

Planes, Trains & E-Mail

By Amy Stahl



Commuter couples like Warren and Ruth Vinz make long-distance marriages work thanks to daily phone calls and regular visits.

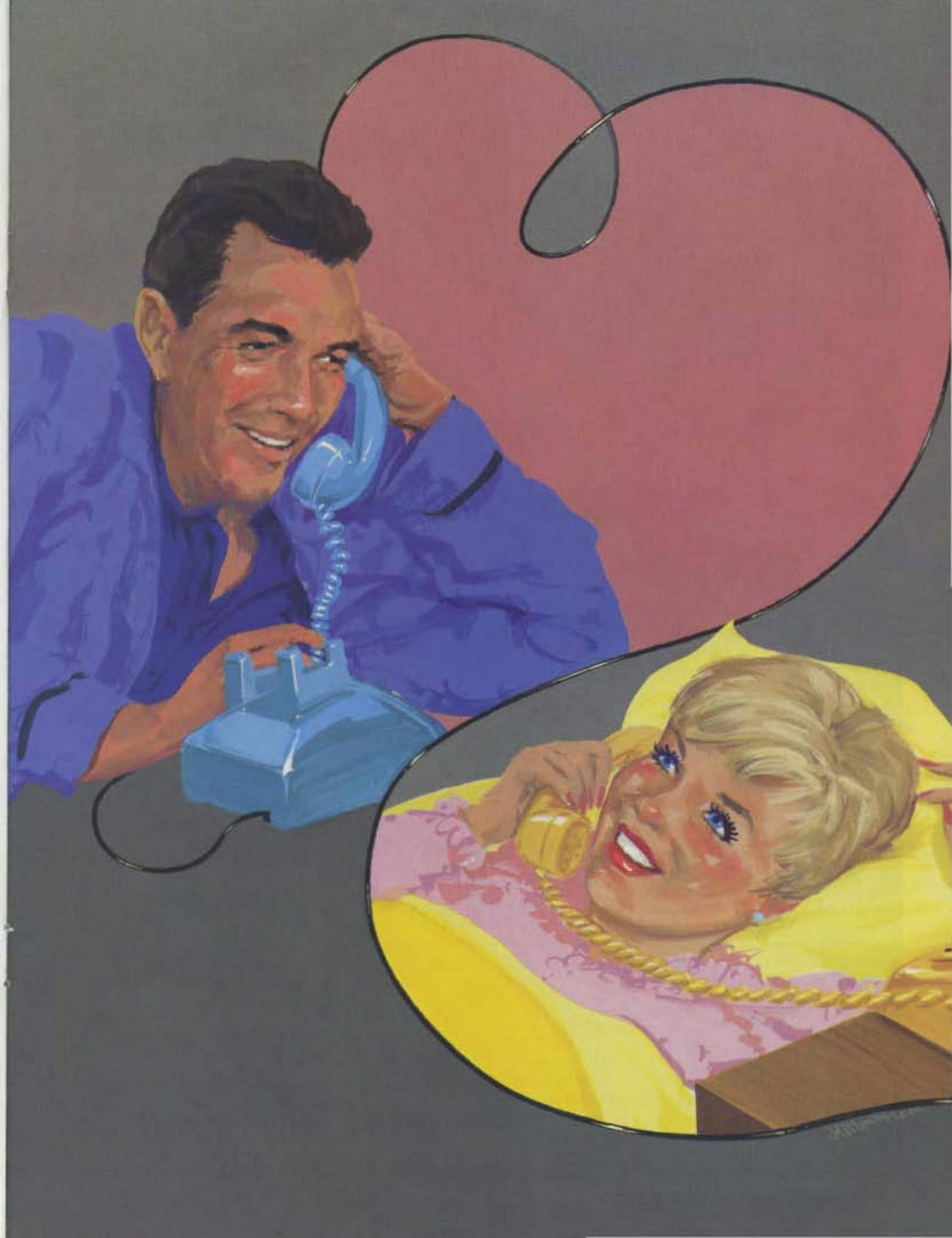
When the call came from Columbia University, there was little doubt that BSU education professor Ruth Vinz would apply for the job.

