

A man and a woman are standing in front of a lush green wall of leaves. The man is on the left, wearing a dark blue turtleneck sweater and dark pants. The woman is on the right, wearing a blue button-down cardigan and a dark pleated skirt. They are holding hands and looking at each other. The background is a dense wall of green leaves. The floor has a pattern of large, stylized leaves in shades of green and yellow.

first
loves

BEN GENTILE | 44
Technician, Verizon

GRETA GREEN-GENTILE | 44
Human resources manager,
Heineken USA

130



second
* chances

WHO HASN'T GOOGLED AN EX, WONDERING WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN? THESE COUPLES RECONNECTED WITH THEIR EARLY CRUSHES AND DISCOVERED THE JOY OF GROWN-UP LOVE

As told to **ABBY ELLIN** | Photographed by **CHRIS BUCK**

GRETA AND BEN DATED

for six months during their senior year of high school in the Bronx, then met again at their tenth reunion and became friends. They leaned on each other through painful divorces and were married on St. Croix in 2000.

* **Greta says** Ben wanted to make it serious when we were in high school, but I wasn't ready. My parents always told me not to consider marriage until my career was established, and I listened to them. Over the years I thought about him—he was the one that got away. During our divorces, we learned how important it is to have an old friend standing by. Ben has taught me about real love—not just romantic, mushy feelings but the kind of love that requires trust and giving each other the benefit of the doubt.

* **Ben says** It was amazing to see Greta at the reunion; she was more beautiful than ever. But she was at the end of a marriage, and I respected that. Then when I got divorced after three years of marriage, she was there for me. Divorce can put you in a very dark place; I was so disillusioned by marriage that I would've been fine casually dating for the rest of my life, but Greta helped me see things from a different angle. As teenagers, we were thickheaded, but now we know how to give each other space and when to agree to disagree. We even went to premarital counseling. We know how special our relationship is.



Ben and Greta in New York, far left, and, left, at their senior prom, June 1981

SARAH LAWRENCE 47

Director of graduate studies,
Cooper-Hewitt, National
Design Museum/Parsons

JOHN STERN 47

Associate general counsel,
international affairs, Verizon
Business



Sarah and
John, with
daughter
Julia, in their
New York
apartment,
and, at
right, in
the 1960s

HAIR AND MAKEUP: EBBE SAUJE FOR JEFFREY MATHIAS/HEALTHYOCOM



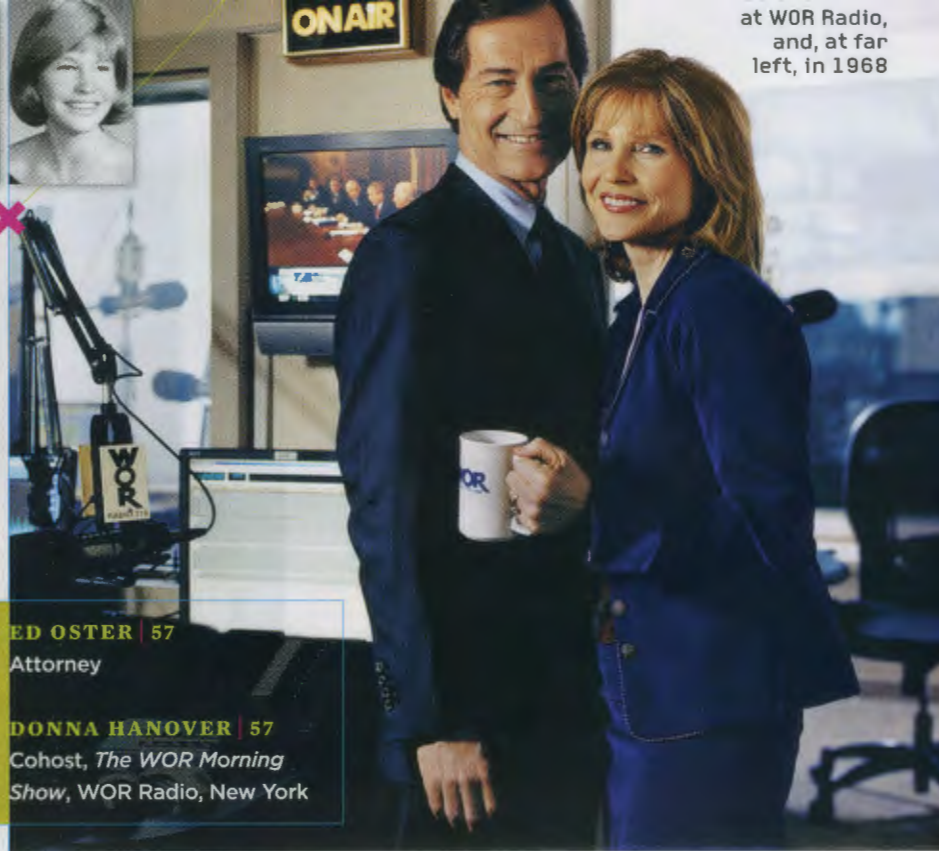
DURING TWO YEARS OF nursery school, Sarah and John were inseparable. And when they ended up at the same dinner party as adults, the bond hadn't broken. But for a long time, one or the other was part of a couple. They found they were finally in sync when he sent flowers on her fortieth birthday, and in 2003 they were wed.

