

# The Washington Post

## 14 couples say 'I do' on Valentine's Day in rare opening of D.C. Superior Court



By DeNeen L. Brown February 14 Follow @DeNeenLBrown

Teresa Bell stood in a red lace wedding dress and red pillbox hat, nervously clutching a bouquet of red roses mixed with chocolate hearts covered in red glitter.

In a few minutes, she would become one of 14 couples to wed Saturday at D.C. Superior Court's Marriage Bureau, which opened its doors for the first time on

a weekend in decades to accommodate the requests of couples wanting to say “I do” on a day set aside for romantic love.

“It’s an ‘I love you’ day,” said Bell, 52, a teacher’s aide who lives in Southeast Washington. She fought back tears as she looked over at her fiancé, Gary Adams, 50, in a red tie and black suit, sitting in a sparse waiting room at family court.

“I’ve known him 25 years. He was my best friend,” Bell explained. “He watched me cry over a broken heart — twice.”

Adams asked her to marry him last year as she lay in a hospital bed recovering from colon cancer. “They didn’t think I would make it,” Bell recalled. “He came to the hospital and said, ‘God told me that you were going to be my wife.’”

Bell shook her head. “I said, ‘Well, God didn’t tell *me* that.’”

Adams found a phone in another room and called her.

“‘Teresa, this is God,’” he said. “You’re supposed to marry Gary Adams.”

A year later, they called the marriage bureau and were told that the first day available on the calendar was Feb. 14. They signed up on what would be a historic day at the courthouse, usually open on weekends only for sad stories.

“Justice doesn’t sleep,” said Leah H. Gurowitz, director of legislative and public affairs for D.C. courts. Saturdays are usually for arraignments and juvenile intakes, not marriage.

But because Valentine’s Day fell on a Saturday this year, the marriage bureau came up with an idea to do something a bit happier.

“Most people come in this building when something difficult is happening in their lives; they are getting divorced, or charged with a criminal offense,” said

Hiram E. Puig-Lugo, presiding judge of Family Court. “It’s nice to see people for a joyful experience.”

The bureau opened 14 slots in honor of Feb. 14 on a first-come, first-served basis. The staff decorated two ceremony rooms with red, purple and strawberry-pink hearts. They hung Cupids shooting arrows, transforming the ceremony rooms, halls and offices into more-festive spaces. Valentines reading “Kiss me,” “Hug!” “Luv U” and “Be Mine” hung from the ceilings.

Over three hours, a stream of beautifully dressed, excited and nervous couples stood under arches decorated in vines made of pink and red roses.

Tyson John Anderson, 43, and Julie Catherine Sehnal, 39, held hands under a red satin pillow heart trimmed in red feathers. Sehnal, a firefighter, wore a red dress, black tights and red shoes. Anderson, a pilot, wore a blue suit.

“At 43 and 39, you know who you are and what you want,” Anderson said.

Officiant Avrom Sickel arrived in the ceremony room and asked the couple to hold hands. Minutes after the ceremony began, it was over and the couple, who met 1½ years ago on the eHarmony Web site and got engaged Christmas Day on top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, was pronounced “legally married.” The small crowd of family and friends cheered.

Waiting in the hallway next was Ronald Holloway, 32, and Tenisha Campbell, 33, who wore a white lace tea-length dress she ordered from Beijing. Her hair was braided in an updo, and a white veil net covered her eyes. She wore red velvet shoes.

Campbell and Holloway met as students at Frederick Douglass High School in Prince George’s County. A year ago, Campbell asked him out on a date for dinner and ice skating. Holloway said he thought to himself, “This is the one I will marry.”

At the appointed time, the officiant arrived. Campbell and Holloway held hands under the pink rose vine trellis. They repeated vows, pledging “to have and to hold from this day forward. . . .” Ten minutes after the ceremony began, they were pronounced married.

Campbell, now Holloway, put a purple coat over her wedding dress, changed her shoes and the wedding party walked down the hallway to the escalator.

In another ceremony room, Donna Green, 56, and James Green, 51, had just become husband and wife. The day was doubly special. It was also James’s birthday. “It is a day I won’t forget,” he said, adding that they have been together nine years. He said he asked her to marry him about six years ago, but “I got cold feet.”

This year, he felt ready. “I’m not getting any younger,” Green said. “I found somebody I care for and I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

The room cleared and in came the wedding party of Alyse Cavney, 21, and Liam Oliver O’Brien, 22, who met at Catholic University. He was an exchange student from the United Kingdom. Their first date was at the International Spy Museum. “He’s a James Bond type,” said Cavney. It was O’Brien who wanted to marry on Valentine’s Day.

After they were pronounced wed, they held hands as bridesmaids in blue dresses snapped photos. They are planning a honeymoon in Cuba, “when it’s legal,” Cavney said.

Down the hall, it was time for Bell and Adams to marry.

“Wait a minute,” Bell said. Then she took a deep breath, taking in the moment.

She recited vows from memory: “Thank you for loving me all these many years. . . . Together, we will make it because you are still my best friend.”

They were pronounced husband and wife. Teresa took Gary's hand and swept him around the trellis. They handed out red velvet cupcakes in red "Valentine's Day" boxes before heading for seafood at the wharf and to pick up movies.

"Then," Teresa Bell, now Teresa Adams, said, "We will go home on this happy, cold loving day."

DeNeen L. Brown is an award-winning staff writer at The Washington Post who has covered night police, education, courts, politics and culture.