

Melissa:

You've been listening to pull up a chair stories from 100 years of creating community in Jewish, Baltimore. It's part of The Associated's Centennial celebration.

Samuel Barsky:

And I said a prayer to God, "let me meet the woman I would marry one day." And what I didn't know was at that very moment, God was answering my prayers.

Melissa:

Welcome back to Pull Up A Chair. Each month, The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore shines a light on your neighbors and friends, illustrating what it means to build, and be a part of, a strong Jewish community. I'm your host Melissa Gerr. In this episode, finding true love at the J! Yes, it's possible. Sam and Deborah Barsky are proof, but it took a few laps at the JCC pool to get there.

Samuel Barsky:

During the 1990s, I was in college and I was hanging out there and I was hoping to meet a woman to get married to one day. But the people there, they didn't for the most part didn't seem like the type would be for me in terms of age group and other things that are important to have in common. I was becoming friends with whoever was there anyway, just to have friendships with people of all ages, genders, everything. And one of the people there was a middle aged woman, and I had gotten to know her while she was swimming laps and it turned out she had a daughter named Deborah, who she brought along one time and introduced me to. And back then, I didn't think of Deborah as being someone I would marry one day.

Deborah Barsky:

I didn't think so either. I didn't know what- if I would marry him.

Melissa:

For some time, Sam and Deborah only waded timidly in the shallow end of romance, but there was a spark there, even if no one knew it yet.

Samuel Barsky:

In the meantime, her mother would tell me stories about her and all different things. And one time Deborah's mother told me that her daughter was stranded in Virginia at some place that she drove to, but she was afraid to drive home from it. And she asked me if I could take some kind of bus there and drive her car home.

Deborah Barsky:

I was, how I explain it? I was at a camp in Virginia and I was scared to drive on the highway. What happened was a police car kind of escorted me to the first rest stop and said, "Are you okay?" I said, "Yeah, I'm just nervous. Cause I never driven on the highway." So finally I, I calm myself down and I drove the rest of the way on the back roads and I found my way home.

Samuel Barsky:

But I keep thinking if that had happened, that would've been my future wife. I would've driven home from this place in Virginia, that would've been our first adventure together.

Melissa:

What foreshadowing. There would be future adventures, but they weren't quite there yet. Fast forward six years when Sam put the search for his Bashert into G-d's hands.

Samuel Barsky:

The following fall, it was during the high holiday season on Yom Kippur. I was going to a congregation called Adat Chaim and the then rabbi of Adat Chaim who is now deceased, he spoke to the congregation. He said, "Anyone during the Yom Kippur Ne'ilah service can go up to the open arc and say their own personal prayers." So I was 27 years old at the time and I was single and desperately wanting to get married. And I said a prayer to G-d, "Let me meet the woman I would marry one day." And what I didn't know was at that very moment, G-d was answering my prayers because the man who would one day be my father-in-law, who I had never met before, he picked the perfect time of year to decide he didn't like the congregation he was going to, and he had to find a new place to go to at that point. So he picked the one that I was going to, and he brought along with him his entire family. So the following Simchat Torah, I was dancing during the services, not even thinking about anything like that. And all of a sudden this young lady came up to me and she said, "I know who you are. You know my mother from the JCC."

Deborah Barsky:

I guess I said, "I knew this guy and wow, let me see what I can do to become friends with him again."

Samuel Barsky:

Yes. We started getting to know each other better. And baby steps from that day on.

Melissa:

They were still just testing the waters. And then finally...

Samuel Barsky:

We had exchanged phone numbers at some point when we were in shul, but then for several weeks she wasn't calling me and I didn't think she was going to call me back. And then all of a sudden on a Sunday evening, I had already been making plans to go by myself to a cooking demonstration. And as I was getting ready to leave the phone rang and it was her and I picked it up and she asked what I was up to. And I said, "I was about to go to a cooking demonstration at Adat Chaim." And she said, "Can I come with you" and I said, "Sure!" And we had a very good time together. And we were engaged about four months after we started dating. And we got married about a year after.

Deborah Barsky:

Our wedding was at Beth Am on a Sunday afternoon. And it was just a sunny day. It was just so pretty. It was a nice fall, sunny day. And I was nervous, of course, I was a very nervous bride. But I tried to calm down. And I think my mom was very happy that day. I think my father too. And it was just an extraordinary day. Excited and I'm glad we got married.

Melissa:

They took the plunge. And as they say, the rest is history. Now, Sam and Deborah share a full and busy life together.

Deborah Barsky:

We go on rides. We go to parks. We love to walk in the woods. We like to go to concerts together, contra dancing and square dancing. We do a lot of things together. We go to shul together. We have Shabbat dinner with family and friends.

Samuel Barsky:

And we travel together. We've been to 33 countries together. We've been to most of the 50 states. We've been to the national parks and a lot of favorite tourist attractions all over.

Melissa:

And speaking of tourist attractions, you might know Sam from his one of a kind sweaters and the viral online popularity they brought him.

Samuel Barsky:

For many years. I had wanted to knit and I had a chance meeting with someone who told me they could teach me how to knit, who owned a yarn shop. And I learned basic knitting and then I found another yarn shop subsequently. And that's where I learned solid color sweater making. And I even started doing this at the JCC on the deck of the pool. I started making a sweater with the intent of having a picture of something on it with no pattern, no graph. It was an experiment, just knitting whatever I felt like. And then if I went to a place in which I either had a sweater of that place or whatever, I, it just felt natural to wear it there. And then one day, and then maybe the year 2011 or so, I realized I had a collection of maybe 10 to 15 pictures wearing the sweaters. And as I was sharing them on social media, soon, the other people on social media were sharing this with other people. And before long, the mass media picked up on it. I have 154 of them now and counting. And that began a life of making sweaters of all different landmarks or objects or anything you can think of without a pattern or graph, which has been what my life has been about ever since.

Melissa:

Finally, if you are thinking of diving headfirst into love, Sam and Deborah share a bit of advice about what works for them.

Samuel Barsky:

Doing things together that we enjoy doing and being friends.

Deborah Barsky:

And just being there for one another. When you need someone who cares for you. And being able to help you when you have problems and being able to talk to someone.

Melissa:

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