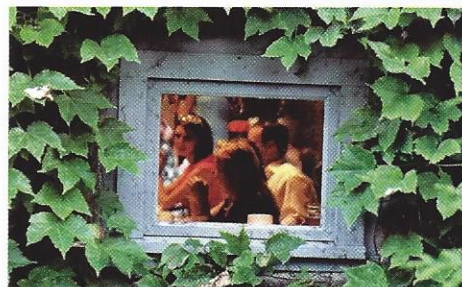
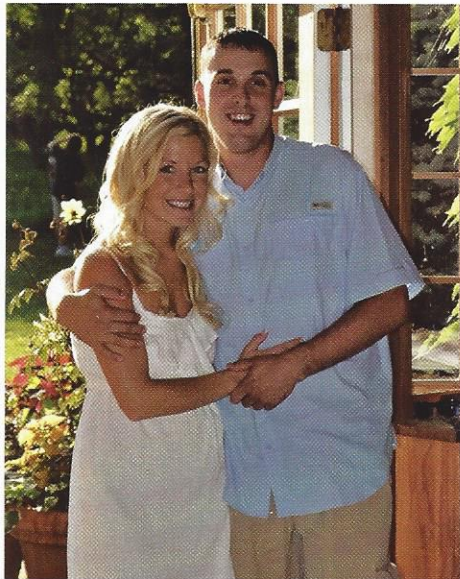


## A Tale of Two Settings

By Nancy Grant\*  
Photos Courtesy of Nancy Grant



It was the best of times...truly, it was! The wedding of our daughter brought joy, tears, and the kind of satisfaction that comes from watching a classic love story unfold. Katherine and Joseph's engagement meant the joining of two people from somewhat different worlds, so along with the joy, we faced a dilemma: how to weave their contrasting backgrounds into the perfect celebration.

Joe was a country boy from Ohio, raised on a farm without indoor plumbing. He could skin a deer by the time he was twelve, was a proud Ohio State fan, and said Ma'am after every yes and no. Kate was a Jersey girl, raised in a suburban Morris County. She took voice lessons when she was twelve, loved New York City and shopping malls, and vacationed in Bermuda and Disney World. Differences in their upbringings were obvious, but both had learned to value God, country, and family and were ready to embrace each other's world.

Under swaying Palmettos and Spanish moss, they met on Hilton Head Island where he taught her to fish and crab, to love seafood, and to think of his loving family, who had moved there from Ohio two years before, as her own. Their lives became even more entwined. She wore Ohio State t-shirts; he became a Yankee fan. They saw Broadway shows and found places to fish in the Garden State's glorious outdoors. What a shock for him to find that most of the animals he had hunted in Ohio could be found strolling around our backyard feasting on our tulips.

Soon enough Kate said "Yes" to the diamond Joe offered on the sunset sands of Dolphin Head, and so the joyous preparations began. The church wedding, reflecting their shared faith, was easy to plan. The reception posed the dilemma! How could it reflect their unique backgrounds and put all their guests, the

tuxedo set and the blue jean bunch, at ease? Of course, there would be a nod to the beach, but should the event be Jersey-style, with abundant food in a formal setting and some bling, or should it honor Joe's simple past, his down-home taste, and love of the outdoors? Out of this dilemma, a tale of two settings evolved.

July in New Jersey can be brutal, making an indoor reception a must. Meadow Wood Manor in Randolph offered floral courtyards, exquisite food, and requisite air conditioning. The venue was transformed into Dolphin Head at sunset thanks to amber lighting; touches of sand, shells, and bling; and an ice sculpture carved like a pair of starfish. The setting was very lovely, very grand, and very New Jersey.

Now for setting number two. Unfamiliar with this area, Joe's family asked for help planning the rehearsal dinner. Here was the chance to host an outdoor gathering that would put the gang from Ohio at ease, and that would showcase NJ in all its summer glory.

