

A toast to her brother

Mary Gramoll of Grafton and her family traveled to England to celebrate a wedding

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It's not often that you get to experience a real-life fairy tale, but that's exactly what Grafton's Mary Gramoll did on her summer vacation this year. It all started with an invitation to her brother's wedding, which was not particularly unusual.

Her brother, John Habich, was joining in a civil partnership with his partner, Andrew Solomon. Unusual, yes, but England has recognized the same rights for gay couples as for men and women who marry since 2005.

"The wedding itself was held at Althorp, the estate owned by Princess Diana's family," she says.

And that's where the fantasy began.

"We'd visited England before, but we'd only been to London," she says. "This time, we arrived in London and then we took a charter from London to Althorp."

Althorp has been in the Spencer family for 20 generations, spanning nearly 500 years of English history. The Spencer family first settled in the estate as sheep farmers, though through history, Spencers have served as politicians, courtiers, sailors, ambassadors, preachers and, most recently, royal princesses.

Princess Diana's brother, Charles, the 9th Earl of Spencer, lives on the grounds for much of the year, though the Gramolls did not catch sight of him on their visit.

"We were told that he was there, but he left the day after the wedding for the big concert in celebration of his sister," says Gramoll. "The grounds are also open to the public for a 60-day season each year, and we were also told that he typically leaves during that time."

The estate itself encompasses 14,000 acres in Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Norfolk, and includes cottages, farms, woodlands and villages. The Gramolls spent their time at the house, and from the beginning, every moment was to be savored.

"The room that my husband and I stayed in actually had a name - India Silk," she says. "It was just beautiful and very elegant. The kids stayed elsewhere on the estate and they just had room numbers, so I had some pull as the sister of the groom, I think."

The Gramolls were not the only ones representing this particular groom's side of the festivities. Their traveling party included their daughter, Katie,

their son, Matt, and his girlfriend, Anna. In addition, their daughter, Mandi, came with her husband, Sal, and their children, Olivia and Sam.

"It's English tradition to have children stand up in the wedding, and both Olivia and Sam were part of the ceremony," notes Gramoll proudly.

The happy couple

How the Gramolls got to England starts with John Habich, a 1971 graduate of Grafton High School.

Habich was the senior culture editor of the Minneapolis Star/Tribune when Andrew Solomon, a National Book Award author and pharmaceutical heir, sent him an e-mail about possible publicity for his book, "The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression."

That working relationship changed quickly and soon the two were a couple, albeit long distance at least for a while. Solomon travels extensively - his writing has appeared in national travel magazines - and Habich proposed to him on a trip to Ghana for a friend's wedding. Initially, Solomon was lukewarm to the idea, but after hearing of the legal recognition available to them in England, later reciprocated with his own proposal back in the States.

The couple is now based in New York City, though they aren't often home.

The wedding

The choice of Althorp was a logical one for the couple. Solomon is a noted Anglophile (he owns property in England) with dual American-British citizenship.

"It was absolutely a fairytale wedding," says Gramoll.

The activities started out with a rehearsal dinner in the estate's Picture Gallery, which is 115-feet long and 20-feet wide. Nearly 200 people attended and Gramoll struggles to describe the experience.

"The tables had candelabras on them and there was beautiful china and crystal," she says. "Walking into the room absolutely took my breath away."

She was also charmed by the Althorp staff.

"They were always so welcoming and friendly," she says. "We didn't have to lift a finger."

The ceremony followed the next day.

"According to English law, there has to be separate ceremonies for the civil and religious aspects of the wedding, and there were actually three for John and Andrew," explains Gramoll.



John Habich, his sister Mary Gramoll and her husband, Pete Gramoll at the rehearsal dinner in the Picture Gallery at Althorp.



The Rev. Peter Gomes of Harvard performed the Christian ceremony in the central hall.

And for the record: Gramoll herself did not wear a hat, a tradition in English Society.

"I guess I didn't really understand how important that is, but the invitation did say that hats were optional," she notes. "I do know of a guest who rented a

hat after she arrived in England, and about half of the women were wearing them."

The ceremony was held on the staircase of Althorp's central hall beneath portraits of Princess Diana and her ancestors. It began with a short civil recognition officiated by the registrar of Northampton, and was followed by a Christian ceremony led by the Rev. Peter J. Gomes, a minister of the Memorial Chapel at Harvard, then in the evening, Baroness Neuberger president of Liberal Judaism in the UK, a Jewish organization that supports civil partnerships performed an additional service.

One last chance to enjoy the princess

Guests had the opportunity to visit exhibits dedicated to Princess Diana, which included her wedding dress and other items from her Royal Years.

The day after the wedding, guests were treated to carriage rides around the estate, which brought guests as close as they could get to the late princess.

"Diana is buried on an island on the estate, which is not accessible to the public," says Gramoll. "There is a memorial

to her by the lake itself - it looks like a large gravestone - and the carriages drove us past it."

Solomon and Habich, however, eschewed the carriages in favor of something a bit more memorable as they bid adieu to their guests at the farewell picnic the following day.

"It was a big surprise to John, but we knew it would be something because Andrew was planning it," she says.

Carriage? No, everyone had a carriage ride. Since they were in a field, Gramoll was guessing a hot air balloon.

"We then heard a rumbling sound and around the corner comes this giant pink tank," says Gramoll, noting the surprise was a big hit with the guests, as well as her brother. "It was actually spewing bubbles. John was stunned, surprised and hysterically laughing at it."



At the wedding banquet, guests including novelist Jhumpa Lahiri ("The Namesake") and actress Uma Thurman, center, listened to Mary Habich Gramoll's speech toasting her brother.



Guests lined the balcony and the central hall, or Saloon, of Althorp during the wedding of John Habich and Andrew Solomon.



Olivia and Sam LoCoco, center, the grandchildren of Mary and Pete Gramoll, were among the children who served as flower girls and page boys.



Alice Dickmann of Cedarburg and John Van Sickle of Grafton in the entrance hall on the wedding day.



The grooms' "escape vehicle" after a Sunday picnic on July 1, Diana's birthday, was a pink Army tank blowing soap bubbles.