

Bob and Maree Gauper's Unification Church marriage endures in Wheatland

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October 22, 2012



Bob and Maree Gauper of Wheatland are members of the Unification Church and recently celebrated their 30th anniversary. The pair got married on July 1, 1982, in a ceremony with 2,000 other couples at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

He had been arrested more than 50 times for solicitation, and beaten up more times than he could count.

She had been abducted and held against her will by her own parents, who hired professionals to "de-program" her.

By the time Wheatland California residents Bob and Maree Gauper were able to live together as a married couple, their membership in the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church had exposed them to enough crazy experiences to last a lifetime.

Being called "cult members," says Maree Gauper, barely even registers anymore.

"We, hopefully, have developed a thick skin by now," says the soft-spoken piano teacher, who refers to herself and her husband as "Moonies."

Moon introduced Maree and Bob to one another during a "matching" ritual at the New Yorker Hotel in Manhattan in July 1982. He married them a week later as part of a mass ceremony involving 2,075 couples at Madison Square Garden.

The controversial North-Korean-born religious leader died in early September at age 92 — just two months after a Bay Area party the Gaupers attended to mark the 30-year anniversary for local "Moonie-weds."

News of the church founder's death reached the couple while they were visiting with a small group of fellow Moonies in Reno.

"I felt relieved," says Maree Gauper, whose voice still carries the lilt of her native New Zealand. "I thought, 'Well, he's finally going to get some rest.'"

She and her husband still consider themselves among the devoted.

This, in spite of Moon's indictment a few months after the wedding ceremony on tax evasion charges. Moon eventually served 13 months of an 18-month sentence.

And the Gaupers remained loyal through fundamental changes that Moon's daughter made in recent years as president of the church. A cloud of scandal about an extramarital affair and child born out of wedlock led the Rev. In Jun Moon to resign just after her father's death last month.



Bob and Maree Gauper of Wheatland were part of a mass wedding ceremony at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

"That was a bigger shock than Rev. Moon dying," Maree, 55, says. "We thought the world of her, and she let us down in a big way."

Now, with another of Moon's children heading the US branch of his church, and his widow becoming actively involved in promoting its teachings, things are looking up, says Maree.

She plans to attend a church-related women's conference this weekend in Las Vegas during which Moon's widow is scheduled to speak.

Women's Federation for World Peace USA bills itself as a nation-wide organization "devoted to bringing world peace through promoting and empowering women."

Achieving this lofty goal now lies with women, she says.

"Men haven't done it, have they?" she says, "So it's our turn."

Moonie on a mission

Linda native Bob Gauper, 58, says his own spiritual path probably started in childhood. By the time he left the state for a four-year college, the journey, he says, was well under way.

"I had a strong social conscience, and I'd studied philosophy and psychology at Yuba College," he says. "That opened up my world view quite a bit."

His college life was unfulfilling and short-lived. He had a tentative plan that involved fishing adventures in Alaska, but his spiritual curiosity diverted him in Seattle.

The Northwest was where he first encountered Unification Church members.

"I was impressed by their intellectual understanding of different religions and ideas," he said of the people who led him to conversion.

A life of devotion to Moon's church, however, meant exposure to what he calls, "some serious persecution."

His small band of Moonies would split up in small towns to hawk chocolate or trinkets or flowers door to door, hoping for a chance to proselytize.

"I lived in a van and got beat up a lot," he says.

He remembers being chased by bands of teenagers on bicycles. He remembers having bottles thrown at him.

"I was in hecka great shape running from everybody," he says.



Bob and Maree Gauper of Wheatland are shown during their wedding through the Unification Church. The couple got married in a 1982 ceremony with 2,000 other couples at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

In one town, he walked into a bar with a basket of flowers, and immediately overheard a voice nearby.

"Hey, Joe," the voice said to the bartender, "you want me to punch this Moonie in the face?"

Arranged marriage

He was 27 and three years into his mission when he learned of the opportunity in New York to be matched with a life partner by the Rev. Moon.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, young Maree had also been undergoing a life change.

She had been one of seven children in a devout Irish Catholic family in a small, working-class New Zealand town. The high school valedictorian, nicknamed "Brain Box," was an unlikely convert, she says.

But a trip to Australia during a break from college led to an unexpected adventure.

"I was sort of hungry for spiritual ideas, even though I loved the Catholic Church," Maree says.

As they say in the big picture of life, one thing led to another. The new convert began her new life as one of the first Moonies on the Southern continent.

In New York, the decision to wed the person selected by Moon, they note, had been entirely theirs.

It had not been a coercive process. The religious leader spontaneously made couples out of a sea of strangers before him. Those selected had about a week of dating, and then it was time to decide.

"We had this blind faith, you could say," says Maree Gauper. "We just jumped in the deep end."

But going through with the ceremony was one thing. Finding their way back to one another from their respective home countries would be quite another.

Maree returned to her missionary work in New Zealand, but her new life — especially the marriage — "scared the daylights out of my family," she says.

"They thought I was under some kind of spell," she says.

In 1983, on her way out to meet college friends in downtown Auckland, she was taken to a car, where her mother was disguised and seated in the passenger's seat.

"She pulled off her wig and said, 'Maree, we're doing this for your own good.'"

De-programming

The next 10 days were like something from a made-for-TV movie, she says.

She was taken to a strange location and kept under lock and key, while a professional in cult psychology worked on her night and day, trying to make her see the error of her ways.

A woman chaperoned her to the bathroom and slept near her. The mind games were emotionally hurtful and exhausting.

"It was partly my stubbornness," she says, "but partly that I'd had a genuine conversion experience."

Meanwhile, back in America, Bob had been told of her disappearance, and her Moonie friends in Auckland had been badgering police to track her down.

The practice of kidnapping and de-programming had become familiar among the Unification Church members. When she finally was located and freed, she says, "I couldn't go anywhere without people calling out, 'Oh, you're that girl from the news.'"

Small-town life

On Aug. 18, 1983, the same day Maree was set free, Bob learned that his mother had died. It would be three more years before the two would be a real couple.

He joined her in New Zealand in 1986.

"We moved in together, finally, and we made some nice babies," says Maree.

In spite of the couple's ongoing devotion to Moon's legacy and the key role that proselytizing has played in their lives, the couple has never pressed their four children into joining the flock, says Bob Gauper.

"Theology isn't as important as your values," he says.

Their two oldest children, both daughters, are UC Davis graduates. Their oldest son attends Yuba College, and the youngest attends Wheatland High School.'

"They're at various stages of their journey," says Maree. "I make a point of not pushing it (religion) at all."

She plays piano at Grace Episcopal Church in Wheatland and calls the congregation there "our adopted church family."

"They love us; they don't judge us," she says. "That's just who they are. They're good people."

Bob Gauper's father now lives with them in Wheatland, where they have lived for 20 years.

The first few years were an adjustment. Bob, who has worked as a civilian contractor at Beale Air Force Base for most of the time here, says it took time for their neighbors to warm up to them.

"Word got around like crazy," Maree says of the "Moonie" label, and all the insulting ideas that accompany it.

But they maintain a sense of humor about the label and about the path they have taken together.

Their daughters plan to take an extended trip to New Zealand to get to know Maree's family better, now that they are adults. Her parents and siblings did warm to the whole Moonie thing over time, Maree says.

"You can't just put us in a box," she says of the ideas people have about their religion.

"It's hard to pin us down," says Bob Gauper.