

'I never forgot my first love'

Just when they found each other again, would cancer keep Rob and Pam apart?

BY LINDSAY POLLARD
lpollard@charlotteobserver.com

Rob and Pam Clark Elders' summer wedding was perfectly planned.

It was intimate. The couple also kept it casual, as both, in their early 50s, had formal weddings for previous marriages.

Pam wore a simple white sundress during the June 3 ceremony; Rob wore shorts. Most of the reception food was made by guests.

They tied the knot in a tent - in the Buddy Kemp Caring House parking lot, a day before the National Cancer Survivors Day celebration.

That was just what Pam wanted.

After all, it wasn't about a big church wedding, a tailored tux or a catered brunch.

It was about celebrating a love that's survived 35 years, two divorces and Pam's bouts with cancer.

Second time around

Pam Clark met Rob Elders at West Mecklenburg High during their junior year. Pam's family had moved from Asheville. The two dated through graduation in 1970, though Pam's father was concerned they were too young to be so serious.

They lost touch after their first year in college. Pam attended Pfeiffer University in Misenheimer, and Rob went to Chowan College in Murfreesboro.

The two returned to Charlotte and worked for Duke Energy in different departments (Pam worked with Duke-Fluor Daniel, and Rob worked in nuclear generation).

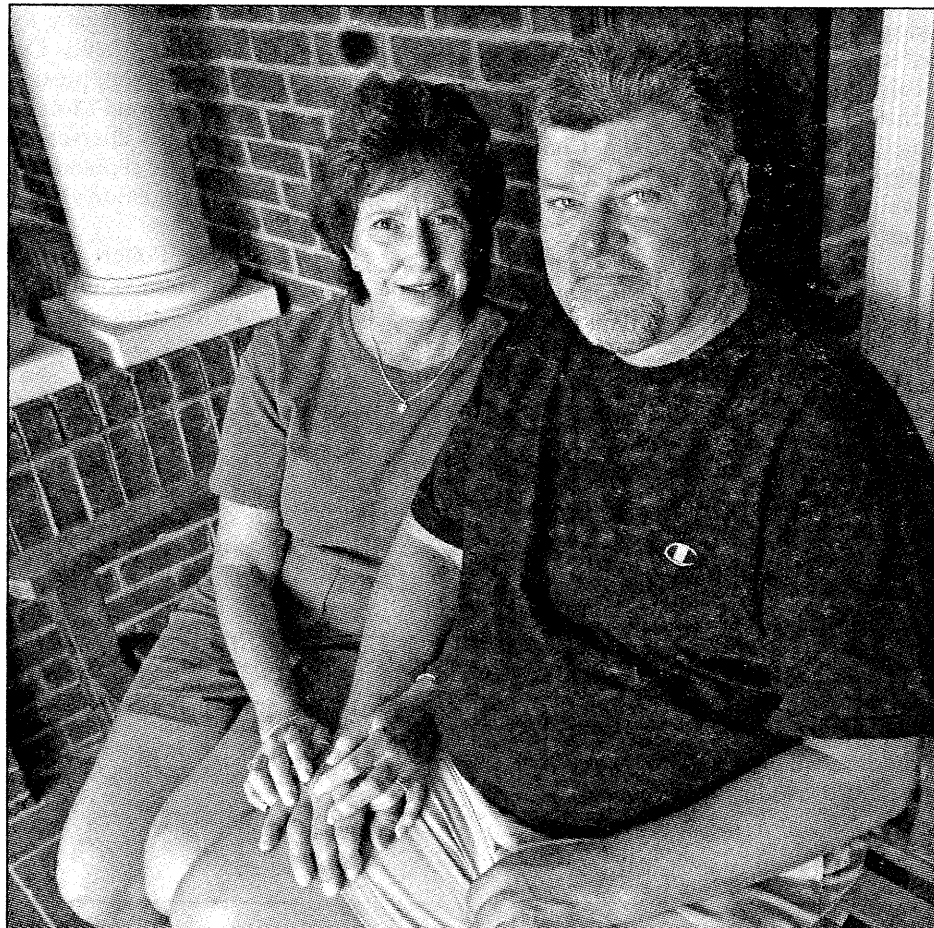
They eventually married other people and only saw each other twice. The first time was at work in 1990 between training classes. Rob was coming as Pam was leaving. They made small talk about spouses and families - Rob has two children, Jason Elders and Lisa Ward, now 33 and 30.

