

features

Rings of



Destiny

Presented in love and carried
in sorrow, only to find love once more,
these rings have a never-ending story.

Story and photos by Kim Ploughman

For centuries,

rings have endured as symbols of love and bonding that, ideally, should never be broken. So when Annette Marguerite Vardy received an engagement ring from her boyfriend at the age of 21, she, like most young fiancées, was looking towards a happy ending. The native of Clarenville, NL, did finally receive this blessing – but not in the traditional nor expected way, and it took close to eight decades to arrive. First she would have to endure heartbreak and tragedy, and a redirected purpose that included a lifetime of passionate missionary work in India.

Today Major Annette Vardy resides at Glenbrook Villa in St. John's, NL, where she lives independently at the grand age of 102. The dainty, white-haired woman greets visitors at the door by placing her hands together, closing her eyes, bowing and whispering, "Namaste," a greeting popular in Indian culture. When I visited her, I remarked on how wonderful it is that she still lives alone. She quickly responded with a warm smile, "Why not? I love myself."

Engagement, war and loss

Annette was a little girl when her mother, Emily Stanley, died at the young age of 35, so Annette was raised by her grandmother. She describes herself as "a very ordinary, shy little girl," who hid behind her grandmother's apron.



Annette holds an early photo of herself at her home in St. John's.



As a more confident young woman, Annette took a job substitute teaching in the now abandoned community of Port Nelson, Bonavista Bay. There, she met and fell in love with a fellow teacher, Arthur Stanfield.

Her engagement story began in St. John's in 1939, just as WWII was erupting in Europe. Arthur was joining the war effort, and the day before he shipped out, he bought both an engagement ring and a wedding band, as he wanted his fiancée to marry him before his tour of duty. "I said, 'No, Arthur, I don't want to be left with a child to bring up alone - I am not that brave.'"

In the following years, the two kept in touch with letters, but only

one phone call. Arthur survived the war unscathed and began his journey home in 1945. On the way, he stopped in Ontario to visit his sister and the siblings took a boat tour of Niagara Falls. That's where Arthur saw a couple in danger of going over the falls, so he bravely jumped in to save them.

Weeks later, in Clarendville, Annette picked up a newspaper and learned the shocking news that Arthur Strickland, her fiancé, had died of a heart attack after rescuing several people in distress in the Niagara River. "I was broken," Annette recalls. Her Arthur had died a hero, and she was left with a crushed heart and dreams, and two rings to always remind her of a terrible loss.

India, adoption and Mother Theresa

By the mid-1950s, Annette knew she couldn't continue mourning. After a move to St. John's to complete her nursing training at the Grace Hospital, she spent a year in England studying midwifery. Then she was ready for something she'd always dreamed of - mission work in India. It was something she and Arthur had planned to do together. "I decided to try it on my own, with God's help," she says.

In 1958, Annette moved to India to work as a nurse with the Salvation Army children's hospital. It became her life's mission for more than 30 years. "Those were busy years; and in my spare time, I did street work."

A part of her work at the hospital involved working directly with Mother Teresa's charity organization - though Annette never met the canonized saint. Dying patients at the hospital were sent to Mother Theresa; and the good mother's charity would send their sick.

Like all missionary workers, Annette bore witness to poverty, starvation and heartbreaking moments. One story stands out for her. An eight-year-old girl came into the hospital crying for milk for her mommy, who had a baby but no money. It was getting toward the end of the month and Annette's own funds were low. She found her wallet and dumped all her change into the

child's hand, knowing she herself would do without dinner the next day. But Annette had faith that life always had a way of providing - and it did. The next day, a postman arrived with a few deliveries for her: one envelope held \$100. "I just bowed my head and said thank you, Lord."

It was getting toward the end of the month and Annette's own funds were low. She found her wallet and dumped all her change into the child's hand, knowing she herself would do without dinner the next day.

During her missionary years, Annette saw many orphans pass through, but one in particular touched her heart. This baby was orphaned when her mother died during childbirth and her father was killed in a car accident after leaving the hospital. Fate, it seemed, ensured the right person was there to care and love wee Leela.

"She was a bundle of bones and not very pretty to look at," Annette recalls fondly, "but if you look, there is always some beauty there, and I saw the beauty spot." Leela's first word to Annette was "Mommy."

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Annette shows a photo of her adopted daughter Leela.

"Of course, I have a heart that's very weak," says Annette. "From that day on, she was my girl." India now held a dual purpose for Annette: her missionary work and ensuring Leela was well cared for like she was her own and, in time, put through school and college. Leela went on to have three children and a lifelong career with the Salvation Army.

In all that time, Annette never quite forgot Arthur. She kept the rings close to her, even wearing them on a chain around her neck for a time, before storing them lovingly in a box.

Rings come full circle

Upon her retirement at the age of 65, Annette returned home to Clarendville, where she volunteered in

the community. But the Salvation Army lured her back to India for five more years. During that time, she underwent stomach and bowel surgery that almost killed her. Eventually, she was back in Newfoundland, where she continued caring for others, including those in palliative care at hospitals.

Around 2015, one of her third cousins, Chris Vardy, was just starting life with a new partner, Mary Crotty. The two visited so Mary could meet Chris's cherished older "Aunt Nete."

Mary recalls that first visit and the one soon after, where she and Chris informed Annette that they were getting married. Annette's eyes brightened as she stood up and declared, "Have I got something for you! A gift, if you take it." It was the rings that had waited almost 80 years to be re-engaged.

"I immediately wept, I was so touched," Mary recalls.

Annette then looked at Chris with a smile and said, "Don't think I don't have something for you." Again, she left the room and returned with her father's (George Vardy's) wedding band.

Mary and Chris were married in St. John's in September 2017. Major Annette Vardy herself officiated the ceremony and oversaw the placing of the rings from 1939. According to Mary, this "added another level of love" to her wedding day.

It was the only wedding she presided over, reveals Annette, who was 99 at the time. She says, "I'm glad the Lord gave me strength to do it... I didn't think I could, but oh boy, I did!"



Mary now wears Annette's cherished rings, a gift for her marriage to Annette's cousin, Chris.

Love never-ending

Major Vardy will be 103 this January 25, 2021. In February 2019, at the age of 101, she was bestowed the Order of the Founder of the Salvation Army for outstanding service and unwavering passion for mission over the years.

Annette was touched by tragedy early in life, but went on to ease the pain of others for more than 80 years. "I have helped people into the world, dedicated them, married them, comforted them as they are dying and buried them," Annette says, adding in her characteristic humour, "So, stick me if you can!"

Annette is known for her compassion, devotion, encouraging words, keen sense of good humour, sweet sass and gracious spirit. As she sips on a cup of tea, she reflects on her long life (despite a heart defect that doctors had warned could be fatal at a young age).

"Life has been wonderful, and if I had to live it over again, I would."

She says people often tell her that she's done enough. She always questions, "When is enough?" and replies, "The answer is when God calls me home."

And she still thinks of Arthur, noting that the memories of him are "just as fresh as the days they happened – maybe my thoughts make it so..." With a twinkle in her eyes, she proclaims, "I'm not looking anymore!"

When the rings are photographed for this article, we notice that a tea stain has left the shape of a heart on the dark table. Annette beams her sweet smile, like she's been touched from afar.

As Mary relays, "She has gone a lifetime and still held this man in her heart – a sense of loss she carried a lifetime. When she speaks of him, it is with profound love and respect that could not be quenched." 🍵