A position at Columbia is considered a plum in the academic world. "This is a pinnacle of one's professional opportunity," says Warren Vinz, Ruth's husband of 18 years and a history professor at BSU. "It really wasn't much of a question. It's something you do."

The Vinzes talked about the down sides of a long-distance relationship, the strain it could place on their marriage. They decided it was worth the risk. They agreed that "This is what ought to be done. We will do anything and everything in our power to make it work," says Warren.

So Ruth accepted the job, her husband and teen-age daughter remained in Boise, and the Vinzes found themselves living thousands of miles apart.

According to *American Demographics* magazine, they aren't alone. As many as 1 million U.S. couples have some form of a commuter marriage.



Is it possible to have a happy marriage from afar? Yes, say many commuter couples, but it isn't easy. It requires understanding, trust, and perhaps most importantly, constant communication.

Mary McPherson, a Boise State University communication professor, is studying techniques used by married or engaged couples in successful commuter or long-distance relationships. For her doctoral thesis, she is examining how couples interact with family and friends and the methods of communication they use such as phone, fax and e-mail.

McPherson, who was once in a long-distance relationship, is fascinated by how people cope when face-to-face communication is restricted. From focus groups she's found that people engaged in successful long-distance relationships typically "get to core issues more quickly."

They also realize the importance of focusing on personal achievements as well as the value of nurturing their relationship, McPherson says. "They work on their individual goals but when they talk they have the good of the relationship in mind."

Most couples who are separated for long periods of time yet remain committed to their relationship develop interpersonal rituals that create a sense of intimacy, she says.

The Vinzes, for example, rely on phone calls to stay in touch. "We literally talk every day on the phone without fail," says Warren. They also meet about once a month in Boise, New York or other cities to vacation or teach workshops. Last summer they even rendezvoused with their daughter in Tokyo where Ruth taught classes and Warren worked with Asia University, a BSU exchange program partner.

Phone calls and plane tickets, however, can be a big financial drain for couples like Donene and Scott Rognlie on a tight budget. Donene is a BSU senior majoring in teacher education; Scott is a BSU electronics technology graduate who is in Texas on an eight-month stint with the Air National Guard.

The parents of two small children, the Rognlies talk twice a week for 30-45 minutes on the phone. "We call in the evening before the kids go to bed so they can talk to him," says Donene. "If [money] didn't come in to play I think I would talk to him every day."

The Rognlies, who have been married for four years, also rely on a more traditional and old-fashioned form of communication — letters. "Letters are just as good as talking on the phone," says Donene, who feels that letters give writers the freedom to be more expressive and share their feelings more than they would



PHOTO COURTESY KATHLEEN W. GURNEY

Kitty and Vern Gurnsey celebrate with her parents and his mother.

Sparks fly in forest

By Kathleen W. "Kitty" Gurnsey

worked as a secretary for the Forest Supervisor on the Payette National Forest in McCall. My husband, Vern, is a forester and he came down from North Idaho in the big fire season of 1949 (similar to '94) to do a timber survey of holdings for the Boise Payette Lumber Company.

One day he was unable to access their land because the forest boundary was closed to the public. Thus he came to complain to the forest supervisor, so the first time I ever met Vern he was mad.

Shortly thereafter, he asked me for a date for a Saturday night. I had plans to attend a beach party after work, and we were short one fellow so I invited him to go along. He picked me up at the Forest Office at 8 p.m. at the conclusion of work that Saturday.

As we walked out of the office there was an old clunker of a car parked in front which I assumed was his. Boy was I impressed when he guided me along the side of the building and we got into his new Ford convertible. I was impressed from the start and boy was he a good dancer!

The beach party near the Shore Lodge was a great success and we eventually married the next year and traded the convertible off following our honeymoon. It just wasn't a very practical car for life in McCall, where we lived the first 2 1/2 years of our married life. □

Rep. Kathleen W. "Kitty" Gurnsey, R-Boise, is serving her 11th term in the Idaho Legislature. She is a 1976 graduate of BSU.

in everyday conversation or even long-distance phone calls.

For those who can afford to depend on phone calls, distance can influence the topics and intensity of a conversation, says Bob Davies, BSU's new Alumni Associa-

tion director. Bob moved to Boise from Reno in November. His wife, Sylvia, is a high school math and science teacher who remained to finish out the school year and sell the family home.

