

Love actually

Shakespeare wrote “the course of true love never did run smooth”. Eva-Maria Bobbert talks to three unique couples about how their love for each other overcame life’s obstacles.

Ageless love

Just when she had almost given up on finding love, Patrice, 50, was introduced to Tamati, 40, through a mutual friend. Despite the 10 year age gap, they’re celebrating their fifth anniversary this month.

Patrice: “By the time you reach 40, you start running out of places to go to meet people. I have lots of friends, but we tend to go out for dinner when we socialise, so it’s hard to meet new people.

“I got to the stage in my early forties where I was feeling quite depressed. I’d tried everything – going to the gym, doing courses after work – but I still hadn’t met anyone.

“A friend of mine was interested in Latin dancing, so I went along with her. We had fun, but there were more girls than guys, and a lot of guys were older or with their partners. Near the end of the course, two guys, who were around our age, came to the class. We had a drink and saw each other a few times. One of them introduced me to a friend he always talked about, Tamati.

“It was just before Valentines Day in 2003. Strangely, I’d just written down all the qualities I was looking for in a guy: trustworthy, open, able to compromise, and someone I can talk to about anything. Tamati ticked all those boxes and we hit it off straight away. In the first year we even talked about marriage.

“After 12 months, he broke it off. I thought, ‘How could you do this to me, it’s Valentine’s and I’m alone again’. I felt the age gap was part of it. He was a fitness instructor and I think he wanted to find his ideal – a young, blonde, trophy girl. I was hurt and angry. It was the first relationship where I hadn’t been forced to be what the other person wanted me to be. I could be myself. I wondered why he didn’t feel the same way.

“I think he realised he valued our friendship, so we continued to talk and see each other [socially]. One night he admitted to me that although he’d thought he wanted something else, he realised we had something special. We decided to give it another go.

“I am conscious of being older. I sometimes wonder what people think when they see us together. I did wonder what my parents would think when it came time to tell them I was going out with a man 10 years younger. You could almost sense mum raising her eyebrows [when I told her] over the phone.

“The hardest part is when people ask why we don’t have kids. When Tamati sees other fathers with their kids, and the closeness

they have, I think he does feel that ‘pang’, but I don’t want to be 55 and taking a 5-year-old to school, and have other parents say, ‘Oh, she’s come to school with her Nanna’.

“I wish I was still 40, but it’s just a number. If you feel young and act young, people don’t look at the number so much. I just take each day as it comes.

Tamati: “My friend introduced me to a bunch of girls, but the only one who stood out was Patrice. She had such a glow about her, something just clicked. I felt like I was 15-years-old again, like the first time you have that feeling inside but you don’t know what it is.

“I had no idea she was 10 years older when we met. I’ve always had a thing for older women to be honest; they’ve experienced more. My friends thought she was my age.

“After I told them how old she was there was a reaction, but it didn’t last long. It’s just a number. I know she’s aware of our age gap, and it’s not just in her head. Sometimes I see people looking,

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but I don’t really care. Patrice has an inner glow that beams out. We share this special connection, so her age is not important.

“We broke up because of me. As hard as it was for her, it was difficult for me, too. I thought I needed to venture out, be one of the boys and go out with other girls. I wanted to find myself in a way. In the back of my mind, I think I was scared to commit.

“We had also talked about the fact we probably couldn’t have kids. That still hurts deep down inside. I suppose I haven’t really dealt with it. It’s tough because I see my nephews and nieces a lot and at the end of the day, they go back to mum and dad and I’m left here alone. But I guess Patrice and I have freedom in a way.

“I had to go through the break-up to find out what I wanted. I went out with other girls but there was something missing. I wasn’t satisfied or content. It was very empty. I was going backwards just to gratify my ego. I thought, you idiot, you need to go back to where your heart is, not your head. I realised I should have someone that really cares about me. With Patrice, we both give to the relationship. It’s amazing how we just fit together. She’s a great rock for me.”



Quote of the day
"When love is not madness, it is not love"
– Pedro Calderon de la Barca

Tamati and Patrice discovered that love knows no bounds, especially when it comes to age.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW LEHMANN HAIR & MAKE-UP: KATE LEE.



Quote of the day

"Love one another and you will be happy. It's as simple and as difficult as that" – Michael Leunig

Paul and Nadia share a love that was strong enough to overcome their cultural and religious differences.

Faith and love

Paul, an IT professional from Sydney, met Nadia, a doctor, on a visit to Brighton, England, when his grandmother was hospitalised. They celebrated their Muslim wedding in traditional Bengali style in August 2007.