The happy couple discovered Willowwood Arboretum, one of Morris County's hidden gems. This 130-acre piece of heaven on earth was gifted to us mortals by two brothers who surely glimpsed celestial gardens and brought them to earth. Every scene seems lifted from an artist's easel.

As we passed through the gate for the first time, I sensed the cloak of 21st century care being lifted from my shoulders. The vistas on both side of the arcing roadway whispered ahhhhh and trees shifted lazily at the urging of a May breeze. The meadows, bedecked as they had been in my youth with such wildflowers, were nurtured by the sun. We drove on past the sweep of Long Meadow, past Willow Path and at road's end, saw a pudding-

stone barn, like a grand gift box wrapped in strands of lacy ivy, flanked with conical pines and adorned by potted florals of vivacious color. We knew for certain we'd find magic inside. Beyond, the gardens beckoned.

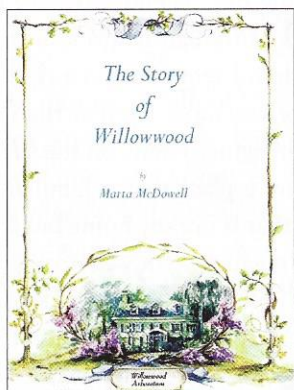
We crunched along stone paths through the formal gardens, charmed by the colors and textures that fired the imagination. Surely a rabbit named Peter might jump from the watering can by the greenhouse and the pergola hugged by blue hydrangea was a place where many a Juliet snatched kisses from her Romeo.

We continued into cool green spaces along woodland trails sparked with beams of diamond light. Crossing a sweet concrete bridge, we glimpsed a bust on Pan in his garden, and there I discovered a long-lost friend. I had not seen a Jack-in-the-Pulpit in Morris County since I was in 6th grade and wrote a mythological story about how they came to be. Nurtured in the shady recesses and protected from hungry deer, Jack lives on at Willowwood. What a joy to see.

The exotic "rosarie" with its water-clad urn, the majestic metasequoia presiding like Gulliver over all, the graceful Adirondack chairs waiting patiently under a 90-year-old Japanese yew, and the charming nooks where surely fairies reside-all of it radiated welcome. I looked toward the bride and groom wondering if the spell of the place had captivated them

too. Hand-in-hand they smiled and began making plans: inside the barn fifty guests, dinner catered by Redwoods of Chester, wine in a metal bucket, a frosty keg, sweet tea in mason jars, candles encircled by simple shells on the deep window ledges, long tables shaped like an embracing U draped with white cloths and warmed with raffia and candles and flowers casually tucked into country pitchers. Then smiles, and hugs, then laughter, then a toast to the bride, to the groom, to love....

Their special evening was breathtaking. Walking toward the barn, I leaned into a breeze full of the pungent aroma of a pine, then the nectar of lilies, then gently caressed by an ivory hydrangea. I gripped an arbor post worn smooth by other hands which had already discovered the wonder of the place and tried hard to take it all in. Inside the barn there was a golden glow and the happy blending of families and friends, a blending we thought might be difficult...but nothing seemed difficult here. I felt the fairies there casting a spell to help me hold the moment, to preserve it like a snow globe scene: the purple barn and the willows and the meadow of wildflowers with a flock of fireflies replacing flakes of snow. It was a storybook ending. In the twilight, under the wisteria arbor twinkling with tiny lights-or were they fireflies? - I glimpsed a tender dance between another of our daughters and the man whose diamond SHE would say "yes" to very soon. It was the best of times... indeed!

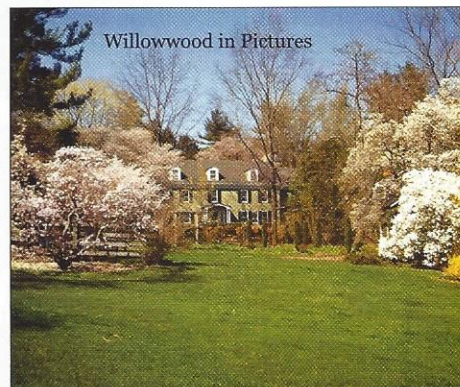


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