

A Woman, Her Best Friend, and a Quick Walk Down the Aisle?

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By Vincent M. Mallozzi

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Lilly Smartelli dreams of marrying her best friend on Valentine's Day.

"Bernie and I have been looking for just the right wedding venue to stage our big Italian wedding," said Ms. Smartelli, 55, who lives in Phoenix.

Ms. Smartelli marks Feb. 14 on her calendar, not as a romantic holiday, but as a day defined by comfort, happiness and a different sort of true love.

She found all of those things in Bernie, who happens to be one of the main characters in a book she self-published last October called, "The \$5 Dog Wedding."

He also happens to be a dog.

"I love Bernie to death and I know he's going to make quite a handsome groom," Ms. Smartelli said. "But there is one problem where our wedding is concerned."

The fact that Bernie is a dog?

"No," she said, laughing. "The fact that we simply cannot afford the wedding we have planned."

Ms. Smartelli, a former travel nurse, is terminally ill, suffering from a form of pulmonary fibrosis, a respiratory disease in which scars are formed in the lung tissues, leading to serious breathing problems that worsen over time.

"My doctors tell me I have maybe one or two good years left," she said, "so Bernie and I are racing against the clock."

Ms. Smartelli said her dog groomer inspired her think outside the box about a dream wedding. When she returned to the groomer after dropping Bernie off, he had on a sequined blue bow tie, with a blue ribbon on his collar and a plastic wedding ring and engagement band attached, along with a note that said "Marry Me." Credit Cassidy Araiza for The New York Times



Ms. Smartelli said her dog groomer inspired her think outside the box about a dream wedding. When she returned to the groomer after dropping Bernie off, he had on a sequined blue bow tie, with a blue ribbon on his collar and a plastic wedding ring and engagement band attached, along with a note that said "Marry Me." Credit: Cassidy Araiza for The New York Times

Two years ago, Ms. Smartelli was enjoying life in San Diego aboard her two-bedroom boat, a 47-foot, 1980 Hatteras long-range cruiser, with Bernie, a hazel-eyed, sandy-haired, 9-year-old mixed breed cocker spaniel poodle; and her other dog, Spinner, a cream-colored, 8-year-old Maltese-Shih Tzu mix who will serve as Bernie's best man. She had rescued Bernie and Spinner a week apart in October 2011, from the annual Riverside County adoption fair hosted by the Humane Society of the Desert in Palm Springs, Calif.

She eventually began suffering from shortness of breath, dizziness and fainting spells, which led to a diagnosis of pulmonary diffusion defect, a subcategory of pulmonary fibrosis. She sold the boat and moved to Phoenix, where she began evaluating her life, not knowing how much of it she had left, and came away with one final wish: to know the joy of a wedding day.

“By marrying Bernie in a symbolic way, I could draw attention to organ-donor groups and local animal welfare shelters that lack proper funding,” Ms. Smartelli said between labored breaths.

So her potential big day will serve as a fund-raising awareness moment for the two causes close to her heart. “It’s all in good fun,” she said.

“I know I will never be married, but I would still love to experience the kind of wedding, even if it’s a fake wedding, that I’ve been dreaming about since I was a little girl.”

Ms. Smartelli chuckled when she said, “I’ve been involved in just one-and-a-half relationships my entire life,” and sighed when she added, “I’ve been single for quite a while.” She needed a significant other to make her a bucket-list item a reality, so she turned to Bernie, her best friend, to play the role of groom.

“I can’t think of anyone in the entire world who loves me more than Bernie does, anyhow,” said Ms. Smartelli, who said she dated a man in Palm Springs for two years before the relationship ended in 2007. (She refers to that experience as “only half of a relationship,” she said, “because he wasn’t half the man I expected him to be.”)



Ms. Smartelli's other dog, Spinner (left), was rescued along with Bernie from the Humane Society of the Desert in Palm Springs, Calif. Credit: Cassidy Araiza for The New York Times

Ms. Smartelli grew up in Detroit, where 12 years ago she spread some serious love of her own, coming to the rescue of a childhood friend by donating a kidney to him.

"I thought, if I could do something to help this person extend his life, then why not do it," she said. "He's doing pretty well today, and he sends me a card once a year thanking me for what I did for him."

Chris Stewart, the manager of the Sun City Pet Market in Sun City, Ariz., has seen her kindness and unselfishness in his store. "She's really no different than anyone else who comes in here and treats their dogs like members of their family," he said. "When she's with Bernie and Spinner, I can see the love she has for them just pouring out of her."

Ms. Smartelli graduated from Wayne State University in Detroit, and holds a doctorate of chiropractic medicine from Cleveland Chiropractic College in Kansas City, Mo., as well as a nursing degree from Excelsior College in Albany. She says the experience of sacrificing a kidney "really, truly highlights the importance of donor organizations."

Before her illness, Ms. Smartelli was working as a travel nurse throughout the country, taking eight-week assignments in such cities as San Antonio, Dallas, Albuquerque, Palm Springs, Los Angeles and Denver.

Though there is no cure for her condition and no sacrifice that will put time back on her earthly clock, Ms. Smartelli said she still hopes to help save the lives of human beings and dogs by raising awareness, and money. She has already been donating a portion of her book's proceeds to [Donate Life America](#), a nonprofit organization working to increase the number of donated organs, eyes and tissue.

"Any 'wedding gifts' I receive," she said, "would go straight to both of those causes."

She began considering a faux marriage to Bernie in October 2017, when she brought him to a dog groomer in Phoenix and mused, "I may as well marry Bernie. He's always there for me. He listens, and he loves me no matter what. What more could a woman want?"



Ms. Smartelli, a former travel nurse, has a form of pulmonary fibrosis, a respiratory disease in which scars are formed in the lung tissues. She said Bernie has brought her comfort and love. Credit: Cassidy Araiza for The New York Times

The groomer took note. When Ms. Smartelli returned later that day, she found Bernie wagging his tail, freshly blow-dried and fluffy, and sharply dressed in a sequined blue bow tie, with a blue ribbon on his collar and a plastic wedding ring and engagement band attached, along with a note that said "Marry Me."

The moment inspired her. "Just because I didn't have a fiancé didn't mean there couldn't still be a groom," she wrote in her book. "It might be a little unorthodox, but so had many other choices in my adventurous life. I don't need to find a man, not when I have Bernie."

"It was the perfect plan," she wrote. "How could I have been so blind?"

The reality, however, is that there will be no actual event, as Ms. Smartelli is barely able to keep up with the costs of her own medical bills.

With her parents deceased and no family members or friends to turn to for financial support, she has managed to keep a sense of humor as she copes with her debilitating disease.

“People who see only a headline that says I want to marry Bernie will think I’m totally insane,” she said, laughing. “So I hope they take the time to learn more about my whole story, and the reason I want to do it.”

In the meantime, Ms. Smartelli said, she will continue to dream of actually walking Bernie down the aisle, with Spinner as best man, and celebrating with virtual family and friends.

But no matter how the reality of her Valentine’s Day unfolds, Ms. Smartelli will ultimately find the true meaning of the day in the company of Bernie and Spinner, just as others who do not necessarily mark Feb. 14 as a romantic holiday on their calendars might instead choose to spend the day in the company of a good book, or by watching a sunrise, or visiting loved ones at a cemetery.

“It’s kind of ironic, but Bernie and Spinner, who are just a couple of rescue dogs, have actually rescued me from a life of loneliness,” said Ms. Smartelli, who began to cry.

“I really love those two guys,” she said. “It wouldn’t be Valentine’s Day without them.”