

Heather and Daniel met when they were 14, but did not begin dating until their junior year of college

LOVING EACH OTHER IN
**Sickness
 & Health**

Written by Kirsten Cornell | Select photography by Rachel Whyte

Less than a month after the wedding of their dreams, Heather and Daniel Coolidge got a devastating diagnosis that would change their lives forever. But not even a cancer diagnosis could keep them from living their happily ever after.

They met at Grace Fellowship United Methodist Church when they were 14 years old. Like many others in their youth group, they hung out at church and had many mutual friends, but had no interest in dating each other. Since they share the same birthday, March 6, their mothers (who are friends) conspired to have them arrive at the DPS to get their driving permits together, followed by an impromptu birthday party. But sparks didn't fly for Heather, a Seven Lakes Spartan, and Daniel, a Cinco Ranch Cougar, until later when they were in college.

A Love Story in the Making

Their families, being really good friends, often traveled together. After a ski trip during spring break their junior year of college, Daniel realized that Heather was someone he wanted to pursue.

"He asked me to his fraternity's formal and then that summer while I was working at Pine Cove Christian Camp, we wrote letters, talked on the phone, and he even drove up to Tyler to take me on dates," Heather recalls.

They dated long distance their senior year of college and both ended up in Houston after graduation. Thanksgiving of 2014 would forever change their course.

Popping the Question

Heather's sisters took her on what was supposed to be a "sister date" consisting of Mexican food and a trip to the nail spa. After their appointment, her sister handed Heather a letter from Daniel that asked if she was ready for an adventure and if so, first she needed the right clothes.

"We had gone in yoga pants, T-shirts, and no makeup," Heather remembers. "My sister had stolen an outfit from my apartment and makeup for me to get ready." The next leg of the trip took her to a park in Grand Lakes where tables were set with lace tablecloths, daisies, signs, and pictures commemorating their relationship. "Each table had a letter from Daniel explaining what to do," says Heather.

At the very last table Daniel surprised her by coming up behind her as she finished the letter, got down on one knee, and proposed. "After she said 'yes' and our family had left, I sang to Heather, washed her feet, and brought out the picnic I had prepared," says Daniel. Their adventure was only beginning.

The Best Day Ever

Their ceremony was planned for August 15, 2015 at Memorial Drive United Methodist Church with a reception at the historical Junior League of Houston. Daniel's voice teacher at Baylor, Dr. Cho, and his accompanist and friend, Jonathan Pinto, played the music for the wedding ceremony.

As a special sentiment and showing of her dedication to wait for the husband God had chosen for her, Heather took her purity ring that her parents had given her to Amber's Designs and asked them to mix the white gold band with yellow gold to make Daniel's wedding ring. "During our engagement season, the best advice we got was to focus on building a foundation for our marriage instead of the details of the wedding," says Daniel, a second-year law student at the University of Houston.

An Earth-Shattering Diagnosis

"Daniel began experiencing light-headedness and exhaustion. His vision became blurry, which was strange considering that he had perfect eyesight his entire life," recalls Heather. After running a few eye tests, the ophthalmologist found fluid and hemorrhaging under his right retina and ordered blood work, which revealed an abnormal amount of white blood cells. Twenty-four days after they exchanged vows, Daniel was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. "We were shocked, heartbroken, and devastated. It's definitely not something you imagine three weeks into marriage," says Heather, who was working as a nurse in a leukemia unit at MD Anderson at the time. By 4 p.m. on September 9, Daniel was transferred there to start treatment.

Heather and Daniel's family celebrate with them after the surprise engagement



Heather and Daniel prayed together without seeing each other before the wedding



The wedding reception was held at the Junior League of Houston



The Coolidges refuse to let this challenge rob them of their newlywed season

He has helped both of our families through cancer multiple times,” says Heather. “We are excited to see Him do it again by healing Daniel.”

Choosing Joy and Love

Heather and Daniel view this challenge as an opportunity to live out their wedding vows early on in their marriage. “We promised to love each other through sickness and health and to stay with one another especially when the going got tough,” says Heather.

The Coolidges continue to pursue one another’s heart despite the new challenges. Daniel coordinated with both of their mothers to surprise Heather with a lunch using their china for the first time to celebrate one month of marriage - coincidentally on the same day as the first dose of chemo.

“I receive lumbar punctures (spinal taps) frequently that inject chemo into my spinal fluid to address my CNS disease, which is basically leukemia in my spinal fluid,” Daniel explains. To monitor his counts, Daniel also has to go to MD Anderson for blood work and will get blood transfusions if needed.

“We don’t want this trial to rob us of the joy of our newlywed season. We want to pursue and treat each other the way we would if Daniel didn’t have cancer,” says Heather. “Once you say ‘I do,’ it isn’t an excuse to coast in the pursuit of your spouse, but a springboard to a new level of pursuit.” KM

Heather’s knowledge about leukemia has helped them both prepare mentally and physically for treatment. She administers Daniel’s take-home IV meds and changes his dressing for his IV PICC line at home, things that would normally have to be done in the hospital. “We realized we had no other choice but to turn to the Lord.



KIRSTEN CORNELL is a lead associate editor for Katy Magazine. She had the ideal role models for marriage - her parents.

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