

# Saving the date

By Kim Purcell

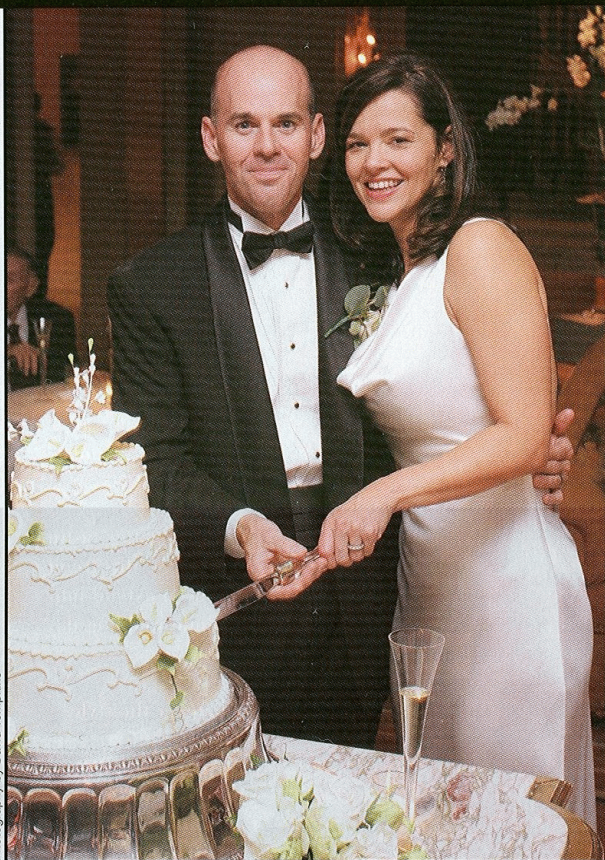
Area couples make a commitment to each other and to the city they love

Four flights of stairs, 1,100 dresses and 15 minutes to go. Fred Schulman of Pearl's Place lugs bridal gowns from an adjacent storage facility and into his store in record time. Upon arrival, he is met at the back door by dozens of determined brides searching for dresses in an evacuated city. "No one can deter a bride," says Schulman of the experience.

In the aftermath of Katrina, it takes bold determination to start over and survive, but that's exactly what local brides and people in the wedding business have done.

"There are so many people working hard to bring the city back, opening their businesses, cleaning up their homes and struggling to get restarted, just to let people know that New Orleans is open for business," says Tammy Dupre, catering manager at the Royal Sonesta Hotel in New Orleans. "It's so amazing to come back here and do weddings. The energy of the people is remarkable." Chesley Adler of Adler's Jewelry agrees. "It's sad for the loss of people who were rooted here, but there is an excitement for the energetic people that are coming in."

In the true spirit of New Orleans, the collaborative efforts of both local couples and businesses to "save the date" show imaginative feats and an unparalleled determination to go on, with just enough heartfelt courage and drive to fuel their entire city. On the path to recovery, weddings have provided a unique starting point for the hopeful citizens of New Orleans.



Photography by David Tompkins

## Amy and Tom, November 12, 2005

When Amy Ramone, 37, a flight attendant for Delta, and local TV station photographer Tom Moore, 44, got engaged in July 2005, the groom's parents, Dr. Thomas and Lynn Moore, promptly booked a wedding at the Windsor Court Hotel as the ultimate gift to the couple. A second marriage for them both, the couple wanted an intimate gathering to celebrate their union.

On August 19, Tom and Amy met with the Windsor Court Hotel's catering manager, Kelli Moore, and decided to go forward with the arrangements. "Well, we all know what happened 10 days later," Kelli says.

Unable to evacuate as a family, Tom stayed in New Orleans with local CBS affiliate WWL, while Amy and her two children, Katherine, 8, and Andrew, 7, left for River Ridge with her parents, Bill and Sue Schremp. The couple, fully exhausted, had other challenges to face shortly thereafter. "Marriage was the last thing on my mind," says Amy. Between evacuating and working, a car accident her parents had gotten into and the prospect of moving into a new house, the couple contemplated just going to city hall for the nuptials. "What really started us planning instead of running to the justice of the peace was that we thought we needed to do something for Katherine and Andrew," says Tom.

When Kelli Moore returned to the Windsor Court Hotel in mid-October, she was delighted to learn that the couple hadn't canceled. "Of all the weddings I had on the books, I was happy for them, because they were a second-wedding couple, local and had strong family ties in New Orleans," Kelli says.

Kelli immediately began re-planning the event and making some creative adjustments to the reception area. In the days that followed the hurricane, a massive fire across the street from the hotel shattered the windows in the boardroom, library and Palm Court—all the original locations for the wedding.

The Windsor Court Hotel quickly came up with an ingenious plan to convert the elegant New Orleans Grill Restaurant into a reception area. "With a great deal of cooperation between the restaurant managers and the banquet staff, the wedding went off beautifully," says Kelli.