✘ **Sarah says** At that dinner in 1989, I was smitten, but John was with his girlfriend, so I went home and had a good cry. Then I got back together with my husband, and we had a kid; eventually we split up. After John sent me the flowers—there was no card, but I knew they were from him—there was this “no stopping us now” kind of feeling. Our lives would be simpler if we'd gotten together when we were younger; we would have avoided the step-family dynamic. But we also benefit from the experiences we had. We simply value being together, idiosyncrasies and all.

✘ **John says** I remember playing together as kids—I would be Superman and I'd swoop in and rescue her from under the piano. A year after we got together again, she gave me a Superman shirt. We like to hike in the woods, which is something I wouldn't have expected of Sarah; there's that stereotype of an art historian being both urban and urbane. I feel delighted and honored that I meet her aesthetic criteria. I've never quite gotten over it.



HAIR AND MAKEUP: PAM ARNONE



ED OSTER | 57
Attorney

DONNA HANOVER | 57
Cohost, *The WOR Morning Show*, WOR Radio, New York

DONNA AND ED FACED OFF ON their high schools' debate teams, then dated into freshman year at Stanford University. Both went on to marry and divorce. As their thirtieth college reunion approached, Ed, who'd volunteered to contact alumni, called Donna (“That was my cover, anyway,” he says). By the time the reunion rolled around, they were a couple; they married in 2003.

✘ **Donna says** When Ed ended it in college, I was heartbroken. Several people told him he was making a mistake, but he felt he needed time to kick around with the guys. When he called about the reunion, I figured it had to do with fund-raising. But when we made plans to meet in New York and I saw him in the hotel lobby, there was something about his expression—a little mischief going on there. We took a walk around Central Park for five hours.

We laugh about our early dating days, when we didn't have much money and he drove a hand-me-down Chevy Impala and I worked in a peach-canning factory. We're both a bit wiser, having experienced a lot. [Her split from New York mayor Rudy Giuliani made headlines.] The hardest thing is that Ed and I are bicoastal—I fly to California or he flies to New York—but we have been able to spend 60 to 70 percent of our nights together. And the commitment is full-time.

✘ **Ed says** We broke up because I was 17; I just didn't want to be tied down. It was the dumbest thing I ever did. I'd seen stories about her divorce, so I knew she was on her own. My adrenaline was pumping when I heard her voice on the phone; Donna is not a person you forget. People who share experiences when they're young have almost intertwined identities, and there were some powerful emotions when we found each other again.

at WOR Radio, and, at far left, in 1968

BONITA AND WALDON ADMIRE each other from afar from fourth through twelfth grade in Queens, New York. Almost three decades on, he contacted her through *Classmates.com*, and 18 months later, in 2003, they were married in the auditorium of their former elementary school.

✧ *Bonita says* I used to walk my dog 10 times a day in the summer so I could catch a glimpse of Waldon playing baseball in the park. But we had different religions—he was Protestant, my family were Jehovah's Witnesses—and my parents were always on the lookout for this young man who would linger hopelessly around our house. After graduation, he went to Brooklyn College and I entered into a too-young, loveless marriage that lasted seven years. On November 12, 2001, when the entire city of New York was still grieving over 9/11, I came home to find an e-mail from him. He was treading lightly—"Hi, remember me? Just wanted to know how you are"—but my response was much lengthier. I even confessed I'd had a crush on him. We met for lunch a few weeks later, and I thought he was the handsomest man I had ever seen. He has changed my life tremendously; I'm finally married to someone I cherish.

✧ *Waldon says* When we were young, she was a wonderfully creative yet shy girl, and I was probably as shy as she. I couldn't express myself coherently around her. Two months after 9/11, I longed to find out how life had treated her. It felt like fate had brought us back together. We're always working on improving our communication—the few times we've argued, it's been *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* kind of stuff. I travel for business, and we spend lots of time on the phone. We're the same people as when we were kids; we're just a bit more wrinkly. **M**

Additional reporting by Dara Pettinelli

Waldon in their yard in Northampton, Pennsylvania, holding photos of each other as kids

