

WEDDED IDENTITY

a balancing act



Clockwise from top left: Elisa Wells and Seth Moran, Jim and Ceci Mains, Keith and Joan Hackett, Jim and Debi Wilkins-Luton, Elisa Wells and Seth Moran, Jacqueline Allen-Bond, and Jim and Debi Wilkins-Luton with their two children, daughter Kasi and son Trey.

Photos special to The Columbian



Not all women take husband's name after marriage; local couples explain name decisions

By MARY ANN ALBRIGHT
Columbian staff writer

Striving for balance was a hallmark of Jacqueline Allen and Marc Bonomini's relationship, and they eschewed traditional gender roles. So, when the two decided to marry, they took an egalitarian, out-of-the-box approach. They became the Allen-Bonds.

"Together, we decided let's create a name," said Jacqueline Allen-Bond. "Our whole life was about trying to make something that was ours."

While couples may be more free now to break from tradition, it's still the norm for the woman to take her husband's last name. Eighty-six percent of women took their spouses' last name upon marriage, according to TheKnot.com and WeddingChannel.com's 2009 Real Weddings Study, the most recent data available. The survey looked at about 21,000 U.S. couples married in 2009 who were members of <http://theknot.com> or <http://weddingchannel.com>.

This figure was down slightly from 88 percent in 2008.

Most couples still go the traditional route, but some people are embracing a number of alternatives, everything from separate last names to hyphenates to hybrids that combine the two surnames in new ways. Many women who do take their husband's surname then make their maiden name their middle name.

"I think it's a sign of the times," said Anja Winikka, senior editor of the New York City-based wedding magazine and website The Knot.

It's among the more popular threads on discussion boards on <http://www.theknot.com> because of all the issues of identity wrapped up in a name. For brides who've already established themselves professionally, changing their name has career implications, as well. Some may legally take their husband's surname but still go by their maiden name in the workplace. The options are as varied as couples themselves.

HERRERA BEUTLER

One local resident made headlines when she took on a compound last name. U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera, R-Camas, announced in December that she was adding the surname of her husband, Daniel, and would be going by Jaime Herrera Beutler.

Herrera and Beutler were married in August 2009. She explained that taking on his name didn't make sense during a hectic campaign for the 3rd District House seat and could have confused voters who knew her as Herrera.

"Now that the dust from the campaign has settled, I've had the chance to thoughtfully consider and make a permanent choice regarding this personal decision about my family," Herrera Beutler said in a news release.

"It's not a simple issue. It's one I encourage couples to talk about," said Keith Hackett of Vancouver, director of the Columbia Pastoral Counseling Center. He works with couples in a counseling capacity and also as a wedding officiant.

"The sense I get is this is a big decision for most women," Winikka added. "It's one most of them don't make right off the bat. It's something many of them mull throughout the whole wedding planning period."

For some women, however, it's an easy choice. Ceci Mains never considered keeping her maiden name of Hildebrand when she married Jim Mains about 2½ years ago.

"I never thought of doing anything different," Ceci said. "I always assumed when I got married I would take my husband's last name. It was never really a question."

Striving for balance

For Jacqueline and her late husband, Marc, the decision to become the Allen-Bonds made sense based on their philosophy on marriage and also their relationships with their respective families.

Jacqueline's parents didn't have

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any sons to carry on the family name, and she knew it meant a lot to her father that she help maintain the Allen line. Marc wasn't close to his family or attached to his last name, so they decided to shorten it to Bond. Allen-Bonomini would have been too much of a mouthful, said Jacqueline, 56, a Vancouver resident who teaches English as a Second Language at Clark College.

Their new name reflected their commitment to equally embracing each other's identities while also staying true to themselves as individuals.

"That was part of our marriage. We wanted to do everything 50-50," Jacqueline said. "Everything was shared, so the name was just a reflection of that. We wanted our lives to be a balance so that it truly was a sharing."

Even their August 1983 marriage ceremony reflected this commitment to balance. The two tied the knot on the border of the United States and Canada, since Jacqueline is Canadian born and Marc was American. One of their children was born in America, and one in Canada, which also helped maintain equilibrium.

A blending of lives and names

Jacqueline Allen-Bond isn't the only hyphenate at Clark College. It's also the route her colleague Jim Wilkins-Luton took.

Jim, who teaches developmental English, was born a Luton, and met Debi Wilkins at summer camp in junior high school. They later attended Whitworth University together in Spokane, where they had several professors and other role models with hyphenated last names.

When the Battle Ground couple got married in July 1992,

On the Web:

For information about changing your name with the Washington State Department of Licensing, go to <http://bit.ly/fbgmsX>.