With 53 adults and nine children attending, the event was a phenomenal success. "What a wonderful wedding. They portioned it off, and it was just perfect. You wouldn't have had any evidence of the outside. It was simply a great party, a great time," Tom remarks of the unexpected arrangement.

As Amy's children walked their mother down the aisle, the marriage became a celebration for their families and, most importantly, their children. "Now we can go back to our new house as a family and start our new lives over, together."

## Joy and Justin, December 17, 2005

Joy Bonaguro and Justin Elstrott, both 25, met at Tulane University in 1998 during their freshman year. Although Joy claimed that their initial courtship was a bit nerdy—endless semesters of flirting while “hammering out problem sets in 12-hour study group sessions”—the couple finally had their first date in 2001. “We’ve been together ever since,” says Joy.



Photography by Cameron Gillie

After graduating in 2003, Justin relocated to San Diego for graduate school while Joy remained working for the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, an authority on New Orleans neighborhoods. On July 4, 2004, they reunited in New Orleans to announce their engagement and celebrate with Chad’s parents, Dr. John and Patty Elstrott. Joy relocated to San Diego in July 2005, but continued to work for the center.

After Katrina hit, Joy’s work for the organization quadrupled as she handled hundreds of requests that poured into the Web site from people seeking information about their homes and their families. “For a solid month after the hurricane hit, I didn’t do anything but work,” Joy says. The decision was made to postpone the wedding until “maybe” the end of September.

“At first, we struggled with what to do for the wedding. We considered canceling it; we considered having it at Justin’s parents’ home. We just didn’t know what was appropriate,” Joy explains.

After checking in with various vendors, Joy found business owners ready to get back to work. Despite having its studio flooded and having to relocate to Houston, Fat Cat Flowers assured Joy that the blooms would be ready. Swiss Confectionary reopened. Pearl’s Place promptly mailed out Joy’s bridal dresses. Yvonne Le Fleur shipped Joy’s gown to San Diego in time for alterations. Joy worked with Chesley Adler of Adler’s Jewelry. “I went back and forth, but once I heard from all the vendors, it seemed the right thing was to have the wedding. They needed it, and I think we did, too,” Joy says.

But there was one sensitive issue left to address: Joy’s parents, Dr. John and Marilyn Bonaguro, from outside Chicago, were hosting the event. Joy felt that it would be a burden to ask out-of-town guests to come. “It was one thing when New Orleans was a destination, but when New Orleans became this place where it was hard to find a hotel—it’s very clear on your guest list who should be there,” says Joy.

Joy and Justin’s decision to have their wedding in New Orleans immediately became a positive force for their friends who had lost so much. “When my friend, whose house was flooded, received the invite, she called me to tell me that she had just started crying. It had been so long since she had received a positive piece of mail.”

“The world needs to know that New Orleans is still breathing!” exclaims Joy, who is thrilled with the decision they made.

## Stephanie and Daniel, November 12, 2005

Both Stephanie Sievert, 24, and Daniel Speiss, 23, grew up in New Orleans and attended the University of New Orleans. They met when a mutual friend and a Mardi Gras invite brought them serendipitously together. Engaged on the Natchez steamboat in December 2003, the elated pair could not have been more “New Orleans.”

Stephanie’s parents, Debbie and Steve Sievert, began planning for November 12, 2005, a date of spiritual importance for both Stephanie and Daniel that they had found through prayer. When Katrina hit only two and half months before the wedding, Stephanie’s parents decided that the best strategy was to stay positive and concentrate on their daughter’s plans.

Debbie essentially became Stephanie’s “cheerleader,” ready to help in any way to re-plan her daughter’s wedding. “Every time Stephanie would even think that it wasn’t going to come together, I would say, ‘No, this thing is going to work. We are going to get through this.’”

The process of re-planning began with the help of Jay Pilot, owner of Champagne Palace who offered an alternative to City Park. “She was a City Park bride,” Pilot says. Understanding the significance of the date to the couple, he did his best to accommodate. “Fortunately, we had a bride transfer to a later date.”

Despite compounding problems, the pressures did not outweigh the goal. “Everybody went just above and beyond anything they could have ever done,” says Debbie. “They were just incredible, including the ones that had taken significant losses from the storm.” Remarkably, Daniel’s parents, Gary and Elaine Speiss, were able to host the rehearsal dinner, even though they had lost their home. For Stephanie, hunting down and finding missing bridesmaid dresses a week before the wedding was a considerable source of stress, but in the end, a huge, personal accomplishment. “Everything that happened turned into something positive, funny or fun; we have lots of pictures. I was really glad that my daughter kept the date, because it was just such an emotional time,” says Debbie.

Stephanie and Daniel’s wedding guests could not have been happier with the event—a joyous release from the pressures of rebuilding. “It’s something that actually gave them strength, and memories, too,” says Debbie. The wedding became a source of strength for everyone. “We wanted this to prove that New Orleans is still alive,” says Stephanie. “And in the midst of such a tragedy, there still is hope and light.”

“It really encourages us,” says Debbie, “because it shows that things are going to get back to normal and we are going to make it.”



Photography by Stacy Marks