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Wedding BELLS, wedding BILLS

Planning a wedding? Simple, check. Elegant, check. Affordable? Let a mother of the bride who managed all three help you out.

By Sarah Miller Barothy
Special Correspondent
Posted October 1 2006

When my 28-year-old stepdaughter, Elizabeth, got engaged, she asked me to plan her wedding. My husband and I live in Maryland and Elizabeth and her then-fiance, Jordan, lived in Fort Lauderdale. Despite the distance, and the fact that I had never planned a party for more than 15 people (at least one that didn't involve kegs), I agreed to take on the challenge.

The goal: a "simple and elegant" affair in South Florida for Elizabeth and Jordan -- for \$10,000.

Sounds delusional you say? Well, considering that the average cost of a wedding in the United States runs around \$25,000, you might be right. I was determined to beat the system, and was fortunate that Elizabeth and Jordan felt the same way. So, with their beach theme in mind, Elizabeth and Jordan put their wedding fate in my hands.

The six tips on Page 4E are what I learned from planning a wedding and reception without losing my mind -- or my savings. Can't say that I kept to my \$10,000 budget, but I was able to hold the actual costs to about \$12,000, while still pulling off a lovely affair for 66 adults and seven children in Coral Gables.

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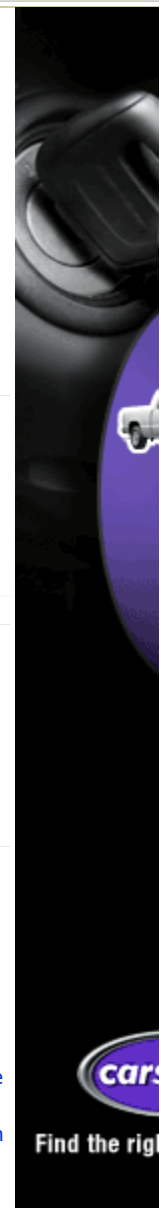
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I cannot emphasize enough how important this is. When people say, "Oh, the wedding isn't for another year," the truth is that year will go by quickly, and starting early will let you rein in those first months of giddiness when imaginations run wild: "Oh, let's have a Moroccan-themed wedding!" "Did you see [fill in celebrity couple's] wedding?" "I want to make a chuppah out of Granny's lace hankies."

Keep your eyes

and ears open

I found a calligrapher from talking to someone in line at the post office. I found a progressive rabbi in Florida from my physical therapist in Maryland. The more I mentioned to anyone and everyone that I was planning a wedding, the more information I got.

Start a wedding

Web page

Neither Elizabeth nor I thought of a wedding Web page until it was too late, but having seen a lot of them since then, it's a great idea. Not only is it a fun read for family and friends, but it's a good way to provide the gift registry stores without being tacky. Web sites like thewedding channel.com and theknot.com both have good templates.

Set limits and

stick to them

If you can't commit to a budget, then at least come up with numbers for the different pieces of the wedding: 100 invitations, four bouquets, eight flower arrangements, three hours of photography. If you add an extra 10 people to the guest list in the last month (as we did) that may mean more invitations, a larger cake, and more chair and linen rentals. Numbers may not be an actual budget but it will help you keep a lid on costs.

Beware of popular (wedding) culture

If you want anything approaching a traditional wedding, you're going to end up spending serious money. And, if you've ever thumbed

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through *Town & Country's* wedding issue or Grace Ormande's quarterly *Wedding Style* magazine, then you're in big trouble! Even Martha Stewart's ideas can add up -- as homey as they may seem. You can look, but try not to be influenced too much by pretty magazine layouts where money is no object.

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Think twice about

DIY projects

Nowadays it seems that all brides want a DIY project for their wedding. All I can say is, think about how much fun it will be to make 150 table favors or write 75 names on brittle sand dollars. If you're crafty to begin with, then fine; but if you aren't, you may end up having more headaches and spending more money than if you had gone ready-made. Every time I went to a craft or paper store I came out with \$100 less in my wallet.



Sarah Miller Barothy is a freelance writer who lives in Montgomery Village, Md.

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