They met again five years later at their high school reunion.

Pam said she was nervous about seeing "Robbie," especially since she going through a divorce. But again, the two exchanged pleasantries. Rob even introduced Pam to his then-wife.

"I never forgot my first love," Pam said. "Seeing him was a little bit exciting, a little bit scary, a little bit regretful."

In September 2002, Rob and Pam's classmates from West Meck and Harding University High threw a party. Pam didn't go, but mutual friend Donna Tinker received e-mailed photos from the fete. Tinker showed Pam and urged her to call Rob; he, too, was getting divorced.



CARRIE LEONARD - cleonard@charlotteobserver.com

Pam and Rob Elders were married at Buddy Kemp Caring House, where Pam is a volunteer. They asked those attending the wedding to make donations to the house in lieu of wedding presents; they raised nearly \$2,500.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAM AND ROB ELDERS

TOP: Pam and Rob Elders share a toast during their wedding. They were married one day before the National Cancer Survivors Day celebration.

RIGHT: The couple maintained some traditions, such as the wedding garter ceremony.



"He was still so cute," Pam said.

Pam said she'd sent Rob an e-mail in October to feel him out. He mentioned his separation and invited Pam to dinner. That December, the couple began seriously dating again.

Rob's encouragement

In the midst of their second courtship, Pam's liposarcoma, a soft tissue cancer, recurred. It had been in remission three years before returning May 2003.

She had developed multiple tumors,

ters stayed with her until Rob returned and sent them away; it was his responsibility to be with Pam.

The liposarcoma recurred again, in November 2005. This time, Rob was in Charlotte for Pam's surgery. She was in the hospital for 12 days. Rob visited twice each day.

Rob had lost his father and grandfather to cancer. Last October, his aunt died of cancer as well. Pam had grown close to her and said the disease was something that bonded the women and Rob.

Pam said Rob's experience helped him empathize and helped her heal.

"I just knew she'd be all right. I felt it," Rob said.

"He's a man of encouragement," Pam said. "He wouldn't let me give up on myself."

Coming full circle

Rob and Pam got engaged Feb. 13. Pam jokes that Rob couldn't wait one more day to propose.

But she'd worn a ring since December 2004. Rob bought it in Asheville, Pam's hometown, while they were visiting family.

The two knew early on they wanted to marry, but they didn't want to rush things. They called the ring "a gift" until Rob popped the question.

They purchased their first home together in Garden City, S.C., last year - a welcome distraction for Pam, who was enduring her third cancer battle. Rob handled the title work and kept her updated on the home during her hospital stay.

"He was my link to the future," Pam said.

When it came time for the nuptials, the couple wanted it to be special.

For the location, they chose Buddy Kemp, a place Pam has found solace and where she's been a volunteer since 2003.

The couple used the tents, decorations and stage set up for Survivors Day activities.

They wanted the guests to see how much Buddy Kemp means to them. They asked attendees to make donations to the house in lieu of wedding presents; they raised nearly \$2,500.

Tinker said she'd didn't expect either Pam or Rob to remarry, but she's tickled for them. "They just bounce off each other. They're a perfect match," she said.

Pam and Rob believe they would've still gotten married if they'd stayed together after high school.

"My sister (Shaw) doesn't," Pam said, adding that Shaw believes everything happens for a reason.

"But I think we still would've gotten here. And had lots of kids."

"Yep, about 10 of them," Rob added with a chuckle.

Pam laughed, too.

"As a young person, instinctively, you know who's right for you," she said.