Paul: "I was in London for my grandfather Ray's 90th birthday, but when I arrived my grandmother was very ill in hospital. Nadia was her doctor and she was amazingly professional and compassionate. I got her number and asked if I could take her out for lunch to say thanks, but she said it wasn't appropriate because she was treating a relative, so my grandfather and I decided to each write a letter of recommendation to the hospital.

"When I came back to Australia, I sent her text messages a couple of times on the pretext of finding out if the letter arrived, but really so she had my number. When the letters came, she called to say thanks. She called Ray as well and they struck up a friendship. Between the three of us we kept up the line of communication for 18 months.

"I went to England again to see Ray and met with Nadia several times. We got on really well. A few weeks later, she rang to say she'd booked a ticket to Australia for 10 days. At the end of her trip, I asked if she wanted to get married. She spent the plane trip home working out how to tell her parents.

"We talked about everything. Speaking on the phone made things very clear – it's such a pure way of getting to know someone"

"I was so nervous. I was concerned about whether the Muslim religion would be invasive and if her parent's might think I was not Muslim enough. They could have asked her to choose between me and them, so had to rely on Nadia's judgement.

"Once she'd told them, I wrote a formal letter to her father asking for his daughter's hand in marriage. I sent a copy to Nadia at the same time, with a string of pearls. She was so excited. Her parent's main concern was that I was a good Muslim. I had to convert to Islam. When I told my family, they were concerned about the religious aspect. I guess they wanted to protect me.

"I organised a transfer to England with work so we could see each other. Nadia and I couldn't live together without getting married; so we decided to marry as soon as I got to England. It was a bit strange, as I hadn't met her family before. Her father went through the agreement as Nadia's representative; we had already come to an agreement on the meher [dowry].

"We had our wedding celebration with family and friends. I arranged for pendants to be made for our families with an image of reeds. It was symbolic of my grandfather's lifelong philosophy – reeds bend but don't break. If you empty your mind of prejudices, you can weather any adversity, like a reed that returns to its former position when the adverse wind has gone.

"Planning the wedding was quite difficult because the Muslim way was to have men and women in completely separate rooms. I had female friends coming over and I wanted them to be able to see me get married. Negotiating for that to be allowed was tense. In the end, the women and men were divided by a curtain and both could see the head table. That took days of discussion.

There was no alcohol or dancing, just light music playing.

"Meeting my father, who is gay, was awkward for Nadia's family, but they were welcoming. There are [cultural] sensitivities that I'm not used to and it can be a bit of a minefield. My friends are curious to see how the 'experiment' works out. It's been a nervous journey in some ways."

Nadia: "The first time we talked, I was rushing out to meet a friend for lunch. I never give anyone my phone number, but he caught me off guard. He sent me a text message saying he'd like to meet. I thought, 'hang on a minute' – I'm friendly with patients, but I keep it professional. The next time I saw him I explained it wasn't appropriate. All I remember is his eyes – something kind of dropped for me then, but it was the right thing to do at the time.

"Paul left for Sydney and I waited until he was out the country before I gave him any information about myself. I thought, 'what harm could it do'? I felt safe from getting into anything serious because he was so far away.

"We're both quite passionate people, so things accelerated quickly. We talked about everything. Speaking on the phone made things very clear – it's such a pure way of getting to know someone, but there came a point where I thought 'what are you getting your heart and mind into'? We were in two different

worlds. I didn't even really remember what he looked like.

"Before I met Paul, a friend and I had decided to apply to work in Australia for a year. They got cold feet, but I came to Sydney for the job interviews. Paul was so sweet, we met a few times and he showed me around. Suddenly, he proposed; I thought, 'whoa, this is heavy'. We'd had conversations about what it would involve if we were to take things further. Being a Muslim, it would mean a commitment like marriage.

"I was wondering how I'd tell my family. I knew he was kind and sweet, but there were a lot of facts and figures I didn't know about him, like what he did for a living. As soon as I hit England, I told my family I'd met an Australian guy I wanted to marry. My mum was really excited.

"Paul converted before he met my parents and said the words for conversion again, in front of my father. My parents know Paul's upbringing is very different and that he'll have influences from other cultures that will make things foreign when he deals with them in an Islamic way. They believe once someone converts, their previous life isn't relevant any more.

"The wedding was really important for dad. My parents were confident we were doing the right thing. It was important to make people understand that, from God's point of view, we weren't doing anything wrong, and to have [everyone] support us.

"Paul gave a beautiful speech. We had already agreed on the dowry but he surprised me with the pendants he had made.

"Everyone thought Paul was brilliant and sweet. They could see how happy we were. Whatever happens, I'm so grateful to god that he has let me meet someone like Paul."

Long-distance love

Andrew, 36, met Lindi, 38, at a pilot training college in Adelaide 12 years ago where they were training to become pilots for Qantas and South African Airways. After a six-year long distance relationship, they married and moved to Sydney where they now live with their two-year-old daughter, Nicola.

