

# Ode to JOY

*Christmas carolers and holiday greenery gave Celina Parker and Rob Engstrom's wintry, historic Virginia-meets-Washington, D.C. wedding the warm and festive spirit of the season.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ABBY JIU TEXT BY EVELYN BATTAGLIA



#### WITH BELLS ON

Place cards were vintage bells with calligraphed die-cut paper "ribbons"—a (surprise) homage to Celina's mother's vast collection. "Every time I see a bell, I think of my mom," she says. This Currier & Ives porcelain bell was for the bride and groom.

# M

ost couples avoid politics on the first date, but not Celina Parker and Rob Engstrom. The two met in Florida, during a heated special congressional campaign—she was on the press team for one of the candidates; he, the political director of a national organization endorsing him. “I had been working like mad on this event,” recalls Celina, who was living in Tallahassee. “I was that crazy press person with her hair on fire, holding a mountain of folders—and as I’m rounding the corner, I practically run right into a tall man in a suit.” As Rob (the tall man in the suit and a seasoned political pro) recalls, “This race was being watched across the nation. I’m about to walk out in front of five television cameras. We almost ran smack into each other, and now I’m completely distracted because Celina is absolutely gorgeous and standing there in the back of the room.”

Determined to keep in touch, Rob emailed Celina two days later, asking for a campaign yard sign—a pickup line he admits was not

**FINE FLOURISHES** Slate gray and gold added sophistication to the white-and-green color palette. The invitation, by Cheree Berry Paper, was wrapped in a custom-dyed ribbon, and vintage stamps nodded to the season and the pair’s political ties. The menu’s shape echoed the oval crest on the program. Reception cards were tucked into gold envelopes.

one for the record books. After a month of emails and texts, the two finally met for lunch when Rob was passing through Florida for work, and they bonded over bourbon and gingers, shared interests, and politics, of course. Two months later, Celina—who grew up in El Salvador and had gone to Florida for college—moved to the D.C. area and, in December, took Rob to meet her family. “When we first visited them over the holidays and everyone got along, I realized this was all falling into place.” For Rob’s part, he was as smitten with Celina’s family as they were with him.

Some six months later they moved into a house in historic Old Town Alexandria—a Virginia neighborhood that the couple adore, especially at the holidays—and they were engaged six months after that.

The pair had their hearts set on a formal Catholic ceremony, which they had on December 2, 2016, officiated by Rob’s friend Kieran Harrington, a monsignor for the Diocese of Brooklyn, at a church just blocks from their home. Afterward, guests were treated to carolers and hot cocoa. Then it was off to the Hay-Adams hotel in D.C., for a winter-wonderland setting that was both elegant and full of surprises, starting when a curtain was pulled back to reveal a cloud of seasonal greenery, candles, and bells hovering over the dance floor. The evening finished with a “carnival hour” (a Salvadoran wedding tradition), as partygoers donned masks and danced to a lively Latin playlist. “We wanted everything to genuinely reflect who we are and whom we love,” says the groom. “It just felt right in every way.”





### LET IT SNOW

1. Outside historic St. Mary Catholic Church, guests tossed biodegradable faux snow from paper cones.
2. Postceremony, guests were treated to a hot-chocolate cart with white and dark chocolate and all the fixings.
3. Custom to-go cups were a whimsical touch.
4. Street carolers lent festive cheer—a bit of the holiday atmosphere the couple treasure in their neighborhood.





**FESTIVE FÊTE** 1. Celina chose the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows" for her father/daughter dance. "He was my rock, so that song was the easiest choice I made." 2. Guests donned props for carnival hour. "People really started dancing after that!" says the bride. 3. The cake's tiers were covered in slate-gray fondant and gold leaf. 4. Each slice revealed two cake flavors: spice cake and devil's food. 5. Two Salvadoran specialties—pupusas (cheese-filled corn cakes) and palomas (tequila-based cocktails)—were passed, adding to the celebratory mood.

CELINA AND ROB'S

# SPIRITED CELEBRATION

## By the Numbers

7

Weeks Rob had the engagement ring before popping the question

362

Days between the engagement and the wedding ceremony

10

Dresses Celina tried on before finding *The One*. "I remember looking in the mirror just when one of the attendants fluffed the skirt," she recalls. "The second that happened, I said, 'This is it. What's next?'"

