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BRAVA

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for women of style & substance

Read about Lisa
and Kaleem Caire's
journey together
on p. 38!

Local couples
share a glimpse
into their
**Real
Relationships**
and life beyond the vows





beyond the vows

They say first comes love, then comes marriage. But often what comes next are disagreements, different life plans, and doubts about surviving the road ahead. So what keeps a relationship going strong? We turned to a few experts—local married couples—who spilled the un-sappy, uncensored truth about what it really takes to make it to happily ever after

As told to Emily Leas | Couples photographed by Laura Zastrow

closet Finding Closeness Through Distance

Changing communities and changing perceptions are what Lisa Caire, founder of the Black Women's Wellness Foundation, and husband Kaleem, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Madison, dedicate their lives to. But it's been learning to find themselves that Lisa says has kept them dedicated to each other

Kaleem tells the story of how we met and remembers every detail ... the way I walked, the shoes I had on, what I talked about. What I remember is a handsome man showing up at my dorm to pick me up for a date. He'd been in the Navy and had seen the world, and his experiences fed my desire to escape the safe, protected life I knew growing up in a small, Southern community.

“You can't shape a person into who you want them to be. But having that foundation of commonalities gives you something to lean on.”

In those early days, when I was 19 and he was 20, there was real honest affection, admiration and respect. We were so innocent; there wasn't much holding back. We soon realized we shared the same foundational principles about family, serving our community, empowering others, and righting the wrongs we saw around us. A year later, we started our lives together.

Through the difficult times—and there have been many difficult times during our 20 years of marriage—that's the foundation that brings us back to each other. It

reminds us what is important and why we've been invested in each other this long.

One of the things I always heard from my female elders was: “Let that man be who he is,” or “Give that man some space.”

There were years early on when having a little breathing room, a little space, just wasn't possible. We were parents to five children, we were somebody's employees, and we were serving through volunteerism. When all of those things piled up on each other, our lives and our relationship began to feel crowded.

Now we recognize we are a unit, and that it takes partnership and compromise, as well as making space to let each other find our calling or purpose as individuals.

Early on in our relationship, we were never apart, and we were so impacted by each other. If we didn't agree on something, it was crushing. Over time, we learned not to take it personally and to say: “That's just him or her.” You can't shape a person into who you want them to be. But having a foundation of commonalities gives you something to lean on.

One thing we've always loved is getting out on the road, and just driving and talking for hours. Even now, we love taking road trips. Carving out that time is something we're trying to get better at. Laying down our work and remembering how to relax like those two innocent, young kids who met 21 years and 10 lifetimes ago.

EDUCATION



True Love: Warts and All

Erin Gee, an administrative services manager at Electronic Theatre Controls, and husband Rob, a game art and animation instructor at Madison Media Institute, know they did things the hard way. But Erin believes setting their sights on their shared goal of growing old together kept them close, even when life threatened to take everything else away

Our daughter Katie asked Rob before she left for college last year, “Dad, what are you going to do when you and mom have an empty house?”

Without hesitating, Rob answered, “Run around naked!”

She wrinkled her nose and looked at me. I shrugged and said, “I’ll be chasing your dad!”

“The best relationship advice we ever received came from Rob’s dad who told us to always *put our marriage first* and always keep dating.”

That’s just the kind of couple we are. Rob still brings me coffee in bed every morning. When I step out of the shower, I find hearts traced into the fog on the mirror. He’s my voice of reason, and I always say he loves me warts and all.

We know we started unconventionally—engaged in college, pregnant then married—but after 24 years of marriage, we wouldn’t change a thing.

The best relationship advice we ever received came from Rob’s dad who told us to always put our marriage first and always keep dating.

We were challenged to live by those words early in our marriage when we were told that Katie, 3 at the time, had a rare heart condition and had one day to five years to live.

We liquidated everything to pay for her treatments, and moved our young family of four from Eau Claire to Middleton to be closer to health care options and a job for Rob that offered us health insurance.

We were on our own for the first time, poor and struggling with a “why us?” attitude. When we found ourselves on the brink of divorce, it was my mom who told us to knock it off. It was obvious we were still nuts for each other, and just needed to figure things out.

From that day forward, we decided our goal was to grow old together. Whenever we feel frustrated or upset with each other, we go back to that foundational idea, knowing that patience and honesty will get us there.

Now that both kids are in college (Katie has had her ups and downs, but her condition has improved), Rob and I are starting our second honeymoon. Since we’ve lived by his dad’s advice and put our marriage first, there are no surprises now that we’re empty nesters, but we still have so much to learn from each other. I remember when we were 20 years old thinking, “I’ll never be more in love.” But I’m only crazier in love now!



horizon

Eyes on the Horizon

Kate Whitson, a contracts administrator, and husband Randy, know firsthand how insecurity, financial trouble and cancer can shake a marriage's foundation. But Kate says they've found you need more than love—including hard work and a smattering of luck—to keep your relationship soaring

When Randy walked into my orientation at Cessna Aircraft in Wichita, Kan., I knew I was in trouble. We both agree it wasn't love at first sight. It was something more tangible, more electric, and nothing either of us had ever experienced.

Randy was not only my boss, but also my flying instructor. He challenged me every day, while also supporting my dreams.

“The lesson we both learned is that no matter how happy you are, **marriage is work**. Every day. If it's easy, you don't care enough and you're not being true to yourself.”

When we decided to leave our cubicles and benefits at Cessna in 2004, our friends thought we were crazy. We agreed that moving to Madison to work in commercial real estate, and be closer to my family, would give us the flexibility we needed to continue flying, even if we had to suffer through the cold. We agreed to live there for a minimum of five years and see what happened.

But then, a year into our marriage, something broke. We were disconnected and fighting to the point of not talking to each other for days. Besides being financially strapped due to the recession, insecurity and paranoia clouded everything I

did, and my trust in Randy wavered.

I knew Randy didn't think counseling was the answer, but he proved his love by agreeing to try when I asked. After three sessions, he was a believer. It was hard work, but counseling gave us the tools to build a stronger foundation.

The lesson we both learned is that no matter how happy you are, marriage is work. Every day. If it's easy, you don't care enough and you're not being true to yourself.

When we hit the five-year mark in Madison, we stuck to our plan, packed up the U-Haul and moved to an island off the coast of Florida. We had our health; a beautiful 2-year-old son, Max; and we knew if we didn't do it, we'd always have regrets.

Besides, what was the worst that could happen?

About two years later, that question was answered. Randy was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. The need for a bone marrow transplant pushed us back to Madison to be near family and UW Hospital and Clinics. We spent our 10th wedding anniversary at that hospital as Randy recovered from the transplant.

He says I've been his rock, but I'm just making sure he does everything he can to get better so he is here for our son and for our family. If we hadn't built that foundation, I don't think we'd feel as positive—or as lucky—as we do today. We call it our layover. We're just stuck in a crappy airport, and our flight back to a normal life will be leaving soon.