Andrew: "Lindi was the one-in-a-million female pilot to get on the South African Airways course. I could see straight away that she was definitely someone for me. She was the sort of girl who had strong morals. She was so ladylike but she still wanted to get out there and compete. We would run together – she runs like an energiser battery – and we talked a lot while we ran. She didn't want a relationship; she was so focused. I managed to convince her to go out to a movie and pizza. We later discovered that we each kept that movie ticket stub in our wallets, and we still do.

"I left college to fly for Qantas in Sydney. She drove me to the airport and said goodbye. It wasn't going to work between us because she thought we were both too passionate about our jobs. She also passionately loved her country; her family have such a strong history in South Africa. From the beginning she told me she wouldn't leave South African Airways. I remember walking up the stairs and turning around to look back, but I couldn't see her. At the time I thought she'd turned around and left. Later, she told me she was standing at the window, crying.

"A month later I received a package from Lindi with some photos and a note saying 'I miss you'. We decided to give it a go, but it was five months before I made it to South Africa. When I arrived, she said if she had to wait that long again, I could forget it.

"I bent over backwards; swapping flights with [other pilots] so I could get the flights to South Africa. Several people in scheduling at Qantas helped me make this relationship work! I would fly home from seeing Lindi in South Africa, then pack my bags and flying somewhere for work the next day.

"We did the long distance thing for six years. Because of the 'romantic' in me, I never thought it was an option to totally give up; but there were times when we thought it really wouldn't work.

"Many people said we were mad. What kept me going was knowing she was the woman for me, that if I wanted to have kids with anyone, it would be with her. I knew we had something unique and I thought, 'I'm not prepared to give it up'.

"When we saw each other we'd have a day of awkwardness because we hadn't been together for so long, sometimes up to 8 weeks. Leaving each other at the airport was the hardest. When Lindi came to visit me [in Australia], I learned it was far harder to be the one to stay behind.

"It was my dream to be a pilot, but once I'd got there, I thought about giving it up for Lindi. Life is about more than your job; you've got to have someone to share the adventure with you. In the end Lindi was the one that made the enormous sacrifice.

"When Lindi announced she had resigned [from South African Airways], it blew me away; there was a fear of what was going to happen, because it was such a huge change. When I looked at her face, I could see she was scared by my reaction. I then realised what it had taken for her to get to that point.

"We finally had direction after six years of heartbreaking phone calls. I'd asked her to marry me before and she had said 'yes', but then 'no'. She didn't want to get engaged before she had made the decision on her own to resign.

"I asked her to marry me [again] on the edge of a ravine. I told her she was going over if she said 'no'! We married at a game park called Thula Thula, (which means 'quietly, quietly') with 12 Aussies and about 100 South Africans.

"I knew it was hard for her to move to Australia. She loves it here, but I always had a fear that I was taking a fish out of water because Africa is in her soul. I still have that fear now.

Lindi: "I was one of only four girls selected for the aviation course. It's a very male dominated industry so I felt like we were going against the odds. The workload was tremendous, so you had to be committed and focused. Especially for me, because I didn't have an engineering or aviation background; I knew nothing about flying. I was never in my comfort zone.

"When my relationship with Andrew started, I didn't take it seriously. Flying meant so much to me, I didn't want anything standing in my way. I knew straight away he was a special person, but in my mind, there was no way it could work. I loved my job, and I loved South Africa; it's a magical place. Breaking up was a head decision, not a heart decision.

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"We started a long distance relationship, but we thought it would eventually die out because it seemed like we had no future. It was hard to make our schedules work. Whenever he came over [to Johannesburg] I had to make sure I had those days off. We didn't have the luxuries of email and web cams back then and phone calls were astronomically expensive.

"A long distance relationship makes you weary. You get sick of missing them, sick of the phone. He couldn't be there for special occasions and my whole life had to come to a grinding halt when Andrew was in Johannesburg.

"When he first asked me to marry him I said 'yes', but later I thought, 'no, I'm not ready'. But something changed then, it made me realise how serious he was. For a long time I'd been trying to convince Andrew to move to South Africa because he loved it too; but somehow I knew I'd be the one to move.

"The second time he asked me to marry him was such a surprise. We were on a sunset game drive. When we stopped, I thought it was for the sun-downer, but they had set up an outdoor dining table with lanterns on a cliff top overlooking the rest of the park. The ring had both Australian and South African diamonds. It was just the most perfect night.

"I got to the point where my relationship was the most important thing. It's great to wake up in the same time zone, but I still get very homesick. It's a bittersweet story; one of us was always going to be a little bit sad, for the both of us to be happy." ■



Andrew and Lindi,
with daughter Nicola,
endured the trials of
long-distance love.