

The Grove in Cedar Grove hosts 50 arranged marriages for Unification Church

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Adam Anik/Staff Photographer

While most couples are the center of attention on their wedding day, 50 brides and grooms shared the spotlight by celebrating arranged marriages in unison at The Grove on Saturday, Feb. 16.

Part of the Unification Church, the large "Marriage Blessing" in Cedar Grove was celebrated with other arranged couples from 17 locations in the United States and 194 nations worldwide in a simultaneously telecasted event, according to Carol Pobanz, ministry team member of the Unification Church in Clifton.

The ceremony was also featured in Gapyeong, Korea where 50,000 people watched as 3,500 couples exchange their marriage vows together.

While no Verona or Cedar Grove couples participated, this was the first time that The Grove was chosen to host the annual blessing.

Dhimetrio Vasilopoulos, one of The Grove's owners, said it was "amazing" to host such a large event with a total of 600 attendees.

"Our wedding venue does one wedding at a time, we're pretty unique in that's what we do here," Vasilopoulos said. "So for this event, and how their religion handles weddings, we were able to do 50 couples in one time."

Vasilopoulos said the "Marriage Blessing" went smoothly and the Unification Church was very organized.

"They approached us and we were definitely interested," Vasilopoulos said. "We love what we do here, and it was our pleasure to work with the Unification Church to make this happen."

Among those married were Unificationists Jana Iparraguirre, 21, of Clifton and Kester Wilkening, 22, of Ithaca, N.Y. Both agreed that The Grove was a sophisticated, special venue and the ceremony was beautiful.

In the history of the Unification Church, founded in South Korea in 1954 by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon (recently deceased), the sanctity of marriage has remained one of the most important beliefs of the religion, Pobanz said.

Pobanz explained that nowadays the yearly event involves couples arranged either by Rev. Moon's wife or parents of the church.

"Sometimes a couple will meet and offer up the match to their parents, sometimes their parents will just match them (and) sometimes they just go to the matching in Korea," Pobanz said. "They could be meeting for the first time, they could be meeting and not even have the same language."

For Iparraguirre and Wilkening, who met as partners on the ballroom dance team in college, the matching seemed to have fortunately fallen perfectly in place.

While admittedly having crushes on each other during school, they remained as the Unification Church states, "brother and sister."

"It's very important in our theology that a relationship between a husband and a wife be only between the husband and wife and that's it," Pobanz said. "Any other relationship you have is as a brother and sister."

It wasn't until Iparraguirre asked Wilkening to perform a waltz with her at their parent's 30th anniversary that the couple was viewed as a possible match by each of their parents.

"Going through the matching process helped us learn about the little things that make up who we are, as well as the big things," Iparraguirre said.

She explained that it is now more traditional for the matching process to be a conversation and collective opinion between the parent and the child.

"The way a friend explained it to me, which I love, is ... rather than arranged marriage it's suggested marriage," Wilkening said.

However, Wilkening agreed that not all couples have it as easy, explaining that one of his best friends was matched with a girl for two years, who later broke it off and told him she only said 'yes' to please her parents.

"I think that's one of the dangers when young adults aren't honest with themselves and with their parents," Wilkening said. "There are broken marriages and broken blessings, and a large part is because people didn't say 'yes' for the right reasons."

The couple explained that while Unificationists must be matched with others of the same denomination, they are taught to have full ownership over their life decisions.

When asked why the arranged marriage model is chosen over a more common romantic relationship model, Iparraguirre said there is much more preparation that goes into preparing for a spouse and making a life commitment in the Unification Church.

"(It's) not just to death do us part, but to death and ...," Iparraguirre said. "Purity and abstinence before marriage is very important in our movement."

Wilkening said couples are married in unison under the Unification Church in order to receive God's blessing and permission to continue their relationship in a "Conjugal Realm of Heart," otherwise known as a husband and wife.

Although Iparraguirre and Wilkening already became newlyweds, they said they will have a chance to be in their own spotlight at a separate wedding celebration with friends and family.