

AN INCONVENIENT
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N.Y. / REGION | SUMMER LOVE

First Came Summer Camp Marriage, Then Came a More Mature Love

By **ELIZABETH A. HARRIS** AUG. 3, 2015

They met when they were 17 and 19 years old, and a week later, they were married — in a play.

Now, two years later, something about that feels right.

Ashwini Chawla and Sanam Wadhvani met in the summertime when they were counselors at a camp, a breeding ground for summer romance for generations, and a coupling tradition left largely unchanged by cellphones and Facebook.

While their meeting was classic, these two do not seem like a typical young couple. A tragedy shortly after they met tethered them together, and today, they seem more comfortable with each other, more sure of their pairing, than most couples their age. When they speak about their future, about a song they want to play at their someday wedding or about the ring he wants to buy for her, one is inclined to believe that they really might get there.

“I cannot even explain my love for this girl,” said Mr. Wadhvani, an open-

cheded avowal unusual for a 21-year-old man.

“We danced together while everyone clapped around us,” he added, recounting the marriage scene in that early play. “I looked right into her eyes, and I didn’t care about anyone else in that room of 100 people.”

Ms. Chawla, who grew up in Queens, and Mr. Wadhvani, a child of Long Island, met two years ago at a religious and cultural camp for children of Sindhi descent, an ethnic group from South Asia. Campers and counselors spent a few weeks in Kerhonkson, N.Y., not far from Poughkeepsie, learning a bit about Hindu scriptures and traditional dance, and playing sports like basketball. But not everyone in attendance wanted to nurture their connection to a cultural past.

“I was honestly just going for a job,” Ms. Chawla said. “I had broken my iPhone, and I wanted to get another.”

On the first day, she was paired with Mr. Wadhvani for icebreaker events, and though she was dressed in a style she describes as “casual bummy,” he was smitten right away.

“She was this girl who caught my eye immediately,” Mr. Wadhvani said. “We were doing the whole glancing thing.”

But it was a religious camp, Ms. Chawla explained, not a retreat set up to facilitate dating, so they had to be creative to get to know each other without an audience.

Mr. Wadhvani would let his campers watch movies on his laptop so he could steal away to see Ms. Chawla. Other counselors would spend a few minutes keeping an eye on their charges so they could be alone. Sometimes, they would meet in a stairwell after their campers went to bed; she would bring Milano cookies and they would talk. They also found extensive use for walkie-talkies provided by the camp so staff members could communicate.

“We were bad,” Mr. Wadhvani said. “Late at night, we’d go on a random channel and talk to each other for hours.”

When the three-week camp ended, they were eager to learn more about each other. In one crucial way, they knew their time was limited: Mr. Wadhvani’s father was gravely ill with cancer. So less than a week after camp ended, they significantly accelerated one dating ritual, and Ms. Chawla met her new boyfriend’s father.

Mr. Wadhvani said Ms. Chawla and his father spoke, not like strangers rattled by nerves, but like two people who already knew each other well.

“He said, ‘Promise me you’ll always take care of my son,’ ” Ms. Chawla recounted. And she did.

Just days later, he was gone.

Mr. Wadhvani had known Ms. Chawla for only a month, but on the day his father died, he needed to see her. She met him in Central Park, and he brought pizza from Singas, a favorite of hers.

It was a little awkward, they said. But it was a comfort. And from that moment on, she was the support that kept him grounded amid so much grief.

“He was in a single-parent home, so after he his father died, he was alone,” Ms. Chawla said. “He would come every weekend, and I’d just take care of him. I’d cook for him and try to give him that home vibe that he missed.”

After sharing the intensity of his father’s death, the services she attended, and the support she gave, their relationship deepened quickly.

“It went from a basic relationship, just teenage love, to almost a husband-and-wife, soul-mate relationship,” he said.

Today, she is a student at Macaulay Honors College at the City University

of New York, focusing on biology. A young woman with dark hair to her waist and a certain quiet confidence, she might go to medical school one day, she said, or get a Ph.D. and focus on research. Mr. Wadhvani is studying marketing at Hofstra University. A solidly built man with deeply set eyes, he is by far the more romantic of the two. (“Of course” he knows the date they first met, he said: June 30.)

While their bond may be unusual for a couple so young, in many ways, they themselves are not. They do not live together; she is in Harlem, near school, and he is in East Meadow, on Long Island. Every few weeks, they have dinner at Ms. Chawla’s mother’s apartment in Jackson Heights, where she cooks for them. The only time they are not texting, Mr. Wadhvani said, is when he is driving. And their favorite activity is to go to the mall, or several, and shop.

Both of them enjoy fashion — Mr. Wadhvani estimates that he has about 20 pairs of sneakers — and sometimes, they will subtly coordinate their outfits. On a recent trip to Roosevelt Field mall in Garden City, on Long Island, she wore a summer dress in a bright blue. He was wearing black pants and a black shirt, but his Nike Airs popped in the same shade of blue as her dress. He carried their bags and rarely let go of her hand.

“She’s been with me through the worst time,” he said, as she took a French fry off his plate at a mall restaurant. “So hopefully we’ll be together for a very long time, hopefully forever.”

“I’m hoping for the next life, too,” he added. “But we’ll see!”

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