



Finding Love When You Stop Looking

BY MARY STONE

Kirsten Reader had happily decided to spend the rest of her life single when she happened to walk out an odd side door after work at The Harley School. On the other side was a familiar face sitting in his truck.

It was 2018, and Stephen Brown had just opened Iron Smoke Distillery's tasting room in Fairport. Stephen had co-founded Iron Smoke in 2011 to contract distill bourbon whiskey. The founders opened a distillery in 2013 to develop their own brand; the tasting room followed five years later.

"We tried to work on a limited budget helping to construct the tasting room ourselves with me on top of a power lift washing the ceiling in a swimsuit," Stephen remembers. Stephen and Kirsten had known each other for years, so Kirsten didn't hesitate to stop and say hello.

Their daughters had known each other since fourth grade at Harley, and Kirsten had taught Stephen's daughters, Makenna and Blair Brown. At the time, Kirsten had finished a 19-year career as a full-time English teacher and transitioned into the director of enrollment and financial aid position at Harley.



"It sounds cliché, but about a month before this, I really had completely written off men. I thought, 'I have really awesome friends, and I will be just fine ignoring men for the rest of my life,'" Kirsten says. "I was done."

In retrospect, Kirsten says it is likely because she had given up on men that she freely accepted Stephen's invitation to attend Iron Smoke's tasting room opening that weekend.

Kirsten went with a friend. The place was packed, she remembers, so packed she nearly turned around and left—until she happened to see Stephen. Kirsten had the first of many tours of the tasting room that evening, which she spent with Stephen and his daughter Blair. It was casual, she says. They had fun.

It's not like they hadn't thought about dating before, Stephen says. "We knew we were both great people. We had both divorced but never really put two and two together I think mainly because she was dating someone or I was dating someone, so it never aligned properly."

After the opening, a few dates ensued, and despite some awkwardness announcing their romance to their combined six kids, they began to weave their lives together.

The connection on the other side of that “odd side door” five years ago occurred without any faith it could, and so did the romance and eventual wedding that followed.

This year, Kirsten and Stephen married on a sunny June day, with every part falling into place more perfectly than either of them thought it could: The venue, the wedding rings, the ceremony—even the 19-foot-long 1965 Cadillac limousine that drove the wedding party to the reception—were all exactly what they always wanted without ever knowing they did.

For his wedding band, Stephen thought he wanted something simple until he began exploring how he could incorporate wood from an Iron Smoke barrel. He spent two months designing his band with Mann’s CEO Nancy Mann. With the same barrel stave, Stephen had four rings made, his with platinum and three for his officiants in titanium.

The bands were a symbol of where and how Kirsten and Stephen found each other—when neither of them was looking. Stephen said: “I felt that adding the oak from one of our barrels would be a constant reminder that we met and started our new lives together at Iron Smoke, and that, regardless of the circumstances of everything before, we both got a new beginning, and we both found true love.”

The ceremony, like their family, needed to braid together seemingly different traditions, faiths and stories. Stephen, for example, was raised Catholic but converted to Buddhism and identifies only as Buddhist. His mother was Jewish but converted to Catholicism before marriage, so Stephen’s siblings were raised Catholic. Kirsten wanted to honor all three faiths and her own, which is rooted Catholicism but focuses on service and embracing the marginalized at Spiritus Christi.

Rev. Myra Brown of Spiritus Christi officiated the wedding. Stephen’s twin brother, Christopher Brown, a brigadier general in the U.S. Air Force, read “The Seven Blessings,” part of a Jewish tradition after the couple exchanged rings.

Kirsten’s younger brother, Jevon Allen, is a teacher in Japan—and an officiant to American weddings there. To honor Stephen’s faith, Jevon read a Buddhist prayer. Tommy Brunett, Stephen’s friend and business partner, read the poem, “How Falling in Love is Like Owning a Dog” by Taylor Mali, as one faith tradition that all eight members of their combined family celebrate.

Combining and honoring all of these traditions reflected the differences and traditions that went into combining Kirsten’s and Stephen’s families. Stephen had a child before his marriage, and so did his ex-wife. They both continued to live with Stephen after the divorce.

“One of the things I learned in divorced families: Traditions are hard. So one of the first things I did in my divorce was, I stopped doing what we always did when their dad was there,” Kirsten recalls.

When Stephen and Kirsten moved in together, she says, “This idea of doing something new and different to me became really important, and that was hard. Even when we moved in, you know, once in a while, one of the kids would say, ‘This feels different,’ (and I would say) ‘Yes it does, because it is different.’”

The kids were ages 10-22 when the couple started dating, Kirsten says. For three years, everyone lived together: The oldest boys only just moved out. There have been challenges, Kirsten says, but there have been kindnesses too and friendships with each other.

The wedding party comprised all six children: Patrick Buckley, 27, Reid Tompkins, 24, Makenna Brown, 21, Zoe Reader, 21, Blair Brown, 19, and Liam Reader, 15.

“We checked in with each of the kids before we got married to see how they were feeling, and the overwhelming sentiment was one of happiness for how happy we were and are,” Kirsten says.

Braiding these lives and faiths into a new story is even more meaningful for this family because of the lives they built before Stephen and Kirsten connected five years ago. Those lives made them who they are today, the couple says.

- Ceremony officiants (with the exception of Rev. Myra Brown) received a band similar to Stephen’s wedding band made out of Iron Smoke Distillery’s barrel stave inlay, designed by Stephen with Mann’s Jewelers. Steve’s band was platinum; theirs were titanium.
- Kirsten’s wedding band was designed by Mann’s Jewelers.
- Bridesmaids received Temple St. Clair keepsakes from Mann’s Jewelers.
- Groomsmen received custom suits from Adrian Jules Custom Clothier.

Photographer: Lauren Page Wadsworth Photography • Venue: Wadsworth Homestead, Geneseo, NY
Flowers: Amy Brand • Music: The Swooners • Hair: Arlie Harwood • Makeup: Jericah Santana
Suits: Adrian Jules • Honeymoon: Tauck Tour in Italy

