

Wed at last: Couple overcomes obstacles to marry

By Masha Rumer

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John Vivona donned a black tux with a bowtie and a rose in his lapel. He grinned from ear to ear when he finally saw his bride, Karen Felice, 54, enter the Elks Club reception room in White Plains last Saturday, Nov. 19.

After 73 years of bachelordom and no relatives to speak of, John was getting married.

John didn't even seem to mind that he could not embrace his new wife, since he got married in a wheelchair. But then again, so did she.

Both have cerebral palsy, an incurable condition resulting from damage to the part of the brain that controls facial and body muscles and occurs before, during or right after birth. Neither has ever walked.

John speaks in short phrases that are hard for an untrained ear to understand and Karen doesn't speak at all. But although the bride and groom have troubled speech and distorted facial muscles and body movements, they are in love.

They met 23 years ago when John was selling Girl Scout cookies to a group home where Karen lived, and the two became friends. "I used to see him giving Karen this look!" said Cliff Galloway, John's best man.

John and Karen ate lunch and worked together all these years, doing piecework through Cerebral Palsy of Westchester (CP/W) in Rye Brook—counting objects, arranging neon-colored rings and other prizes for vending machines.

Two years ago, after going to a spiritual retreat with the organization, John decided to propose to Karen.

"She said yeah!" John remembers, smiles a half-toothless grin and shakes his head vivaciously. "She got me a family. I got no family."

Karen has three siblings who visit her. "Her family is very happy," John said. "I love her, she loves me."

Karen nods, agreeing. She wears glasses; her brown hair with a touch of gray at the temples is pulled back from her face.

Neither has ever been married, but both have had romances before. "She had seizures," John explained about his ex-girlfriend. Karen winces; she doesn't like hearing about it.

The couple, however, had obstacles to overcome.

"Most of the time people don't expect handicapped individuals to get married. It was a new kind of thought for them. (There were) logistical problems like living together," said John Camillone, psychologist at CP/W and marriage counselor. Also, John had no birth certificate.

But through the perseverance of the couple and Cerebral Palsy of Westchester employees, the wedding happened at last.

The bride and groom held an engagement party, for which Eileen Camillone, director of Day Habitation, printed more than 100 invitations. "It was very real," Camillone said.

The bride and groom exchanged matching rings. Their song was "You are the Sunshine of My Life" by Stevie Wonder and the organization's employees helped the bride and groom dance. There was even a live band.

"This wedding celebration is very special to Cerebral Palsy of Westchester; this is the first time in 56 years that two of our clients got married," said Joan Colangelo, development and public relations manager. The two spent their honeymoon night at the Crowne Plaza in White Plains, accompanied by two assistants in the adjoining room.

They will live together in a group home in White Plains.

When asked if John kissed the bride, John rocked on his seat, "Oh, yeah!" he exclaimed, and Karen nodded, blushing.

A kiss like that can be a challenge. But not for John and Karen. "Close the door!" John asked the center employee, pointing at the door leading to the room with other residents.

Then, John wheeled toward Karen, as the two clasped hands and, with some struggle, locked their lips in a kiss.