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Buffalo, New York

The question “Why do you want to win the wedding at the Athenaeum Hotel?” is easy for me to answer. Because it would be my dream wedding. Let me take you back to the summer of 1993. I was a 9 year old excited to run around the neighborhood playing with my classmates. When my mom told me that she had a different plan for me, I was not happy. My mom is an independent single mom who decided that she needed to go back to school to get a degree in order to support herself and children. Her plan was to send me with my grandma (Grams) to Chautauqua Institution to the Boys and Girls Club while she worked in the Colonnade.

For the next 7 summers Grams and I drove to the Institution listening to Billy Joel’s Greatest Hits. I would hop on my bike, ride past the Athenaeum to the Boys and Girls Club. Every time I would speed by I would admire the huge gorgeous building and wonder how I would one day get to spend the summer on the enormous front porch on a rocking chair reading a book. Grams knew how much the hotel intrigued me so she arranged for us to have lunch there on my birthday. I can still remember it like yesterday.

As I grew older I decided I wanted to start working in the summer, but who would hire a 14 year old? With the summer approaching Grams called and said she arranged for me to have a job at the Refectory scooping ice cream. I continued to ride with Grams in the mornings until I was 20. I also worked at the hotel during the off season serving at weddings and various events. I would day dream, in my maid’s uniform, about one day being married in the Hall of Philosophy, with the rehearsal dinner in the bell tower and reception in the hotel. I would picture all of this with Grams being there being so proud that I chose a place that meant so much to her and myself.

I never really thought much of these morning drives until Grams past away in June 2010. On our trips to and from work she taught me many life lessons like how to be an independent woman and to always have a plan in life. She is the person that had the most influence on my life and was always so proud of me and what I had accomplished.

I spent her final days in her room talking as if nothing was wrong. I could never show her I was upset because I am “tough” like she taught me to be. I spent those final days sharing memories only her and I knew.

When I left that day, not knowing it was the last day I would spend with her, I called Kris and told him life was too short. From that day forward we knew we were meant to be.

Kris and I had been talking about getting married and I had my eye open for the “perfect” ring. To my surprise Kris had in a box a ring that looked familiar but I couldn’t put my finger on it. It was 12 round stones around a slightly larger center stone in the shape of a flower. He could tell I was a little confused and told me it was Grams’ ring! It was the best ring I could have ever received. I didn’t even know she had a ring. It was perfect! The flower lit her personality because of her love for gardening.

So now at 27 years old I am engaged to the love of my life with Gram’s approval and better yet her ring! My dream would be to take the trip across the bridge listening to Billy Joel’s Greatest Hits my wedding day in Chautauqua.

I’ve come to the realization that my dream wedding is nearly impossible because we both have significant student loans and both come from divorced families that can’t contribute a lot because of their own financial burdens. We both have jobs, Kris works 80 hours a week at a car dealership and I serve at a restaurant because I can’t find a job in biology until I get my masters, which I will be starting in the fall. We just don’t have enough to cover my dream wedding at the Athenaeum. So I was thinking of other options. None of them my dream but, it’s about who you marry not the location. Well that’s what I keep telling myself.

My mother called last night so excited to tell me about this contest because she knows how much it would mean to me to have our big day there. Especially with all the memories that I had in Chautauqua with Grams since she can’t be with us. So as you can see Chautauqua Institution is not a destination for me as it is much more, a memory dear to my heart. So I’ll say a special prayer to Grams that I could be granted this special gift.