For information about changing your name with the U.S. Social Security Administration, go to <http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/10127.html#3>.

For general information about different ways couples handle the name-change decision, as well as tips, go to <http://bit.ly/U0brf>.

they decided to follow suit and become the Wilkins-Lutons.

There are certain assumptions people make about the couple because of their hyphenated last name, which can be frustrating, they said.

"We never intended it to be a strong social or political commentary," Jim said. "We're like, it's just a name, people."

Both are frequently asked why they decided to hyphenate.

"The joke is we went to a liberal arts college in the '80s and hyphenated last names came with the diploma," said Jim, 42.

More seriously, it was a way for Debi, who doesn't have any brothers, to maintain the family name. A hyphenated last name also was in keeping with their views on marriage.

"It was a good representation of the fact that we're about to blend our lives, so why not blend our names?" said Debi, 42, who home-schools the couple's two children.

They considered Luton-Wilkins and, less seriously, various combinations such as Wilton and Lutkins before deciding that Wilkins-Luton sounded best.

"We played word games. We had fun with it," Jim said.

They never considered just Debi hyphenating her name, though that is an option some couples take.

"I always said I don't see the point of hyphenating my last name if my husband has a different last name," Debi said.

The fact that their children have both Luton and Wilkins in their last name meant a lot to his late father-in-law, Jim said.

"He made a comment about how much it meant that his grandkids had his last name. We kind of felt validated after that. It just seemed like the right thing to do," Jim said.

There are some challenges to having a hyphenated last name, though. For one, what happens if the Wilkins-Luton kids grow up to marry people with hyphenated last names?

"Then you've got a sentence for a last name," Jim laughed.

Also, there's not always space for such a long last name on forms or electronic registrations, as Jim discovered when for awhile he was listed at Clark as "Wilkinslut."

"That was a funny icebreaker on the first day of class," he said.

The power of a name

The Wilkins-Lutons encourage people not to read too much into their last name, but names do carry meaning. For many people, a rose by any other name may not smell as sweet.

"I don't think many men have a clue what it means to give up an identity you've had for 20 years," said Hackett, 64, who holds a doctorate of ministries in counseling, authored the book "Couples and the Art of Playing" and has officiated weddings for 40 years as a Methodist pastor.

"I think a lot of young women just see this as part of the romance. Many of them don't realize what it means to give up their family name and don't

understand the symbolism of that name," he said.

When Hackett and his wife, Joan, got married 42 years ago, she took his name without even considering the alternatives.

"It never occurred to us not to," he said.

Now, however, he advises couples to give the decision some thought.

Something most engaged couples don't like to think or talk about is divorce, but it's worth noting that getting one's maiden name back can be time-consuming and expensive. Unless the woman asks for it back during the divorce proceedings and it's part of the divorce decree, then she'll have to go through district court.

Going the traditional route

The majority of couples still embrace tradition, even though they could be more flexible when deciding on a family name.

Among those happily going along the more traditional path are the Mainses, a Vancouver couple.

"It's kind of exciting. A new chapter in your life, a new name," said Ceci, a 25-year-old office assistant in the culinary department at Clark College.

Both Jim and Ceci grew up in fairly religious, conventional households, so the woman taking her husband's surname upon marriage is what they knew.

"We both were raised kind of in your traditional setting. Her parents (both had her father's last name), my parents did it. It just seemed like the way it is," said Jim, 33, who owns the marketing consulting business Main Distribution.

Still, the change did take some getting used to for both of them. To Jim, it was jarring hearing Ceci referred to as "Mrs. Mains."

"That's my mom," he laughed.

Ceci had to practice signing her new last name and getting accustomed to responding to it. She also had to go through the process of getting a new driver's license and Social Security card, as well as changing her name on her bank accounts and credit card.

It was well worth the hassle, though, Ceci said. The couple doesn't have children yet but plan to, and are happy that the whole family will be named Mains.

"It's kind of easier that we all have the same last name so you know we belong together," Ceci said.

Professional considerations

Elisa Wells and Seth Moran found another way to make sure their children have the same last name as they do. The kids are Wells-Moran, while Elisa and Seth each kept their surnames.

When they got married in June of 1996, retaining their last names made the most sense professionally.

"We were already in our 30s and had professional lives and publications and were both known professionally by our names," said Wells, 48, a public health consultant. Moran, 44, is a volcano seismologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Vancouver.

Wells had more philosophical reasons for keeping her surname, as well.

"I also as a feminist objected to the assumption that I would change my name," she said. "I like having my name. I've always had it. I grew up with it. It's who I am."

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