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Seniors Remarrying: Growing the Family Tree

BY ERIN BRERETON



Family members visit with Regents Point residents Al Mortenson and Mickey Jackson.



Seniors face challenges and joys blending their families. Find out how these couples make it work.

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Carolyn Shadle, 74, and John Meyer, 79

Carolyn Shadle certainly didn't expect to fall in love while in the State University of New York at Buffalo communications consulting class she'd registered for as part of her doctorate program.

But when John Meyer, a State University of New York at Plattsburgh professor on sabbatical who was auditing the course, reviewed her resume during a class assignment, he immediately noticed they were interested in the same communication areas. They had other similar interests, and they both had children.

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"I turned around to find out who in the world was this person?" Meyer says.

"And there she was, sitting right behind me with a big smile on her face."

Spurred by their mutual academic interests, Meyer and Shadle teamed up to write communication studies articles and a book.

"After we wrote the book, sparks began to develop, and we thought, 'If we can write a book together and survive, we might enjoy a life together!'"

Shadle says, laughing. "It wasn't exactly love at first sight—but it was close."

How Blended Families Adjust

Shadle and Meyer had both been married; she had two adult children when they met, and he had four.

Although neither had introduced a significant other to their children before, Meyer's initial meeting with Shadle's children went well.

"That's not to say it wasn't an adjustment getting used to the fact there were new people in the family," she says. "But that didn't last."

Shadle and Meyer, who got married in 1999—10 years after they met—and moved to [White Sands La Jolla](#), a be.group senior living community in La Jolla, California, shortly after Shadle retired, visit family members whenever they can. Most recently, on their way to a conference in Canada, they took a detour to see Meyer's granddaughter play the flute in a concert in Buffalo, New York, and then stopped in to spend time with Shadle's daughter in a nearby suburb.

Their children, Shadle says, don't think of themselves as step-siblings. They view each other as their mother's and father's friends.

"Even though the children are older and on their own, they're sensitive," she says. "[It's important] to respect the fact they had a history with another family structure and not try to force them to redefine themselves into another family."

Mickey Jackson, 78, and Al Mortenson, 92

Al Mortenson and Mickey Jackson were neighbors, living just a few blocks apart in the same Irvine, California, neighborhood. But, the two didn't meet until one evening when Mortenson went on a milk run and approached

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Jackson in a local grocery store parking lot.

“He asked me about my car, and various other things,” she says. “Every time I’d think he was just about done talking, he’d start to walk away and come back.”

Mortenson eventually asked for her number and called a couple of weeks later.

“I was a little leery,” Jackson says. “But when we met, he was just charming. We went out to lunch, and went on from there.”

Respecting the Past

Although the initial family introductions went well, Jackson was aware the couple’s relationship was a change for their collective six children—even if most were adults.

“There is a little bit of, ‘This means my parents aren’t ever going to be married again,’” Jackson says. “The secret is time. You little by little build memories and have one contact after another.”

The couple, who married about a year and a half after meeting, began renting a house in Idyllwild, California, each year to host the combined crew, and also held joint holiday celebrations.

Now, more than three decades later, their children often stop for dinner with Jackson and Mortenson at their home at [Regents Point](#), a be.group senior living community in Irvine, California. Extended family members keep in touch—particularly the grandchildren—Jackson says, through Facebook.

“Sometimes I’ll tell someone on my side of the family news about someone on Al’s side and they’ll say, ‘Oh, I knew that,’” Jackson says. “We’re about as close as we can be.”

“Her kids are my kids, and vice versa,” Mortenson says.

Jackson and Mortenson grew up with several siblings—he’s one of eight, and she’s the youngest of seven—so both feel at home in a big family.

Jackson recently lost his brother. The two were very close and going through that sad time was a reminder of how families change and evolve. "It made me think, 'I really miss the end of that family.' I also thought, 'But look at the family we've created!' It's kind of awesome," he says.

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