

CELEBRATING OUR STORIES
Jewish Life in Ann Arbor

Bonnie and Jim Keen
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5:46-6:17

Jim: Yeah. We were dating a lot, and we just had a good time, and we started getting serious. I don't know what brought it up, but we were talking about—it must've been around junior year, maybe even senior year when we started talking about, "Okay. When we graduate, what are we going to do?" We both knew that we wanted to get married, but then Bonnie said to me, "Well, I don't know how we're gonna do that. I've always pictured myself marrying somebody who's Jewish and we raise our children as Jews."

I, like, "Okay. *[Laughter]*."

Bonnie: *[Laughter]*.

Jim: "What do we do now?"

7:19-8:48

Bonnie: So we finally came up with a compromise, or, I don't know if it was a compromise. How would you phrase it?

Jim: Well, I guess you can call it a compromise, but it was a decision that we both came to.

Bonnie: Right. I was gonna live here and be away from my family on the East Coast, and while you weren't gonna convert, you had agreed to raise the kids Jewish.

Jim: Yeah. I guess if you were gonna give the gift to me that you were gonna stay in my hometown, because I had a job after graduation working in the family business which is here in Ann Arbor manufacturing wrestling uniforms, I guess I could give to you the gift of raising the children Jewish. It dawned on me one day that this love and respect I had for you and your faith—well, why couldn't that apply to my kids? At that point, I knew that it was the right decision and that it was gonna be okay.

But there's always that nagging thought in the back of your mind whether you're gonna feel any connection to your children—these are children we didn't have yet, but we were planning on it. We got married. We graduated in 1989. Bonnie went back to Boston College for law school two out of the three years. The third year, she came to Michigan.

Bonnie: After we got married.

13:12-14:57

Jim: But a lot of people ask us, though, are we raising our kids both because I'm Protestant and Bonnie's Jewish? I say, "No, nope. We decided before they were born that they were gonna be just Jewish." We had read some research that said a lot of times, if they're raised both, then they get a little confused later on as to what they are, or they end up nothing. We didn't wanna take a risk in that, so we decided just Jewish. They have gone to church with me. I don't go very often because it's hard to belong to two places, but we'll be there for a Christmas Eve service. For the most part, we go to the temple for all the holidays.

Bonnie: Right. Well, your family comes over and helps us celebrate Jewish holidays, specifically, Hanukah, and then—or Shabbat sometimes when they're around, so we go and help your family celebrate. It took a while, though, to get the certain things. Well, are the girls gonna have stockings or not? Are they gonna believe in Santa Claus or not? It took a while to hammer out some of the details, but we were able to. Jim has a tree at our house, and we help Jim decorate the Christmas tree.

Jim: Yep. That's a hot button issue for a lot of people, I think, is to tree or not to tree. *[Laughter]*.

Bonnie: Right, but we figure the kids know that they're Jewish every day during the year, and here's Dad's one day, Christmas. We're gonna help him celebrate.

Jim: Yeah. We figure it's more important how we raise them as Jews the other 364 days out of the year than to really stress over one day. They know it's my tree, and they help me decorate it—

Bonnie: And pick it out.

27:14-28:47

Bonnie: But I think another thing about raising our kids in Ann Arbor is people don't really care if you're Jewish or you're Muslim or you're Christian. Everybody's pretty much accepting.

Jim: It's a very open-minded community we have here, a very diverse community.

Bonnie: Yeah, and everybody's interested about learning about everybody else's religions. It makes it easy to be an interfaith couple in Ann Arbor. Our temple has a lot of interfaith couples as well—

Jim: It does.

Bonnie: - so it makes it very comfortable and very easy as opposed—I think if we were in a different community, it might be a lot harder.

Jim: Well, just nationwide, the intermarriage rate is roughly 50 percent, so one out of every two Jews who take the plunge is diving into an interfaith marriage.

Bonnie: Right, but then they don't continue to go on and necessarily affiliate with the temple or not.

Jim: My whole point about the book was that it can be done. You can affiliate. You can have an identity. You can give your children a Jewish identity. You can keep your own Christian identity. People say, "Why didn't you ever convert?" I said, "Well, I'm not Jewish. There wasn't a reason to convert." It has to be done for the right reasons, I think. A lot of people do, and it's gotta be right for them, but for me, I still feel Protestant. I'm very happy to be part of the Jewish community and raising a Jewish family.

31:15-32:28

StoryCorps: Was there anything that made you feel, like, "Oh, I'm the non-Jew here." Do you remember anything, like the way people were behaving?

Jim: Yeah. I think it was—we were at your cousin's, and we were watching—I think it was the wedding. I think it was Jim and Janice's wedding, and—

Bonnie: Oh, yeah. Uncle Sydney.

Jim: - Uncle Sydney—great guy—oh, I just love Uncle Sydney. He led a toast—was it, “Roses are red, violets are bluish—“

Bonnie: “We’re so glad that Janice is Jewish.”

Jim: Yeah, something like that. [*Laughter*]. Cousin Ken leaned over to me, and he goes, “Does that make you feel uncomfortable?” I’m, like, “No. Actually, it was pretty funny.” [*Laughter*]. It got me thinking a little bit that I have to do a lot of learning about Jewish culture. That’s a good thing after what we’re—we’ve been married for 22 years this June, and I get the jokes now. I get the Jewish jokes. I get Woody Allen. I can watch *Annie Hall* now and get it.

Bonnie: And *The Simpsons*.

Jim: And *The Simpsons*. A lot of Jewish jokes in *The Simpsons*.

Bonnie: A lot of jokes.

Jim: Yeah, and they would go right over my head, otherwise.

Bonnie: And our kids get it too, so that’s always fun.

Jim: Yeah.