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STAND ON *ceremony*

THE RITES OF MARRIAGE TAKE A PERSONAL TURN.

writer RINA CHANDARANA JOHN ~ photo LARRY FAGALA

From the orchid on the place setting to the Swarovski crystals on the cake topper, a bride can spend hours poring over the small details that go into the biggest party of her life. With so much energy—not to mention money—spent on the reception, it's no wonder that many brides leave the wedding ceremony to standard rituals and traditional settings. But while ritual and tradition are vital parts of the wedding celebration, your ceremony also is a wonderful opportunity for personalization and sentiment, fine detail and deep meaning.

THE RITE SITE

Whether in the city or country, the location of your wedding plays a big role in the overall emotional tenor of your ceremony. Event planner Jenika Gonzales of Houston-based Event Solutions says one of her brides held her wedding at the family's farm. "It was a location out of a fairytale," Gonzales says, "complete with wildflowers, farm animals and a barn that we thought only existed on Pinterest."

The couple held their ceremony under a wooden treehouse that the bride's late father had built for her and her sister. "That represented so many great childhood memories of him for them," says Gonzales. "We draped the treehouse with ivory linens and added flowers to give it the perfect touch and dress it up as her ceremony

backdrop," says Gonzales. "One of the most rewarding moments was seeing her walk down the aisle path to the treehouse and seeing her face light up when she saw it decorated."

IN SPIRIT

Weddings are a unique occasion for family far and near to come together to celebrate the new couple. But if a loved one such as a parent or grandparent is deceased, a memory table filled with favorite photos is a meaningful way to have them there in spirit. "At one wedding both parents of the bride were deceased," says Jo Ann Schwartz Woodward of Houston planning firm Schwartz & Woodward. "We had a special memory table with photos and the mother's favorite flowers." She also has used

flowers to reserve chairs in the first row of the ceremony in memory of family members.

Sobi Qazi of Lion & Lamb Event Services agrees that it is important to recognize lost loved ones at a wedding. "We have had the groom walk down the aisle with a single long-stemmed rose, either white or red, to honor his late mother or father," placing the flower on a chair in the first row before taking his spot at the altar, she says.

FLORAL SENTIMENTS

Gonzales suggests incorporating your family history into your ceremony bouquet and floral accent pieces. One of her past brides used "a boot that belonged to her late father as a vase for some gorgeous flowers on her sign-in table," the planner says. "Not only

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did it add a nice touch to her rustic-chic wedding decor, but it was also a touching way for guests to remember her father.”

She adds that pinning a locket with a picture of a deceased family member onto your bouquet wrap keeps your loved one close. “We had a bride do

this who had lost her father, whom she was very close with, and she wanted him to be right beside her on the happiest day of her life.”

Planner Jubilee Lau of Jubilee Lau Events in San Francisco says her brides have added family heirlooms, such as a grandmother’s brooch or necklace,

to their bouquets. “It’s a way to bring family history into the wedding, and if grandparents have passed away, it makes it feel like they are still part of the wedding,” says Lau.

Schwartz Woodward suggests that couples ask their mothers what types of flowers they used in their weddings, and incorporate those blooms into the bride’s bouquet.

FABRIC OF LOVE

While “some brides wear a family wedding dress or veil that has been passed down from generation to generation,” notes Schwartz Woodward, even a small piece of history can have major importance as part of the bride’s wedding-day attire. Pinning a small swatch of lace from a family wedding dress onto the bride’s petticoat, for instance, is a thoughtful and personal way to remember the past. “It makes for a wonderful photo and is meaningful to many brides,” Schwartz Woodward says.

Lau adds that even stitching a beloved family member’s name inside her wedding gown can have profound meaning for the bride.

Another of Schwartz Woodward’s favorite ideas is to monogram a handkerchief—either a family heirloom or one purchased specifically for the wedding—with the date of the mother-of-the-bride’s wedding, as well as the bride’s wedding. “It can be passed on to their children to use,” the planner says.

