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Written by Maryangela Layman Román
Thursday, 17 September 2009 12:00



The Christmas before Ann Valentine met her husband-to-be, she remembers hanging an Elvis Presley ornament on the family Christmas tree and commenting to her mother, “We need more Elvis around here.”

Jokingly, she looks back to that comment as a “Be-careful-what-you-wish-for” moment.

Her life today is pretty much all Elvis, all the time, as her husband, Peter Valentine, moonlights as an Elvis impersonator, and, on occasion, she’s accompanied him as Priscilla.

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Peter Valentine, as Elvis, performs at a house party in July. (Catholic Herald photo by Allen Fredrickson)

While the King of Rock 'n' Roll helped draw the West Allis couple together, the Valentines, who will celebrate their third wedding anniversary next month, also

share a deep faith bond that grew stronger when Peter went through the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) program four years ago and joined the Catholic Church.

Peter's been an Elvis fan for years, even though at 38, he did not grow up listening to the rock and roll legend. He was drawn to the singer, and recalled telling his good friend, Tom, that he dreamed of quitting his job and becoming an Elvis impersonator.

"He always told me that if it would make me happy and if it would bring joy to others, I should do it," said Peter in an interview with your Catholic Herald, explaining that he and Tom, a grade school teacher, would often have deep discussions about faith. Peter was raised Baptist, but fell away from the church in his late teens. He explored various faiths, including Lutheran, and one year, he recalled, attended Christmas services of three faiths.

In what Peter describes as the most difficult time in his life, Tom committed suicide nearly five years ago. On a snowy January day, Peter traveled from his home in Milwaukee to Sheboygan for Tom's funeral, listening to Gospel music by Elvis as he drove.

During the service, some of the songs that Elvis had recorded, such as "How Great Thou Art" and "Amazing Grace," were sung, something that Peter believes is more than coincidence.

"Maybe it was his way of telling me to continue my freakish quest to keep up on my impersonating," wrote Peter in a Lenten reflection in the St. Mary, Hales Corners bulletin.

"Maybe not, who knows? They were still my favorite songs and even though he didn't pick them, it gave me comfort."

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Driving on the snow-covered highway was treacherous on Peter's journeys home and he smashed into an SUV, leaving his car undrivable.

Peter caught a ride from a friend to his parents' home in Waukesha.

"I borrowed my mom's car and once I got home, I just lost it," he said, recalling how he sobbed for about an hour. When a friend called to invite him to a nearby party, Peter's initial response was "no," but the friend was persistent and Peter met him at the party.

In a roomful of strangers, Peter introduced himself to a group by stretching the truth and telling them he was a professional Elvis impersonator.

One of the people to whom he was speaking was Ann and her memory of that first meeting is vivid.

"When we first met, I sat down next to him at a party, and he was joking he was an Elvis impersonator, and my first thought was 'Oh boy, where's the door?' but ironically, I've always liked Elvis and I remembered how the previous Christmas, how I told my mom we should get more Elvis in the house," she said.

Discussion turned to tattoos and Peter was surprised to hear that Ann had an angel tattooed on her back. Peter recalled asking her why and her response, "So I always have an angel looking over my shoulder," led him to believe that he was supposed to be at the party.

"I knew that God told me, 'If I take something from you, I will give something back to you.'" The two made an initial connection, but they didn't see each other for a few months. Peter, who had been divorced, felt he needed to straighten things out in his life.

"Even though I did not see her again



until May 7, she was always in the back of my head,” he said, noting that when they met again, their friendship blossomed.

Ann and Peter Valentine pose for a portrait inside St. Mary Church, Hales Corners in July. (Catholic Herald photo by Ernie Mastroianni)

A devout Catholic, Ann attended Mass weekly, and Peter asked to go with her. They attended Mass at several churches, but Peter said he felt most at home at St. Mary, Hales Corners, Ann’s longtime parish.

“By August we came to this point of going to church together,” said Peter, explaining, “We were dating and kind of knew right away that we’d get married. I kind of knew right off the bat that I was not able to get rid of her and she could not get rid of me.”

Peter also decided that if he was to get married in a Catholic church, he wanted to join the faith. While Ann, 35, didn’t force that decision on Peter, she was happy he came to that conclusion.

“I’ve always been very spiritual and in looking for a partner or mate, I was looking for those qualities also,” she said. “When we met, we shared so many common spiritual threads. But I wanted to make sure that he wasn’t just doing it for me. I know how I feel about my faith, but I didn’t want him to feel that he had to change just for me.”

Ann was Peter’s RCIA sponsor and said the experience bonded them.

“Being a cradle Catholic, I didn’t really learn all that they learn in those classes so it was very interesting and it made us bond a lot. It was a big undertaking and he worked hard and I was so happy to share it with him,” she said.

As he reflects on his life, Peter, a commercial construction worker, sees the hand of God.

“It’s so hard to know why stuff happens sometimes, but if I look at what I’ve gone through, I can see that the goodness outweighs the bad. God took my friend and

in return gave me my angel,” he wrote in the Lenten reflection.

Elvis came to the forefront of the couple’s life about a year ago when, as Peter explained, “(Ann) let me get my jumpsuit.” He already owned an Elvis wig; the jumpsuit made him ready for the stage.

He entered an Elvis contest at the Wisconsin State Fair, walked through the crowds at the 105th Harley Davidson celebration in Milwaukee, and conducted Elvis bingo at the St. Mary Parish festival. And the reaction to his Elvis impersonation has been overwhelmingly positive.

“Everyone’s reaction from kids to the elderly has been positive,” he said, adding one lady thanked him for keeping Elvis’ memory alive, while at State Fair, an autistic boy ran up to him and threw his arms around him.

A good Elvis impersonator needs “a good suit, good hair and has to look the part,” according to Peter, but he also has to be able to connect with people, he said. It’s that connection that has Peter hooked.

“There’s so much negativity and sadness in the world and bad things are happening all the time, but if I can put a smile on someone’s face and let them forget about their problems, it’s all worth it,” he said.

In June, Peter spent about an hour entertaining residents and their families at Franciscan Villa in South Milwaukee.

“The residents just loved him,” according to communications manager, Candace Doyle. “Their faces just lit up when he was singing. He would go and talk to the residents individually and was so kind and gentle with them.

“He really was a big hit,” she added.

While she prefers to stay in the background, Ann said she enjoys seeing the joy being Elvis brings to Peter “and I love the smiles he brings to people.

“I don’t mind being on the sidelines. I don’t mind not being in the spotlight, but I enjoy getting to share in the joy he brings to people. I really think it’s a blessed thing that he is outgoing enough to do that for people,” she said.

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written by Craig, September 17, 2009

Viva Las Vegas

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