

Wedding: Her heart's desire

By [SAMANTHA DUNN](#)

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Chris Gray will never forget when his daughter Amber had her first open-heart surgery at age 12. Doctors at CHOC had to replace a narrow valve that was hampering blood flow, the result of a condition she was born with called aortic stenosis.

The very next morning, doctors' orders were for her to get up and start walking to pump blood through her mended heart. Gray recalls his little girl was ghost- white, hooked up to a maze of tubes, IVs and monitors.

"She looks over at me and says, 'Dad, can you help me?' I say, 'Sure.' I picked her up with her tubes and IVs, and we were off."

Flash forward another 12 years: The Grays, from Orange, were back in the hospital, this time at Loma Linda. Amber's heart, having reached full maturity, needed a final valve replacement, so she had to undergo a second open-heart operation. Her father was once again perched at the foot of her bed, waiting for her to awaken. "This time, though, there was also Matt," Gray says.

Matt Bridges had been dating Amber for two years at that point. A cowboy boot-wearing, country music-cranking, fishing and hunting kind of guy, Matt was ambling his way through a business degree at Cal State Fullerton. "I might have failed a few classes," the Placentia native admits with a smirk. "It took me six years to graduate."

He met Amber one night when he struck up a conversation with her at Paul's, a bar on the Circle in Orange. "Real classy, I know," says Matt, 28. This booze-and-pool joint is known to have a good juke box, but it wasn't Amber's typical hangout. Friends had dragged her there to cheer her up, as an ex had just trampled her delicate-in-so-many-ways heart.

What did she think of the guy with the high-wattage smile and the blue eyes? "I was skeptical at first," says Amber, who at the time was studying photojournalism, also at Cal State Fullerton. Maybe the fact, as her dad says, that "Matt is just Matt" made her lower her defenses, but whatever the reason, the two were soon inseparable. "I think we maybe didn't see each other a total of five days the whole first year we were together," says Amber, 27.

Then, it was time for her surgery. Matt accompanied her to all her pre-op appointments, and waited with her parents for her to come out of the seven-hour surgery. "When I came to, he was sitting there," Amber says, a routine he maintained for the four days she was hospitalized. "He was in his last semester of college, and was driving about an hour from Fullerton to Loma Linda, and would stay there until the nurse kicked him out."

Unlike the first surgery in childhood where she "snapped right back," Amber says this recovery was tough and painful. She was connected to three IVs, including one that ran from her neck, and she felt weak and sick.

"Just seeing her like that was ... scary," Matt says.

Gray watched it all transpire. "I remember Matt was kind of shocked, because Amber's normally tanned face was ashen, but, he wanted to be there."

The morning after the surgery, says Gray, just as had happened a dozen years earlier, the doctor came into her room. "He said, 'Amber, I want you to get up and walk down the hallway,' so I am ready to get up – but Amber says, 'Matt, can you help me?' So I sat on her bed and watched Matt get up and walk her down the hallway. And that," he says, "is when I gave my daughter away."

But it still took awhile longer – another four years – for Matt to actually get down the aisle with Amber: "I figured we'd get married eventually, but ..." says Matt, who seems to be a six-year-plan kind of guy (see: college).

"Every vacation we went on, my friends were like, 'He's going to do it.' When we went to Cabo, even his mom told me, 'Oh it's going to happen.'"

Nope.

Then, they went to Santa Barbara for their fourth anniversary, and everybody was sure it was going to happen, because he borrowed his father's convertible Porsche. "We brought a blanket down to the beach, and were watching all the boats in the harbor. I thought, 'It's going to happen!' And instead he was like, 'Hey, let's get another bottle of wine. ...'"

"I'm oblivious to stuff like that," says Matt. "I wasn't thinking she was expecting anything."

She tried dropping the classic, "Oh what a nice ring" hints; she tried guilt with the tick-tock of her biological clock, which, in her case, is more like Big Ben. Doctors advise her not to have children any later than 30, as pregnancy will put too large a strain on her heart as she ages. Still, nothing.

And then, one day about a year ago, he asked her to come over to see the concrete he'd just laid at a house he was renovating for his company, MB Management, which he owns with his father, Mike Bridges. "I thought, whatever. I'd long since stopped expecting anything. I had my hair in a ponytail ... and an old shirt – I just looked disgusting," says Amber.

But when she got to the path leading to the spot he wanted to show her, she noticed rose petals. Lots of them. Suddenly, Matt was on one knee, shaking, ring in hand. In the concrete he'd written, "Will you marry me?"

"I couldn't figure out how I wanted to ask her, and one day we were pouring concrete at my house ... and I thought, write it in the concrete and then it will be there forever."

So on Sept. 29, at La Purisima Catholic Church in Orange, in front of 270 friends and family, Chris Gray finally got to officially do what he foresaw that day in the hospital – give his daughter away. Never mind that it took the groom awhile to get to it. As Gray told the crowd of well-wishers during his toast to the couple at their reception at Red Horse Barn in Huntington Beach:

"Nobody is perfect – until you fall in love with them."

Contact the writer: sdunn@ocregister.com or 714-796-6892