

*"When you're receptive to what comes to you, life is so much more rewarding."*

Jacklyn VanHeirseele, American Red Cross volunteer



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Jessica Luebke and Dahlak Keleta kiss after Jacklyn VanHeirseele (right) marries them Saturday at Luebke's parents' home in Paddock Lake. When Hurricane Katrina hit, it washed away their plans to wed in New Orleans. From left are her parents, Tom and Sharon, and maid-of-honor Patty Wondrash.

## Best gift of all — their wedding

Red Cross volunteer helps Katrina evacuees marry

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Jessica Luebke shed her share of tears in the weeks after fleeing New Orleans, with fiancé Dahlak Keleta, barely a step ahead of Hurricane Katrina.

She cried for friends, whose whereabouts she didn't know, and for strangers, whose harrowing exodus she followed from the safety of her parents' rural Wisconsin home.

And the traditional New Orleans wedding she and Keleta planned had been canceled.

But Saturday, Luebke cried tears of joy and gratitude.

She and Keleta exchanged vows in a simple ceremony at her parents' Paddock Lake home, an event made possible by American Red Cross volunteer Jacklyn VanHeirseele.

"It's hard to believe that someone who doesn't even know you, who never met you before, could do something so kind," Luebke said on the eve of her wedding. "We are just so lucky considering what so many people went through."

Lucky, certainly, to have met VanHeirseele, who was interviewing Katrina evacuees for the Red Cross in Racine County when the young couple came through.

The mother of three grown sons, VanHeirseele stepped off the corporate ladder two years ago to do something she considered more meaningful with her life.

Shortly after, she started a wedding and event-planning business called Blessed Be, and in January, she began training as a Red Cross volunteer.

"One of the reasons I left my job — my company had been wonderful to me — was



Sharon Luebke puts pearls on her daughter, Jessica, on Saturday. For the past week, Sharon and Jessica, along with Dahlak Keleta and Jacklyn VanHeirseele, have pored over vows and readings, colors and silk flowers. VanHeirseele runs a wedding and event-planning business.

that I had gotten so far away from the person-to-person contact I feel I need in my life," VanHeirseele said. "I made a commitment to myself that, whatever I did in the future, it would be an opportunity to enjoy my life and to be in service to others."

VanHeirseele elicited the tale of the couple's dashed dream with a routine Red Cross question: Were they members of the same household?

"Something I said made her (Luebke)

tear up," VanHeirseele said. "We were going to get married," she said, "but that all changes now."

"That was it for me — hook, line and sinker," VanHeirseele said. "I told them I may be able to help."

VanHeirseele told them of her business and that she had recently been ordained in the Universal Life Church, so she could even officiate.

Please see WEDDING, 2B

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Tom Luebke (left), his son, Josh (center), and brother-in-law Marty Wondrash bring in a decorative arch for the wedding of Luebke's daughter at his Paddock Lake home Saturday.

## Volunteer makes wedding possible

WEDDING, From 1B

Luebke's father, Tom, who had accompanied the couple, studied VanHeirseele's business card and asked about her fee.

"No, you don't understand," VanHeirseele said. "This will be my gift to the kids, to help get them on their feet."

Luebke and Keleta, her mother, Sharon, and VanHeirseele have spent the last week together, poring over vows and readings, colors and silk flowers.

The couple went for their marriage license and had Luebke's dress shipped from a suburban New Orleans bridal shop, which had suffered minimal damage in the storm.

They had planned to be wed amid the lavish beauty of a historic New Orleans mansion before 100 or more people. By contrast, the ceremony in Wisconsin was simple elegance. But it didn't seem to matter.

"The most important part is that we're here together, and we've got each other right now," Keleta said.

Luebke glided in her ivory-silk dress into her parents' living room Saturday evening where Keleta waited as a faint

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Jessica Luebke

melody hung in the air. They pledged their love and exchanged rings — among the few possessions they spirited out of New Orleans when they left their home.

Before a small group of family members and friends, VanHeirseele bestowed the Blessing of the Apaches on them, which began: "Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other."

And VanHeirseele pronounced them husband and wife.

VanHeirseele feels that she was meant, somehow, to speak those words. She's a strong believer in what she calls "synchronicity."

"There are things that come past you, and your eyes are either open to them or they're not," she said. "When you're receptive to what comes to you, life is so much more rewarding."