

# Margaret Johns and Donald Nowicki



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

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HE had just come through a difficult divorce and a grueling course of treatment for cancer when Donald Nowicki posted an ad on a dating Web site. Given his medical history and complicated personal history (two older children from a first marriage, and a young child from his second), Mr. Nowicki wasn't expecting to find love.

But then Mr. Nowicki, a nuclear engineer at the Seabrook power plant in New Hampshire and an avid cyclist, saw an ad placed by Margaret Johns.

"The fact that she mentioned road bicycling was the first thing that attracted me to Meg," Mr. Nowicki, now 52, reminisced. "That, plus she was cute. So I sent her an e-mail. A few minutes later, she e-mailed me back."

The owner of BlueLake Partners, an investment firm in Boston that finances technology companies, and a former marathoner and triathlete, Ms. Johns, 50, had decided to post her own ad on the Web after a broken engagement, two long-term relationships and "a series of six-monthers" - casualties of her long career in investment banking - had led nowhere over the years.

"Living in a man's world forces you to have a hard shell," Carol Bunevich, a longtime friend, explained. "But after Margie's brother died of AIDS in 1996, everything changed. She did counseling with terminally ill patients and got involved with her church. She was looking for community. She's someone who's become stronger and more vulnerable with every milestone."



Figure 1: The couple offer communion to the bridegroom's son Chris, above. (Jodi Hilton for The New York Times)

In September 2003, just a few months after Mr. Nowicki had finished his chemotherapy for colorectal cancer and completed a 100-mile bike race, the two met for dinner. Whether it was because Ms. Johns, a graduate of Columbia, Stanford and Harvard Business School, had answered his "prayer list" or because she was impressed that he was a Naval Academy graduate and a submariner, the evening was a clear success.

"I knew there was something special about Don when I told him where I went to school and what I did on our first date. Most men I'd known were intimidated, but Don was different. He welcomed the things I'd accomplished."

Mr. Nowicki also engaged in full disclosure that night. "I'd learned from experience that I was going to have to be open about my health situation, so I told Meg everything."

For Ms. Johns the news, though sobering, was not a deal breaker: "It was never an issue for me," she said.

Ten days passed before their next date, an intense 30-mile bike ride around Squam Lake (where "On Golden Pond" was filmed), so unexpectedly hilly Ms. Johns had to call for a time out at the 22-mile mark. Mr. Nowicki recalled the day with a huge grin. "We melted into each other during our 40-minute break. It was a great first kiss."

He phoned her that evening, Ms. Johns recalled, only minutes after she called a close friend to say, "This could be the one." She added, "The next night he drove down to Boston, and we've been together ever since."

After 20 months of commuting from Boston, Ms. Johns sold her apartment in the North End and moved into the house she and Mr. Nowicki built in Londonderry, N.H., where his daughter Brianna, 8, will spend half her time.

They were married on May 7 - an unseasonably cold and rainy Saturday - by the Rev. Stephen Ayres at the historic Old North Church in Boston. The church, where warning lanterns hung in 1775 spurred Paul Revere to his ride, seemed appropriate, given the couple's predilection for physical endurance, emotional perseverance and their indefatigable spirit. The bride carried a bouquet of white orchids and lilies of the valley with photos of her late father and brother, Lloyd, hanging from thin satin ribbons.

Afterward, at the reception at the nearby Downtown Harvard Club, music from an unusual jazz duo whose parents are friends of Ms. Johns - a 12-year-old keyboardist and 13-year-old bass player - filled the room. The panoramic view from the 38th floor made the wet and windy blue-gray dusk in the harbor below look like a stormy Turner painting, but the bride's laughter and the bridegroom's smile signaled that after years at sea, these two ships had finally come in, together.