When talking on the phone, Bob says,

"You're a little bit more conscious about what needs to be said. Communication is a lot better because you have a shorter time frame. You have to get more in because of the constraints," he says.

"The conversations are a lot deeper. You talk more about your feelings and emotions instead of just the day's agenda."

In addition to phone calls, Davies says they try to spend every other weekend together. Married for five years, now he and Sylvia are "more willing to be more cooperative" about activities like hiking and movies that one partner may prefer over the other.

Technological advancements in the form of e-mail and the Internet are giving many couples new avenues for communication. Rosemary D'Arcy "talks" to her husband in Rhode Island every day via e-mail.

"I can't even imagine what it would be like if we didn't have such an inexpensive method," says D'Arcy, who has been director of BSU's Center for Management Development since 1994. Her husband of nearly 30 years lives in the family home and works as director of financial aid at Providence College. Their two sons are grown.

D'Arcy says her husband was understanding when she applied for her BSU job. "He knew I was under a lot of pressure and needed a change." Besides, she says, "We'd been together so long I thought a few years apart were not going to kill us."

Managing the distance, however, has been a learning experience. "In many ways it's like a new relationship. You are thinking more consciously about the other person. You appreciate each other more," she says.

Time together is more precious now, says D'Arcy. "When we do get together it's like being on vacation. The quality of our time is better. It's special because we don't see each other every day," she says.

Conversely, she misses the ability to see her husband when she's had a tough day or wants to share a triumph from work.

D'Arcy figures her situation is going to become more common, not less. "One of the realities of two-career couples is that this kind of dilemma happens more often. It's not an easy thing to deal with and none of us have any experience dealing with it," she says.

Clearly, commuter marriages and long-distance relationships aren't for everyone. Warren Vinz is convinced that the miles can easily sever a shaky union. He believes that a long-distance marriage works only if the relationship is on solid ground. "If you're looking for excuses to terminate a marriage, a commuter marriage will fit the bill very nicely," he says. □

Third time's a charm

By Pat Sullivan

Juli took dance lessons with my sister in 1960, in Ontario, Ore., when she was 5 years old. Juli's two older brothers ran around with my older brother. But Juli and I never played together. In 1961, Juli and her family moved to San Francisco.

In 1975, I was celebrating my 19th birthday with my older sister in Boise because you could go into Idaho nightclubs at 19 in those days.

The nightclub had a show group performing with two very attractive women as lead singers. One was especially pretty in her all-white outfit, bell bottoms and short top. As you might guess, that very pretty woman was Juli. I was telling my sister a joke in the nightclub that night, it was very loud, and I had to yell so my sister could hear. Juli walked by our table at an inopportune time, just as I belted out the punch line, and she thought I swore at her. So, she had the management remove me from the nightclub!

In 1982 I was living in Washington, D.C., and came home to visit my family in Ontario. My younger sister and I decided to go dancing one night. We walked into the Eastside Lounge in Ontario and I looked to the stage and asked my sister, "Who's that good-looking singer on stage?" It was Juli. During her break I struck up a conversation with her and told her I would like to have a dance with her on New Year's Eve. She was noticeably uncomfortable and told me she was married, but agreed to have one dance with me. I knew she was just being nice. And on New Year's Eve I had that dance. That was the last time I saw her for five years.

I moved back to Boise in 1987. After living here for a number of months, a friend of mine decided to take me out after a Boise State football game to have some fun. He told me that I just had to see this fabulous singer at a well-known Boise nightclub, so I agreed. As I walked in the door I turned to my friend and said, "I know her." Five years had passed since I had last talked to her. When the band took a break, Juli came over and sat next to my friend. He asked her "do you know this guy?" She looked at me and said "I danced with him years ago in Ontario." My heart jumped!

Juli had since divorced and was single. I ended a Washington, D.C., relationship, and Juli and I began seeing each other. We were married on May 29, 1992.

We were like ships passing in the night throughout our lives, but we finally made the connection. I knew it was true love and Juli was meant to be my life partner. □

Pat Sullivan is a political consultant and president of the BSU Alumni Association.



Pat and Juli Sullivan celebrate four years of marriage in May.

PHOTO COURTESY PAT SULLIVAN