Neil Parker

A second chance

Neil Parker’s long-lasting marriage and four beautiful children almost did not happen. He cancelled his engagement mere weeks before his wedding day more than a half century ago, wracked with a severe case of cold feet.

But a few months separated from young Frances Peltzman humbled him, and by the spring he was calling on her again. “I found out I really loved her,” he says of their time apart.

Fortunately for him, she agreed to take him back, and their elopement in the summer of 1965 opened the door to all the good things that followed.

From Trenton to Yardley to Penn State

Neil was born to Sydney and Rose Parker on September 14, 1942 in Trenton, New Jersey. The couple went to the same high school and met on the bus to school.

They divorced when Neil was 3. His father owned a printing company and his mother worked for a children’s clothing store and later as a secretary at De Laval turbine company. She and her boss Fred fell in love, a romance that necessitated a change in jobs for her — she became a telephone operator — and led to their marriage. The family bought a house in Yardley, PA.

Growing up, Neil loved baseball and summer trips to Atlantic City with his grandmother.

Neil’s father was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis when Neil was young. Sydney Parker lived with his parents after he got sick, and Neil recalls visits to their house on weekends. Sometimes his father would take him bowling. “He kept score and I bowled,” he recalls, noting his father had limited mobility.
Neil graduated from Pennsbury high school in Yardley and went on to college at Penn State. He played minor league football and earned his degree in rehabilitation education. He was interested in working with people with disabilities like his father.

A blind date

During his senior year, Neil met Fran on a blind date. She was working at the New Jersey Department of Health at the time. They got engaged soon after Neil graduated from college and planned a big family wedding. But weeks before their big day, Neil cancelled the wedding.

Fran was devastated. She quit her job and moved to New York City to start fresh. Neil joined the National Guard, training at Fort Dix in Trenton. But several months later his heart pulled him back and he went to find her again. They went to the World’s Fair on a date in the spring of 1965. He asked her to marry him again that weekend. She said no. With some coaxing from her best friend, Fran saw him again, and they agreed to get married.

Their wedding almost did not happen a second time. They found a justice of the peace to marry them, but the judge rejected Fran’s official documentation, a birth certificate that had been doctored to help her get into a club when she was 17. One reissued official birth certificate later, they drove to Maryland and tied the knot on July 31, 1965.

“Nobody knew about it but us,” Fran says. “I was shaking. He was shaking.”

The only thing scarier was telling their parents. “We had to go face the music,” says Neil. He knew he had to earn back the trust of Fran’s parents. And he did.

“I think it was two years before my father said, ‘Neil, you are good man,’” Fran says.

From Philadelphia to Northern Virginia

The couple moved to Philadelphia and Neil got a job as a case worker. He made home visits to determine eligibility for public assistance. On weekends he served in the National Guard. On August 1966, their daughter Sherri Lynn was born. A year later, Scott David was born.

Neil went back to school in the evenings and got his Masters degree in Counseling and Guidance at Temple University. He got a job in Washington DC and the family moved to Virginia when Sherri was five years old and Scott was four years old.

He worked at the College Board, where he tested and counseled teenagers for college readiness. After two years, he was hired by DC government, where he worked with minority youth, including those who were disabled or who had been incarcerated, to help them find jobs. He later became a program analyst.

Fran and Neil had two more children, Frank Paul in 1972 and Michael Alan in 1975. They bought a house in Vienna when Frank was born. Neil coached Little League on the weekends. And in the summers he took his kids to the same stretch of beach in Atlantic City that he used to go to as a child.

He retired after 23 years with the DC government. He missed working with youth, though, and for several years he was a substitute teacher in the Fairfax County schools.
The children loved him, Fran recalls, and delighted in his stories – like the time he and Fran accidentally brought a gecko home in their suitcase from a vacation in Costa Rica. They found it two days later in a roll top desk and set it free in a park, where the neighborhood kids would go and look for it.

**A close-knit international family nearby**

As their children grew up and got married, the Parker family became increasingly international. Neil and Fran welcomed a daughter-in-law from Mexico, another from Poland, and a third with Japanese ancestry who was born and raised in Lima, Peru.

The extended family lives close to each other and they pitch in to help one another. Neil’s mother lived with him and Fran for ten years before she died, and they helped her through cancer treatment. Then in 2016, they moved into Sherri’s home, the same year Neil was diagnosed with Parkinson’s.

Now his grandchildren go for walks with him and they are very happy to be quarantining together. Neil still loves sports and rooting for the Nationals and the former Washington Redskins.