KIDS’ STUFF

Young bridal-party members always elicit smiles at the wedding ceremony, especially when they are styled for the occasion. Tracie Domino of Tampa, Fla.’s Tracie Domino Events says there’s nothing wrong with adding a little



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humor to your young guests' entrance. "Dressing your ring bearer as a secret-service agent is sure to get a laugh, and the little guy will love his moment in the spotlight," she notes.

Another lovely touch is to infuse young guests' attire with sentimental value—making the flower-girl dress or ring-bearer pillow from fabric taken from the bride's mother's wedding gown, for example.

PICTURE PERFECT

Photos, whether vintage, childhood or professionally shot just for the occasion, bring memories and meaning to the ceremony experience. A ceremony-entrance table or shelf display featuring framed photos mixed with flowers, candles, and vintage or thematic items, for instance, is a terrific way to pay

homage to your past before embarking on your future. Particularly with heirloom wedding photos, "It is so much fun to see who is related to whom and to see the wedding attire," says Schwartz Woodward.

With one wedding she worked on, Lau says, "The bride grew up with lots of family and friends' photos in her home." To echo the bride's childhood home and add sentiment to the ceremony, the planner picked out pictures from old family albums and created a "wall of fame."

BEST WISHES

Many couples forgo the standard guestbook and opt for other creative ways to solicit and hold onto their guests' best wishes. Schwartz Woodward says she often creates

personalized note cards for guests to write thoughtful wishes or fill in helpful advice to the newlyweds.

Wedding planner Jung Lee of Fête New York makes custom oversized guestbooks with thick paper for guests to write special notes or add photos, recipes or any other trinkets they wish to leave for the couple.

Other guestbook alternatives include sign-in trees (using fingerprints or cutouts as "leaves"), rock jars, quilt squares, photo-booth books, and canvases paired with paintbrushes for guests to leave their artistic mark.

TOKENS OF LOVE

Qazi likes to help the groom pick out a wedding gift for his bride-to-be. "From musical instruments, to iPads with pre-recorded messages, we help couples



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find the perfect wedding-day surprise based on what speaks to their relationship," she says.

WELL NAMED

If your ceremony guest list is small, planner Jennifer Brisman of Weddings New York says programs can be personalized to include the guests' names. "It makes them feel you were being thoughtful," she notes.

Domino suggests having a little fun with the content. "You can list the nicknames of all the bridal party members, or maybe just the groomsmen, in addition to their real names."

RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS

Aspects of a couple's parents' wedding can also be brought in through religious customs. Schwartz Woodward



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says that she has seen a couple use their grandparents' or parents' kiddush cup for a Jewish ceremony.

"Weddings are a time of love and unity and we like to make sure that all traditions, cultures and families are represented," agrees Qazi, who has done many "fusion" weddings. Qazi planned a Vietnamese and Hindu wedding and used cultural inspirations for the wedding invitations and the traditional attire. "We used a Buddha to represent the bride's side and a Ganesh for the groom's side."

She also recommends that her clients provide their guests with programs that describe the symbolism of these traditions so that the guests can understand their significance.

Domino says couples often incorporate readings or Bible verses that were

part of their sorority or fraternity rituals.

And Lau adds that she has couples of different cultural backgrounds incorporate different languages into the readings.

READINGS AND VOWS

Qazi notes that adding your love story to vows or readings is a good way to personalize a ceremony. "One couple had their pastor explain the story of how they met," she recounts. "This was a great way to add humor and joy for their guests to really feel as if they were part of the journey of their love story."

She has also had clients walk down the aisle to their recorded vows.

MOVE TO THE MUSIC

When walking down the aisle, Qazi

says her South Asian couples choose songs that reflect their stories with family, love and life. "Hindi songs explain love as a crazy emotion that is so powerful it can be overwhelming in a good way," she explains.

Although music choices may be limited in certain houses of worship, Domino suggests getting creative everywhere else. "We have a client getting married this spring walking down the aisle to 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow,' and another bride walked down the aisle to U2's 'Beautiful Day.'"

Lau says using your talent makes the day even more special. "We had one groom compose his own music for the bride to walk down the aisle to."

Notes Qazi: "It is moments like these that everyone will remember for years to come."



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