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## LIFE, BEYOND WEDDING PLANNING

BY ELISA SHOENBERGER

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It wasn't a coincidence that I started an oral history in the weeks after I got engaged.

A mere two weeks after the engagement adventure, I started interviewing women in the arts in Chicago to write an oral history book. And for the longest time, I didn't make the connection. I told myself that it was the perfect storm of events — a documentary and a three-day festival in Chicago celebrating oral historian Studs Terkel.

I didn't want to be one of those brides. I was in my early thirties, had three degrees and a feisty personality. I hadn't spent my childhood envisioning my ideal wedding with a thirty-tiered cake, a white horse-drawn carriage, and being married to Prince Charming. Instead, I planned on putting together my ideal library, overflowing with colorful books. As I grew older and added books to my ever-growing library, I began fantasizing about my ideal vacation, like Antarctica or Machu Picchu. These were my fantasies. Libraries and vacations. Weddings weren't part of my plan.

The brides in my life seemed to suggest that weddings were an endeavor that took over your life. It defined you. I knew several women who suddenly became inundated with the wedding obsession. It was all they thought about and talked about. Their nightmares involved extensive battles with cocktail sticks fighting off gargantuan flowers in the exactly wrong shade of red. And the media landscape didn't help the matter. There were wedding expos, wedding magazines and a plethora of wedding books that catered to every bride. I wanted none of it.

And here I was, thrust into the middle of it all. I had to make a thousand decisions. Before the engagement, I was a fundraising professional at a local university who put on historical reenactments for fun and played saxophone. I was still that. I wasn't going to let this process overwhelm me.

The last thing I wanted was to be a bridezilla or even anything remotely like it. My priorities for the day were to get married and to dance with my friends and family. That was it. Everything else was immaterial — icing on the cake.

For the oral history project, I planned on talking to women in a variety of artistic fields, from the visual arts to performance and design. Since I had never done an oral history before, it seemed natural to start with a friend. We met at a Japanese restaurant where she talked about her art and philosophy.

I was hooked. I went on to interview my tight-wire teacher, musicians, poets and much more. I loved the experience of finding artists, researching their work and then talking to them about it. This felt so natural to me.

The wedding planning process, however, made me feel like I was an observer outside of myself. A few years prior, I had gotten my MBA in marketing and operations management. The process of planning a wedding seemed anathema to the concepts I had learned.

I started seeking out new artists throughout Chicago for the project. I read articles about music festivals and art shows and then I would try to experience the art in person. I traveled across Chicago to the neighborhoods of Bronzeville, Beverly, Ravenswood and more. I wanted to be as comprehensive as possible.

By the time we got to the month of my wedding, I had completed 43 interviews. Eventually, I would complete 70 in total. This crazy project of mine changed everything for me. I realized that I really liked talking to people and could cold call people for interviews. My mantra became “It’s okay to ask. No one ever spat on me for asking.” No one did spit, of course. Most artists are happy to discuss their work.

The project kept me sane. Because I was doing this multifaceted project, finding new artists to interview, researching artists, sending transcripts, I had a lot on my plate besides the wedding. I had more to talk about than the wedding colors and the shoes I was going to wear. I was calmer and more organized, able to weather the inevitable spots of stormy weather on the path to matrimony. My crowning moment came a few weeks before the wedding when my coworker I saw everyday said, “Wait, you’re getting married this month?” He hadn’t realized it because I didn’t talk about it.

The wedding itself was a success. My husband and I got married. We danced to live music surrounded by our friends and family. And more importantly, I didn’t transform into a harpy, spreading vicious wedding cheer. I wasn’t a bride. I was me.

As for the oral history project? I’ve transcribed and edited 18 of the 70 interviews for the book. And yes, I’d be more than happy to talk about it.

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