

FOREWORD:

THE STORY OF US

TWO HEARTS, ONE VISION

IT'S JUST OVER TWO years now since I married Elma, the love of my life. Elma has quickly become an indispensable part of everything I do at Joy Junction, and we quickly realized that we are two hearts with one vision. We're always together, in the community daily, heightening awareness of the plight faced by the homeless and letting people know what they can do to make an impact on the issue by partnering with Joy Junction.

While I could never have kept going for so many years without other people's prayers and support, God also knew I needed a partner. As He told Elma shortly after we met, we could do more for him together than we could apart.

We continue to see the truth of those words unfold daily.

The path to our getting married was not at all conventional. While beautifully covered by local media the day after we got married, some of you readers may not be aware of our journey.

So how did this whole adventure begin?

OUR “VIRTUAL” MEETING

I first met Elma “virtually” on eHarmony.com in early 2013, and then in person in October 2013 during a quick trip to Israel.

A year back before Elma and I met on eHarmony, we each had been praying that God would bring the right person into our lives—not only as husband or wife, but also as a ministry partner. We had both learned (after many years) to give God the full authority over our lives in finding that person. Doing so always works out best in the end, and Elma and I are ongoing testimonies of that fact.

We are both Christians and love to help the poor, hungry, marginalized, and disenfranchised. What better choice for a life partner than that?

We didn’t meet again until March of 2014, when I traveled to the Holy Land as a reporter to cover the Christ at the Checkpoint Conference for the ASSIST News Service (ANS). Working with ANS and covering stories of this type is a natural extension of the ministry I feel God has given me to help bring light to the oppressed and marginalized.

Elma and I had a wonderful time of reconnecting from Friday afternoon through Monday evening. The highlight was an engagement dinner for us on Sunday night at The Old Man and the Sea restaurant in Jaffa Port, with a number of friends from Elma’s church family, including her pastors. They went out of their way to embrace me and make me feel welcomed and loved, which I most definitely did. What a delight it was to experience God’s plan and redemption unfold for me in my personal life!

When it was time to leave Israel the following week, tears flowed. I realized I was truly in love and had met the woman with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life. During the ensuing months we continued to talk daily, usually for between ninety minutes to two hours. I spent more time with Elma on the phone than I had with anyone else in my life—of course, talking on the phone was all we *could* do. We talked about

every subject conceivable, including sharing what we imagined our lives together would be like in the years ahead. There was no made-for-TV drama in our deepening relationship. Instead, there was an increase in the love and commitment we felt for each other.

THE BALL STARTS ROLLING

In January 2014, I submitted a packet of information to the U.S. government to start the ball rolling for Elma's K-1 visa. In addition to tax returns, fingerprints, an FBI background check, and proof of income, Elma and I also had to include, as part of our application package, a number of the e-mails we had exchanged with each other.

In July, Elma returned to the Philippines to spend some time with her daughter. I joined her a few weeks later, and we started gathering additional documents still needed for the all-important interview at the U.S. Embassy, for which we still didn't have a date.

As we waited and waited, we both felt frustrated and powerless. We couldn't do anything other than let the wheels of the bureaucratic process run their course. And for me, typically a type-A personality, it was perhaps worse than for someone with a more low-key, relaxed personality. I would wake up day after day hoping there would be some communication indicating progress. Elma encouraged me to be patient.

I wasn't.

Finally, we found out that the U.S. Embassy in Manila was ready for us to schedule our appointment. We quickly locked in the date.

The day loomed large in our minds. As it drew closer, neither Elma nor I thought about much else. We were prayerfully prepared, but it was still a tense time.

Finally the day arrived. Elma went by herself to the interview, as we didn't think I was allowed to be there with her. (Later on, I found that I could have accompanied her.)

The morning hours of January 29 passed slowly for me, as I prayed and waited for Elma to come back and tell me how things had gone. Finally she arrived and said that things had gone well, but we still needed three more documents. Two of those we obtained the same day and sent to the embassy; another one took a little longer. A couple of weeks later we heard from the embassy that they had everything the staff needed and would notify us of their decision.

