose to Matt the second time, in a big way; even asking his parents' permission. "I figured that I couldn't let him ask me again. He needs to know that I'm really in it." So she planned a neighborhood

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It felt a lot like their beloved former enclave of Park Slope, Brooklyn, too, so it was a natural fit. "There were really great mom-and-pop restaurants and shops, and a little bit of an art scene. And it does have an earthy, eco-conscious community, which was a real draw for me," Dorothy says of choosing to bite the bullet and purchase their first home in Asheville. "We just decided that we're going to plant our roots and make it work. So we went all in."

A new city brought new ways of utilizing their creativity, too. Matt found himself greatly inspired by Asheville's architecture and unique history, and has been writing a graphic novel chronicling the city's past. Dorothy's experience with set design and direction, on the other hand, translated into work as a family and lifestyle photographer. It's a profession that steadily grew from her first months as a mother, when she purchased a professional-quality camera to capture those special newborn moments.

"After looking back on all those meaningful photos, I thought, why wouldn't I want to do that for other people now?" Dorothy says of her transition to photography. She dove headfirst into teaching herself all the nuances of the trade and photo composition. In many ways, it felt very familiar; not all too different than dressing a set for a play or production, especially when it came to newborn photography. "Sometimes it's a four-hour process of getting the baby to go to sleep," Dorothy says, stressing that patience is everything. "But then, they're just like a little bowl of fruit you can do whatever you want with."

WHAT A HUNGRY LITTLE CATERPILLAR -2018



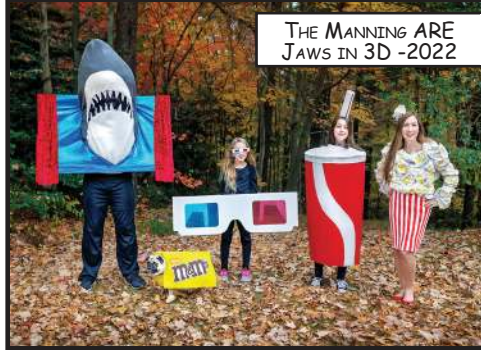
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THE MANNING ARE JAWS IN 3D -2022



scavenger hunt, something straight out of a video game. She even wrote clues in "Interlac," an alphabet substitute from a futuristic comic Matt had written called Legion of Super-Heroes.

To no one's surprise, he said yes. And when it came time for the wedding day, they figured they'd appease their friends and family's curiosity about the past years with none other than a comic book, detailing the story of their entire relationship. Dorothy painted the cover, Matt wrote the script, and their art friends all created different pages. It's as fitting a memento as can be.

After over a decade of living in New York, though, change was on the horizon for the Mannings. They welcomed their first daughter, Lilly, in Brooklyn, but couldn't help be pulled towards something new; like a place where you didn't need to lug a stroller up subway stairs. Although Mystic, Connecticut, was that first transitory step out of the city, it wasn't until Dorothy's sister suggested Asheville that the wheels started turning. Visiting the city for the first time, the connection felt right. "Every once in a while I'll just click with a town right away. And with Asheville, it was like that," Matt says. "In the first half-hour of walking around, I said, yeah, this works."

Talent and a list of individual accolades is one thing, though, and a meeting of minds is another altogether. Like all great partnerships and group dynamics, the Manning family elevates each other's strengths to create something memorable at every turn. Their yearly Halloween costumes reflect that to perfection and it's become a family tradition that's bound to evolve as their girls grow up. But they'll savor every moment they can. The family they've created, after all, is their greatest achievement.


"It's so fun now that Lilly and Gwen are older, having real conversations, personalities, and opinions," Dorothy says of her daughters, especially proud to be raising curious and kind humans. Watching them explore their own creativity is equally rewarding. Lilly loves drawing, videography, and sharing a story, much like Matt, while Gwen gravitates towards building things with her hands, taking after Dorothy. The girls are both big readers, too. "They still like some of my friends' comics better than mine, but that's all right," Matt adds.

They find no shortage of ways to relish the beauty of their community as a family, either. Whether that means waterfall hunting in Pisgah National Forest or packing up a picnic for an impromptu dinner in the outdoors. These day-to-day connections are what fuel the Mannings above all else. For Matt, the consummate storyteller, it's also the perfect recipe for character creation. "Especially with the girls, a lot of times they help inspire different elements in the stories or just funny conversations we've had."

For Dorothy, it's more a framework for consciously existing, and observing. "Just being present in the moment and being grateful, because life is good right now," she says. "And that fuels me creatively, too. Seeing an embrace, or hands touching each other. I want to feel the connection between people."

The secret to the Mannings' success and happiness, then, is no grand superhero mystery. It's rather to, simply, and graciously, continue fostering connections and creativity, in the most authentic ways possible. Matt says it best when describing his typical workday. "Well, it wouldn't be fun for a camera crew to follow me around all day. Because they'd just be, like: *you're still just sitting there? What's happening next?* But it's kind of just about stretching the imagination all the time."






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