

Couple finds Path to love



BRIAN LAPETER/Chronicle

After 20 years of an on-again, off-again relationship that included bouts with alcoholism, Joe and Kim Freda are now sober and were married Saturday at Fort Island Gulf Beach. The couple credits a three-month stay at The Path, a homeless shelter in Beverly Hills, with turning around their life.

Relationship rekindled after alcohol battles lead former loves to center

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The night Joe Freda arrived at The Path, a commotion rippled through the women's shelter.

"There's a new man out front," one of the children said.

Kim Freda, then Kim Rudolph, peeked outside to see who it was and gasped. It's desperation that brings a person to a homeless shelter, and The Path has strict rules about male-female relationships.

She knew she couldn't let anyone know that she knew the man who had come for help — one of them would have to leave. She didn't want to jeopardize Joe's opportunity to get help, and she didn't want to jeopardize her own.

Joe, too, upon seeing Kim thought the same thing.

So the couple, who were married Saturday, kept their 20-year, off-and-on history together a secret. By the time they had almost completed their recovery programs and let their secret out,

■ The Path needs a new van. For story, see **PAGE 3A**

everyone was shocked. "That speaks volumes about what love is capable of," The Path women's administrator Debbie Quinn said. "We were all floored to learn (their story). In all the time they were here, neither made one wrong move. That's devotion and sacrifice and commitment to another person's well-being."

They first met 20 years ago in Orlando, at the Altamonte Springs Mall where they both worked. Kim grew up in Orlando; Joe had come from New Jersey. They were casual acquaintances, went out a few times, but nothing serious.

They married other people, each had children, got divorced. Kim worked as a medical transcriptionist for 20 years and made a good living.

She moved to Ocala and ran into Joe again. He had been all over — Williston, Clearwater, Ocala. Joe had gotten a job with a van conversion company making good money and eventually ended up in

Hernando where his mother lived at the time.

Meanwhile, a fall in a restaurant had left Kim injured and unable to work, so she moved to Inverness to live with family.

One day, Joe wasn't feeling well and left work to go home — he worked in Citrus County at this time — and stopped at a Circle K in Inverness to use the pay phone. He heard a woman say, "That phone is broken and I'm next!" and just as he was about to say something sassy, he recognized Kim.

Shortly after that, they began dating and should have lived happily ever after; but they each harbored a demon that eventually proved to be their undoing.

Kim couldn't work, so she depended on Joe's income to care for them both. They rented a house together in Inverness, then rooms here and there all over the county. Joe worked various jobs, had several accidents that kept him from working, worked day labor.

COUPLE

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The car kept breaking down. Luck was not on their side.

And their demon?

"Back then, we were drinking up all the money," Joe said. "We'd go to a bar and spend \$100 that we didn't have. We moved around a lot, fought constantly over money."

"That's how I ended up at The Path," Kim said. "We were destitute and I ended up going on a binge and ended up in jail."

They had gone to a bar so Joe could play in a darts tournament. The plan was that he would win and they could pay their rent and get by for a little while, at least.

Joe won the tournament, but lost the money when Kim, so drunk that she blacked out, went outside and got into an argument. When Joe went outside to get her, she had busted out their car window and was out of control. The police came and Kim was taken to jail.

"She was in the back of a squad car and I didn't know what to do," Joe said. And the winnings he had left on the bar had disappeared by the time he returned to claim them.

Eight days later, Kim got out of jail, sober and ready to change her life. That's when she called The Path.

Meanwhile, Joe kept drinking and working, drinking and staying in hotels, drinking. He ended up in Tarpon Springs where his daughter told him he needed help. He tried The

Centers in Ocala, but they didn't have room for him. Then he remembered seeing The Path every day going to work and called them.

He had no idea Kim was there, and when he first saw her, he left and went to a convenience store to get a beer.

"I was talking to the can of beer — 'What should I do? I don't want to harm Kim; if they found out that I know her, they'd kick her out or kick me out.' Then I threw the beer down and said, 'God's got to help me.' And I went back," he said.

They were there for three months and no one knew their history together. They only wanted to change their lives and do whatever it took to allow the other one to change, too.

It's been nearly two months since they successfully completed The Path program. They each have a job and are both sober. They feel that they are on a good path, although they still have obstacles ahead. It takes time to set decades of bad choices right, but they plan to do it together.

Years ago, Joe gave Kim a promise ring. Saturday, he gave her a wedding ring.

"Financially, we have a roof over our heads, our rent is paid, we're both working, there's food in the refrigerator — no alcohol — and I have a happy heart. I've got my sobriety and I've got God," Joe said.

"If ending up in jail and homeless brought me to this place, then I thank God," Kim said. "If we hadn't ended up at The Path, we'd be dead. I know it."