

SAILING AROUND ALL OBSTACLES TO FIND LASTING LOVE

BY JAY ROLAND PHOTOS BY LYNN ELKES



THE KISS



"I'D LIVED ALL OVER THE WORLD AND I WANTED TO SETTLE DOWN IN PARADISE."
— TIM SOLOMON

Jan and Tim Solomon, owners of Key Sailing, have lived one heck of a tale. If you ever hear the words "I love the captain of the Key Breeze!" echoing under the John Ringling Bridge, that's Jan demonstrating to passengers on their 41-foot yacht how anything said while sailing under the span echoes, for a few moments in the ears and much longer in the hearts.

Where to begin? Well, in this case, you really can begin at the beginning, and the Solomons have the photograph to prove it. In glorious black-and-white, mothers and grandmothers in long dresses and fathers and grandfathers in suits are spread out on the Ashland Theological Seminary lawn in Ohio, for the 250th conference of the Brethren Church. Held by their respective fathers

(friends long before their children were born) in the summer of 1958 are Tim and Jan as babies. The Solomons were heading for missionary service in Argentina, while the Hamels were off to Florida.

Some longtime Sarasota residents are no doubt familiar with Jan's father, the late Rev. J.D. Hamel. The veteran's park at Gulfstream Avenue and Main Street in Sarasota bears his name, because Rev. Hamel aided the city's firefighters, police officers and anyone else who needed his spiritual guidance as Official "Town Chaplain" for almost 40 years.

Janet Hamel grew up in Sarasota, learning important lessons about compassion and grace from loving parents. Her mother, a Florida West Coast Symphony violinist, also passed along a love of music. Jan picked up the flute and played it all the way to first chair in the state of Florida at the tender age of 14.

But before she could share her gift with the world as part of a national band poised to tour Europe, that boy from Ashland reappeared in her life, in November of 1973.

Jan and Tim spent five days getting to know each other as the families visited once again before the Solomons' upcoming move to Medellin, enjoying Siesta Key beaches and small-town Sarasota. On a walk through the woods (now a shopping center at the intersection of Fruitville and Beneva Roads), Tim blurted out all he had been feeling and thinking about (though Jan is quick to point out that his speech came in "Outline Form").

"He gets to the part where he says he loves me and wants me to wait for him, because he's going to be gone for four years," Jan says. "He even asked permission to kiss me. Then he kissed

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me one time and immediately left the country! I was 16 years old."

But with the blessings and machinations of both families involved, there would be no four-year separation. Tim's father, seeing his lovesick son not eating, not sleeping and writing Jan daily, arranged for a summer visit from

Rev. Hamel, encouraging him to bring his fair-haired young daughter with him, flute in hand.

So much for the national band tour! Instead, Jan was strolling up mountain paths to romantic restaurants, where her handsome young escort ordered exotic dishes in Spanish. What was a girl to do? Well, naturally, she, Tim's sister and a pair of well-intentioned moms arranged for Tim to return to Sarasota to finish his high school education (interrupted too many times as the son of a missionary). In caps and gowns together, Jan and Tim graduated into the Real World, where they went to college together and were married on April 10, 1977.

While service to others remained a constant, handed down from parents, aunts, uncles, family friends, etc., geography and logistics proved to be a challenge. "How we're raised influences our desires," Tim says. "I'd lived all over the world and I wanted to settle down in paradise. I fell in love with Jan and Sarasota at the same time."

"I'd heard missionary stories my whole life," Jan recalls. "I felt a call to make a difference." In a way, they managed to do both. They lived in Sarasota and then worked and played in 30 countries on six continents – though a close call in 1989 almost cut short their real-life fairy tale.

Jan and Tim braved the unstable political climate of Colombia to carry out their spiritual calling, along with their two young children (who have now had missionary experiences of their own). Three of five presidential candidates had been killed, and an estimated 144 guerilla groups were trying to take over a country the size of Texas. Americans were encouraged to leave or at least keep a low profile.

Jan recalls: "I was playing flute in the soccer stadium for Luis Palau at a Christian Crusade. That's probably not the best way of 'keeping a low profile.'"

"The drugs were in my cola that I bought en route to rehearsal.

"Terrorists are not supposed to kidnap relief workers. Christian missionaries, Red Cross, etc., don't pay ransom so as not to encourage kidnapping, but I guess the guerillas didn't get



that memo," Jan says. "I drank the Burrendanga that was in my soda, hit the sidewalk at full speed ahead without anything to break my fall, bounced three times, and was unconscious for three days. The good news is that I woke up in the arms of my husband.

I was left with facial nerve damage, but I was left alive."

A return to the Midwest followed soon after that foiled kidnapping attempt. Jan taught school and Tim built Christian bookstores. But it wouldn't be long before they returned to Sarasota with their kids and their love of the water.

After a few rides on the Key Breeze and wondering just how fun it would be to run the Marina Jack-based charter business, the Solomons got their chance the summer of 2007. It's now their boat, their main source of income, and simply the latest romantic adventure of their lives. Aboard the sleek craft, they provide tranquil excursions for wedding services, the perfect opportunity for a proposal at sunset, or, as Jan puts it, "We offer clean air, true love (bring your own) and a few hours of peace on earth... and we always sail with chocolate."

"We see the boat as a way to pay for the things we believe can make the world a better place, and 100% of our tips go to nonprofits," Jan says, admitting that neither she nor Tim are especially good at fund-raising. "But it has become so much more. We have met the most fascinating people and have been invited to captain vacations in the B.V.I. [British Virgin Islands] and Greece."

While Jan sets out these days to write a book about her 50-year romance with Tim and include the many love stories heard on the Key Breeze, she continues to be amazed how the chapters seem to write themselves.

"The most interesting people in the world wind up on our sailboat," Jan says, almost seeming to forget that few stories are going to top that of the captain and the woman who loves him.

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