640

The number of stamps that were attached to the wedding invitations

67

Bells given out to the 124 guests—one for each single guest or couple

## A Proposal at Home

Having asked her parents for permission, Rob popped the question on Celina's birthday, December 5, 2015—in the cozy, character-filled third floor of their historic-register house. "I wanted a special place that we would want to come back to," Rob says. She agreed with his choice: "This house is our life together now."

### THE LOGISTICS

Most of the guests came from afar (Rob's from Georgia and Texas; Celina's from Miami and El Salvador). Those wanting to explore Washington, D.C., stayed at **The Hay-Adams** ([hayadams.com](http://hayadams.com)), but most chose to stay at the **Hotel Monaco Alexandria** (now **The Alexandrian**), near the couple's Old Town home.

On Thursday night, about 30 guests attended an intimate rehearsal dinner in a stone-walled room at the couple's beloved haunt, **Landini Brothers** ([landinibrothers.com](http://landinibrothers.com)). A larger welcome party followed at CXIII Rex, the upstairs cigar bar, with bourbon tasting and signature cocktails.

### FOR MOM

"My mom's collection of bells was a focal point in our big family room," Celina says. "Every time one of us went somewhere, we'd bring back a bell." She decided to make the vintage bells at her reception a surprise for her mom—no easy feat. But "the second the curtain was pulled back and my mom saw all those bells, she understood."

## BRIDE AND PRINCESS

*The Princess Bride* is one of Celina's favorite films, but Rob had never seen it—so she streamed it on one of their early date nights: "He was completely mesmerized, and it always struck me as one of those moments that felt really right between us." Fast-forward to the nuptials: The orchestra played "Storybook Love" while people were seated, and verses were displayed on paper flags. For a guest book, people signed a beautifully bound edition of the novel. "It will make a great nighttime story for our kids one day," Celina says.

**"The church doors opened, and I almost lost it. Seeing my very-soon-to-be-wife walk down the aisle was beyond any dream I'd ever had before. It seemed like time literally stopped."** —Rob

## WEDDING WISDOM

The Friday wedding—due to venue availability—was a blessing in disguise. "Everyone tends to buffer in time with folks right before, but if I learned anything, it would be to buffer time in afterward. You can look people in the eye and say, 'Thank you for coming' and 'How was your trip?' All the little things you might not have time for beforehand." —*Celina*

"We had time with friends and family and we were able to enjoy the Scottish parade in Old Town. Adding that day postwedding to decompress, share stories, and relax was a highlight of the whole experience." —*Rob*

## Honeymoon Dispatch

The newlyweds flew to Maui on Celina's birthday, the Monday after the ceremony, and spent a glorious 10 days at the **Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea** ([fourseasons.com/maui](http://fourseasons.com/maui))—now their new go-to vacation spot. "We packed workout clothes, bathing suits, and books, and had a wonderful time not doing a lot," says the bride. One excursion they took was a sunrise visit to Haleaekalā, which had exceptional views but was "absolutely mortifying" due to the fast-and-furious bike ride back down the volcano. (They packed it in about halfway and rode out the rest in the van.) "It definitely felt otherworldly being up there. It was kind of metaphorical to where we were in life: a brand-new day on the other side of marriage," Celina says.

## SOURCES

**Ceremony location** St. Mary Catholic Church **Reception location and catering** The Hay-Adams **Event design and coordination** Lauryn Prattes Styling and Events **Flowers** Sweet Root Village **Photography** Abby Jiu **Stationery** Cheree Berry Paper **Calligraphy** Laura Hooper Calligraphy **Cake** Buttercream Bakeshop **Music** 42nd Street Singers (carolers); Cherry Blossom String Quartet; the Bachelor Boys Band **Rentals** DC Rental; La Tavola Fine Linen **Cinematography** Socialart Cinema **Décor** BD3 Design; Fabrication Events **Bride's gown** Amsale **Bride's accessories** Peter Langner (veil); Bhdn (faux-fur jacket); Badgley Mischka (shoes) **Hair and hair clip** Bridal Hair by Remona **Makeup** Carl Ray of One80 Salon **Flower-girl dresses** David's Bridal **Groom's tuxedo, bow tie, shirt, and studs** Brooks Brothers **Hot chocolate** Bev-Rage (catering); Revolution Event Design and Production (cart rental)