We were back to the waiting game again, and there was nothing else for us to do other than wait. During those weeks I appreciated our good friends in Davao, who encouraged us during this time as they had for many months prior. The Edge radio station manager Jay Bringas, Pastor Michael Thompson, and Jeremiah Gubat, you will always have a special place in our hearts.

That long anticipated e-mail arrived from the embassy a couple of weeks after. Elma had been granted the K-1 visa. I started crying—tears of happiness. Our long wait was over!

GOD USES EHARMONY

As I reflect back on the last three years, I realize they have been the most exciting time in my life. God used the eHarmony computers to introduce us to each other, and that resulted in me getting to know the woman who would become the love of my life and very soon my wife.

Thanks to God's provision and the Holy Spirit's unifying gift, we are now two hearts with one vision for the homeless, poor and hungry. "True Love Starts with the Kiss of Hearts," says the song by Christian musicians Steve and Annie Chapman. It goes on to say, "Though a kiss may be the end result, it should never be the reason."

That's the way it happened for Elma and me. We've now been married just over two years and are savoring every minute. It all started with the "kiss of hearts."

THE STORY OF US

Knowing and loving Elma has caused me to marvel as I have asked myself what makes the “other heart” of Joy Junction beat with such a resounding passion for the needy? In addition to being an obvious spiritual gift, from where did Elma’s compassion come in a human sense? I had never met anyone in my life as Elma who is as moved by and interested in bettering the plight of the needy, hungry, and disenfranchised.

WAITING FOR GOD

I knew Elma’s life growing up in the Philippines was far from easy. Her parents, while both hardworking farmers, often struggled to make ends meet. Elma said they had three meals a day “most of the time,” but when her parents got sick, finding the necessary funds to go to the doctor was a challenge.

Those hardships helped instill in Elma an ongoing desire to work hard to help ensure she had a better life, as well as to help her family and other people in need who she encountered.

Fast forward to Elma becoming a caregiver in Israel for nearly twenty years. Due to the wages available in the Philippines (a typical wage may be a dollar an hour or a little more), it’s a common practice for many Filipinos to spend a lot of their working life outside the country and to send much of their income back home to support family. Elma says the almost two decades she spent in Israel helped mold her further into the person she is today.

“Though I learned to love my job,” Elma explains, “and was contented with my life, I knew there was something more out there God had in store for me, but I had no clue what it was.”

In late 2012, Elma felt she wanted to be in a ministry that fed the hungry with three meals a day, helped the poor and homeless, and ensured that youngsters could go to school with the school supplies they needed.

She knew this was a very ambitious goal, but she was also aware that nothing was impossible with God. “All I could do was pray and ask God to lead me to the direction where He wanted me to go. The best thing that happens when you just continue to delight yourself in the Lord, is that he will give you the desire of your heart.”

HEARTS FOR THE NEEDY

So it was that on March 27, 2015, following an amazing adventure and a number of challenges, we became husband and wife.

Having a shared vision has been both challenging and rewarding. “We both wake up thinking about Joy Junction, spend the whole day working for JJ, and the last thing in our minds before going to bed is still JJ,” Elma says, echoing my own thoughts. She adds, “We’re dealing with different kinds of people at JJ, but at the same time, I never have trouble in understanding the needs of the people we serve. I understand exactly what our guests are dealing with. Many of them are not hesitant to come and talk to me and are so grateful that I am willing to listen and encourage them.”

Looking back, Elma says she is amazed at what God has done—and keeps doing—as am I. I am humbled and honored to be one of two hearts with the same vision. Elma now understands why she’s always had a heart for the needy. “Everything I have experienced in my life prepared me for the ministry where God has put me. Now I feel whole and complete in my life.”

Meeting Jesus in 1976 changed my life forever. Now forty years later, my journey with the most amazing woman I have ever met in my life is everything I ever thought it could be and more. I wake up each morning thankful for the blessings God has given me. I look forward to what lies ahead as I go about the day’s activities with Elma at my side.