

A new life begins for local cancer survivor

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On a sunny Saturday in June, Larry Edward Virts, Jr., and Carla Rae Butler became husband and wife.

The couple met on a blind date, when Butler, now 18, was a sophomore at Keyser High School. Virts, now 23, had already graduated. He proposed last June one night when "we were just sitting around watching TV," Virts said.

But the love story isn't that simple. Last June, shortly before Virts proposed, Butler was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, cancer of the bones. After a fall in January of 2001, her leg hadn't healed. She went to the doctor in February. Eventually that doctor referred her to an orthopedic specialist. In May, because she was losing feeling in her leg, the doctor did a MRI, finding the cancer.

Butler started chemotherapy last June, at Johns Hopkins, in Baltimore.

"I miss the nurses," she said, as her treatment ended in April. "I spent a lot of time there, and got to know a lot of

"She was a spitfire," said Heather Coyne, a physician's assistant who worked with Butler in Baltimore and attended the wedding. "She was awesome, but a spitfire."

During the winter, Butler's name was given to the Make-a-Wish Foundation, the organization who grants wishes for children with life-threatening illnesses.

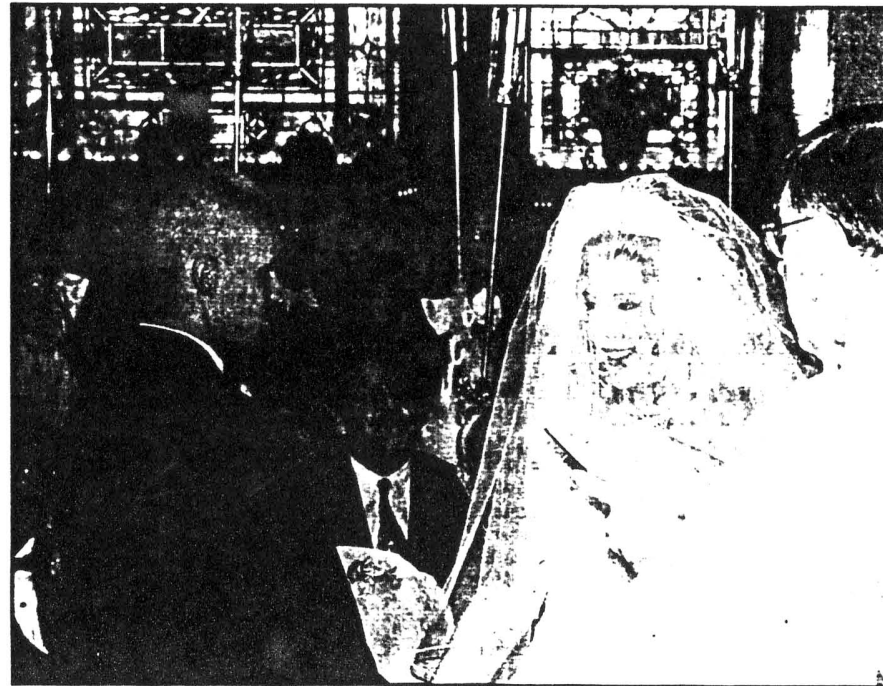
"It's the best thing I've ever done," said Bobbie Spear, of the Morgantown, WV chapter of Make-a-Wish.

As word spread of the project, the donations to the wedding grew.

"Everyone I told the story to wanted to donate something," Spear said. As a result, almost 50 sponsors, from New York City to South Carolina, gave Butler and Virts a dream wedding. Even the honeymoon, a trip to Branson, Mo., was donated by the Children's Miracle Network.

Spear and Butler worked closely while planning the wedding.

"We picked out what we wanted, and Make-a-Wish did what they could" Butler said.



Smiling as they did the remainder of the day, Larry Virts, Jr., and Carla Rae Butler are married by Rev. Fred Villinger, at Grace United Methodist Church. For more photos, please see page 5.

Tribune photo by Allison Churchill

gown, strapless and princess-style, with pastel sequins decorating the bodice. Michelle Roth Designs, of New York donated the end result.

"We were stranded in

she was supposed to meet me for a fitting, but her plane was late because of a storm," Butler said of Roth.

One of the colors of the sequins, lavender, inspired

purple and white balloon arch welcomed guests to the Grace United Methodist Church. Michelle Taylor, maid of honor, and the other brides-

maid- (Please see WEDDING, triplets), and Ashley Amtower wore deep purple fitted gowns, and carried bouquets of white roses and white and light purple calla lilies.

The groom and his best man, J.J. Winkler, and groomsmen Jeremy Taylor, Eric Winkler and Jamie Rogers wore black tuxedos with silver and black vests.

As the wedding day neared, emotions started to run high.

"It's good, but I'm sad," said Carl Butler, father of the bride, at the rehearsal dinner, donated by and held at the Candlewyck Inn.

As they patiently awaited the beginning of the wedding in the dining room of the church, the bridesmaids considered when they would start crying.

"When they start singing 'I Hope You Dance,' that'll be it for me," Amtower said. "That song is just perfect for what they've been through, and how they overcame everything." Butler is now cancer-free, but still has to travel to Baltimore for check-ups.

After the traditional

Wedding

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wedding ceremony, during which the bride and groom exchanged rings donated by Zales Jewelers, the couple emerged to find a horse and carriage waiting to take them to the reception, at Keyser Volunteer Fire Department Station No. 2. The hall was a generous donation, as the department canceled Bingo for the first time in its history to allow for the party.

The reception continued to reflect the detail involved in planning the dream wedding. On each table were several champagne bottles, decorated in chocolate tuxedos by Spears' sister. The wedding cake, prepared to feed 600, was a spread of purple hearts, each a different flavor, including strawberry, red velvet, chocolate, marble, white, banana, spice and carrot.

After Virts popped open, and spilled much of, a bottle of champagne, the best man, reading parts of a speech prepared by Make-A-Wish — "I guess they don't have much confidence in my speaking ability" — told the couple to let "love and happiness be with you everyday...all right?"

The new Mr. and Mrs. Virts then took the microphone to thank Make-A-Wish.

"You made my wish come true," Carla Virts said.

The Rev. Fred Villinger, who performed the ceremony, then thanked God for helping Carla, and for Larry's faithfulness.

After dinner, the couple danced their first dance as husband and wife to "Maybe She's An Angel." A short time later, the bride and her father, and the groom and his mother, Nancy Virts, danced to "Butterfly Kisses."

Following tradition, the groom removed and tossed the bride's garter, which was caught by George May. Spear was the lucky bachelorette to catch the bridal bouquet.

As the bridal party decorated Virts' truck, guests boogied to the "Electric Slide," "Macarena," and "YMCA."

The reception ended around 7:30 p.m. The couple spent their wedding night at the Holiday Inn, and will leave for their honeymoon on Tuesday. They plan to reside in Springfield, W.Va.

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