

## AT LAST, A REAL WEDDING

The dresses didn't match exactly and some people couldn't find a seat, but it was a perfect affair

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By Lindsay Carroll, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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It was almost 10 years after Lonnie and Bobbi Kessler got married, but on Sunday, a charity gave them their first full-blown church wedding, and a reception, too.

They arrived at the reception hall in Connellsville in a big White Knight limousine late Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Kessler had her bright blond hair curled and pinned up in a tiara; Mr. Kessler wore sunglasses and a tux. The crowd begged them to kiss.

"Hey Bobbi, do you want me to pick up your train so you don't have dirt on it?" a woman asked.

This wedding was slightly haphazard. The bridesmaids' blue dresses didn't match perfectly, it was hard to find a seat for everyone, it was planned in less than a week. Nevertheless, it was memorable -- it was Mr. Kessler's last wish.

About three weeks ago, doctors diagnosed Mr. Kessler with incurable liver cancer. He is 42, with skin that is yellowing because of the disease. He's like other adults with terminal illnesses who get their wishes granted by a Vanderbilt-based nonprofit called Unity, A Journey of Hope, co-founded by Mr. Kessler's cousin, Bobbi Robinson, and her husband, John.

Mr. and Mrs. Robinson founded the charity in 2007, after the hospice they owned went out of business, Mr. Robinson said. Part of the therapy they gave their patients was fulfilling their last wishes, so they decided to create a nonprofit based on that idea.

"I always felt if you treat the mind and soul, the body will follow," Mr. Robinson said.

Since, they've fulfilled 52 wishes -- a woman who wanted to dip her toes in the Atlantic Ocean and an 83-year-old man who wanted to meet Loretta Lynn -- mostly for people in the Pittsburgh area.

But planning a wedding -- complete with a church ceremony, limousine, a band, a DJ, videographers, photographers, flowers and dinner -- was special, Mr. Robinson said. All were donations from friends, family and local businesses.

"This is the most prolific wish," he said. "It's a blessing."

More than 200 people came to the reception. People brought food -- pasta, stuffed peppers, green beans -- and blew up balloons. A family friend came to give Mrs. Kessler and her bridesmaids facials, said Kelly McKeel, Mr. Kessler's sister.

"You would not believe the support system," she said.

Mrs. Kessler and her husband sat to eat dinner under two signs that read, in red and blue aluminum-foil letters, "Lonnie N Bobbi" and "A love that last forever." When Mr. Kessler grew tired and lay his head down on the reception table, his wife whispered in his ear to make sure he was OK. There were so many people at the ceremony that the church was hot, and it made him tired, she said.

She met her husband when he was 13 and she was 16. They dated for a year and a half, separated and got back together 15 years ago, after both had two children. They married in 1999.

"I thought I'd never have a wedding like this," she said.

Charlene Franklin, Mr. Kessler's oldest sister, said when she asked her brother for three wishes he had for his last weeks, he gave her seven answers. He wanted to go to Virginia Beach or Six Flags. Or maybe get a set of new wedding rings for his wife.

Mrs. Kessler suggested a full-blown wedding.

"He said he'd love that," Ms. Franklin said.

She said her brother was scared and in pain, but throughout the week leading up to his second wedding, she told him, "Keep up, your limo awaits."

She got to see him ride in that limo.

"The look on his face is something I'll always remember," she said.