

A Thoroughly Modern Marriage

Multiple obstacles don't deter couple from pursuing life together

By Prue Salasky, psalasky@dailypress.com | 247-4784

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Sharon Huang was raised in a Taiwanese family in the metropolis of Taipei. "I grew up with the traditional Confucius philosophy that you take care of the young and respect your elders," says the Newport News resident. So, her current roles as mother to 19-month-old Leanne and chief operating officer of an in-home care business, Home Helpers, seem made-to-order. She and her husband, Curtis Custer, 43, purchased the franchise for Norfolk and Virginia Beach in April.

Getting to this convergence, however, she followed a far from traditional route. If anything, the family's story is a contemporary fable with its technology-facilitated intercontinental romance, enforced separations, job changes and relocations.

It all started in 2003, when Huang, now 36, signed up for a free month's trial with an Internet dating site, American Singles. "They were bombarding me with advertising," she says in explanation. She then paid for a subsequent one-month membership but had met no one until the day it was set to expire. "That's when he showed up," she says, indicating Curtis. "He was the first to treat me like a normal person. We talked about 'Discovery,' a program we both like to watch."

Custer, who is currently a supervisor with the 86th Engineer Dive Team at Fort Eustis, was stationed in Hawaii at the time. A Southern California, former pro surfer, he joined the military while there.

As their friendship grew the two were communicating daily via email. With the six-hour time difference, Sharon would send a message before she went to bed, and then read Curtis' response when she got up in the morning. After about four months, they graduated to calling each other. "I gave him my cell phone number, it was a big mistake," she says with a laugh. It was costing them each \$1,000 a month; and she got in trouble at work for taking his calls. "I couldn't afford to buy clothes, or do anything," says Sharon, a marketing analyst for 3M.



Sharon Huang holds her daughter, Leanne, as her husband, Curtis Custer talks Friday, August 6, 2010, at their Home Helpers office in Newport News about how they met. Huang is from Taiwan and met Curtis through the internet. (Diane Mathews, Daily Press)

Eventually, Curtis arranged for a three-week leave to go and visit her in Taipei. "The adventure began at the airport and hasn't stopped," he says. They decided to marry. He met her family. Her mother, who speaks no English, liked him because of his appetite and appreciation for her traditional cooking; her father was less accepting. Now, however, the two are fast friends.

A month later, Sharon set up a return trip to California — her first ever visit to the United States — around Thanksgiving. Meanwhile, Curtis was preparing to go to Special Forces training. His boss advised him that he'd be gone a lot and he shouldn't get married once that started. So the two decided not to wait and got married that month, in November. A friend officiated at the casual ceremony in Central Park in Huntington Beach, home to Curtis' family at the time.

After a couple of weeks Sharon returned to Taipei to tie up loose ends with her job in order to qualify for a severance package; she was planning on staying for a year. But in March Curtis had a training accident, breaking his back in an 800-foot jump; he called Sharon from the hospital to come and look after him. She did so, helping him with ADLs (activities of daily living) — the same service their Home Helpers' franchise now offers — for the three months he was bed-ridden.

She then entered a period of immigration limbo as her B-2 tourist visa expired. She received written approval to stay— "visa amnesty" — in the form of a letter carried in her wallet, but she couldn't work or leave the country until she secured a green card. That process would take almost two years. The couple moved to Fayetteville with Curtis' orders, a culture shock to the urban Sharon, made worse by her inability to work. "That first year was very tough on her," says Curtis. "I felt bad for everything she'd given up and was going through."

Curtis expresses his frustration with the immigration process, citing the amount of paperwork, the complexity, the cost (\$1,500 to apply), and the delays — the Charlotte office they worked through had a two-year waiting list and staff was routinely rude when Sharon called. "Here's my wife who has two degrees, one in chemical engineering and one in marketing. She's Type A and driven, and she can't work. Her life's completely on hold... It's no surprise that people bypass the process. It would be better if they just had a quota and made it simple. They should make it more user-friendly," he says.

Their situation improved considerably when they moved to Virginia in 2005. The Norfolk immigration office moved at the speed of light compared to Charlotte and Sharon received a green card in 2006. She immediately made a visit to her family in Taiwan and on her return started work, eventually landing a job as a Mandarin translator for Language Line Services. Prior to that she worked as a waitress at Red Lobster, and for a year tried her hand at a booth at the commissary selling imported jade and her own handcrafted jewelry.

Things changed again in 2008: Curtis' father died in January, their daughter Leanne was born in December, and Curtis received orders to deploy to Iraq the following March. "I jumped at the opportunity. It's my job. The team needed me," he says, though it meant leaving when Leanne was 3 months old and missing Sharon's citizenship ceremony in June 2009. Meanwhile, Sharon and the baby went to rural Bucyrus, Mo., to help her mother-in-law run a 500-acre farm. "It was good for my mother. I didn't worry about them at all," says Curtis. To this Sharon responds, "I'm a trouper!" The couple reunited in Taiwan for a two-week visit halfway through Curtis' one-year deployment.

On their return to the Peninsula this spring, the couple started casting around for an investment for his father's estate that would provide a revenue stream for Curtis' mother and employment for Sharon. They looked at various franchises before settling on Home Helpers. "It had to be something my mother would appreciate," says Curtis, who is the CEO, while Sharon takes care of the daily operations from a small office in Denbigh.

Sharon adds, "I'm really impressed with them. I feel really good. I think they're awesome. Having our own business is more rewarding. I feel very fortunate." As for Curtis, who says their lives are never dull, he says, "I look back. I'm so happy. It's a dream come true."

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