



Constructing a dream: Couple to marry on 40th anniversary of great-aunt at same venue in the renovated historic Durant hotel

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Couple Jack Wolbert, A Flint native and Alejandra Arceo are in town from California and plan to get married at the renovated Durant Saturday- the first event in the building after its completion which is scheduled this week- just days ahead of time.

FLINT, Michigan — On the night the bride and groom arrived in town, their Flint wedding venue was still a construction site: orange electrical cords snaking across unfinished floors, construction crews working around dust and blue tarp and empty paint cans strewn through the ballroom.

But on Saturday, the historic Durant Hotel, which symbolizes Flint's glory days, will go back in time to when it hosted the city's most extravagant affairs.

The freshly renovated downtown landmark is expected to celebrate its new life as Jack Wolbert and Alejandra Arceo start theirs in the once premiere hotel's first wedding in decades.

"I grew up in Flint and drove by that hotel all my life," said Wolbert, 31, a 1997 Powers Catholic High School graduate who is an investment banker in California. "It was always abandoned and vacant, but I heard stories about how back in the day, it was quite the spot.

"It's just exciting to see the re-emergence of downtown Flint. I think that building will be a big centerpiece to all of the revitalization, and I'm honored to be getting married there. My future bride is a little more nervous."

The couple's roughly 275 guests will have dinner where Flint dignitaries once famously dined in the chandelier-lit grand ballroom — whose arched windows, gold-hued walls and original mosaic floors have been restored to their 1920s classical era.

And as the past meets the future in the city, the family will relive its own history: Wolbert's great-aunt was married in the same hotel on the same day 40 years ago.

"As soon as he told me the story about his aunt getting married there the same day, I thought that was really cute," said Arceo, 22, a Los Angeles native who plans to start graduate school in fall. "They've been married 40 years so it must be a good omen."

Just three days before the wedding, the soon-to-be newlyweds walked across cardboard-covered floors, weaved around yellow caution tape and busy working men still scaling ladders.

"Sorry guys, it's not ready," a sheepish crew member told them.

"We trust you guys," Wolbert said.

But the couple knew they were taking risks planning their big day at a place that until just months ago was nothing but the gutted shell of a dilapidated old building.

"Whatever happens happens," Arceo said, surveying the ballroom where she expects to have her first dance with her new husband this weekend. "I'm a very classical girl. I like the history of it all."

Still, they booked a back-up venue — just in case.



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And Wolbert's dad Dave has driven by and peeked into the windows more than a few times.

"I go by at least once a week," Dave Wolbert, 51, of Flint said with a laugh. "I was a little worried we might be walking on boards to get into the building or have to bring portable johns in there, but it looks like it's all coming together. It's a beautiful space."

And his son's wedding is already bringing back old memories.

He remembers strolling past a red-suited doorman outside the hotel whose luxurious accommodations served celebrities and business leaders back when the city still drew visitors to its downtown shops.

"It was Flint's grand hotel," he recalled. "Once this became a possibility, this was where it had to be. They were looking for something special with meaning."

And the family connection will bring back other special memories.

Jack Wolbert's wedding will fall on the 40th anniversary of his great aunt and uncle Ann and Ray Parks, of Fenton Township, whose reception was held in the same ballroom Aug. 14, 1970.

Ann Parks, a retired Flint schoolteacher, chose the venue because her own aunt also was married there in 1951.

"I remember as a small child going to that wedding and thinking it was the most magnificent thing I'd ever seen," she said. "It was beautiful, old world elegance. It was grand architecture, beautiful old wood molding that you don't see in buildings anymore. As a Flint resident, it was sad to see that landmark fall apart."

And when the Parks got married, the Durant Hotel was also under construction, undergoing mass remodeling, with some rooms still unfinished.

There were other parallels.

"There was hope Flint would take off again," she remembered. "It was being redone in hopes of keeping a vibrant downtown."

The Durant wedding will bring back to life the hotel that has become an industrial icon and reminder of the legacy of the Flint legend it's named after: General Motors founder William "Billy" Durant.

It closed in 1974 and has been vacant ever since. Starting Sunday, a group of more than 30 people are expected to move into its 90 stylish renovated lofts.

Music from a mariachi band will imbue the long-vacant building whose entryway greets visitors with faux-marble columns overlooked by a white balcony.

The cuisine — half American, half Mexican to honor the bride's heritage — will be catered by Flushing-based Bella Birches, which has coordinated the event.

"Can you imagine people having dinner here?" Durant building developer Kevin Prater said, standing in the ballroom days before the wedding. "A new couple is going to start their life here soon. And Flint's past is meeting the 21st century. It signifies the rebirth of the community."

And this weekend, love will definitely be in the air downtown as a second couple also plans to get married Saturday in the recently renovated Rowe building.

Stephen James will wed Maureen Kildee — sister of former Genesee County Treasurer Dan Kildee and niece of U.S. Rep. Dale Kildee, D-Flint who steered the Durant renovation — in the loft apartment building where they live.

It will be their second marriage — to each other.

The high school sweethearts married in 1978 and got divorced eight months later. After marriages ended to other people, they recently reconnected through Facebook and got engaged more than 30 years after the first time.

“Two weddings. It should be a fun night downtown,” Maureen Kildee said with a laugh.

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