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## Love's concierge

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*PLANNING PROPOSALS: Eric Sofield, a concierge at Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort and Spa at Gainey Ranch, regularly helps to arrange proposals.*

*Deanna Dent Tribune*

A fire is crackling in the big stone fireplace at Ristorante Sandolo at the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort and Spa at Gainey Ranch as couples and groups of friends gather around small tables in the cozy, dimly lit dining room, chatting over glasses of good Italian wine. Michael D'Ambrosio and Jessica Irps of Chandler are sitting at a table just big enough for two, directly in front of the fireplace, enjoying their entrees and the luxury of a night on the town.

Unbeknownst to Irps, D'Ambrosio is sweating under his perfectly pressed black dress shirt, and it's not from the heat of the fire. He's been planning this evening for more than a month

(although he worked hard to make it seem spontaneous) and in just a few moments will ask his love to marry him.

Just steps away in the kitchen, things are anything but serene. Eric Sofield walks agilely among the bustling kitchen staff seeing to the last-minute details of the evening. He checks with pastry chef Martin Nakatsu to see that the dessert for the D'Ambrosio table is perfect.

"Jessica, will you marry me?" is skillfully scrolled in chocolate across a white plate holding the restaurant's signature pastry dessert, shaped to resemble a gondola.

Sofield compliments the chef and then moves on to a stainless steel table where a dozen red roses sit in a vase.

He plucks away several wilted petals. "Trick of the trade," he says.

A few minutes later he moves off to the side of the room with his clipboard and waits.

"She's gone to the bathroom," someone in the kitchen tells Sofield.

"We'll send it as soon as she gets back," he says. "I'm so excited. I hope she says yes."

Several female servers have gathered inside the doorway, and one of them peeks around the corner every few minutes to watch for Irps.

"This is so much fun," the server says. "I hear about these all the time, but I've never actually been here when someone's popped the question."

There are four proposals planned at the Hyatt on this winter evening, which is typical for the resort.

With Irps back in her chair, the engagement ring is placed on the confectionery gondolier's oar, and the dessert finally goes out to the table. Half a dozen heads crane from behind the kitchen's threshold to watch.

As restaurant manager Greg Emmett places the plate in front of Irps, there is a moment of confusion on her face, and then her jaw drops as she registers what is written on the plate. She blushes and then begins to cry. Nodding "yes," she leans over the small table to bury her face in D'Ambrosio's shoulder.

Sighs and giggles ripple through the kitchen and then the onlookers disband, everyone returning to chopping vegetables and filling drink orders.

"Oh, that was fast," Sofield says from his post in the kitchen. He wipes his brow with a handkerchief he keeps in his pocket. "That was really nice, wasn't it?"

It's about 8 p.m., time for Sofield to call it a day. He walks out of the restaurant the back way, through an empty dining room, and heads to his office, passing dozens of people enjoying music and drinks, celebrating the start of the weekend. He's on his way home, he says. It's been a long day at work, and he's ready to unwind.

#### 'YES, I CAN' BUSINESS

Sofield has a gentle handshake and an even gentler smile, and when he speaks you know immediately that he's a natural at keeping people calm.

Which is good, considering his business. Sofield deals daily with perhaps the most delicate of human emotions - love. Specifically, he gets paid to orchestrate other people's love lives.

Sofield is a concierge at the Hyatt, where he has all sorts of duties: securing tee times, arranging rental car reservations. But he spends much of his time making arrangements for people's romantic special occasions - wedding vow renewals and anniversary celebrations, proposals and weekend getaways.

"People just call," he says. "I've been doing this so long, most of the time, I can anticipate what they want."

The demand for someone to help couples in their romantic endeavors has grown so much that in recent years hotels and resorts have designated employees to take on the role of romance concierge. While it's not Sofield's full-time job, he often helps people like D'Ambrosio plan the details of their momentous occasions.

This Valentine's Day, the concierges at the Hyatt will be at their busiest, says manager Chanda McRoberts, with matters of the heart.

"It's definitely our busiest time for dealing with romantic ideas," she says. "There'll be a lot of proposals and those types of things."

Sofield says the things that people find romantic haven't changed much in the almost 30 years that he's been a concierge - flowers, candlelight and quiet one-on-one time are timeless.

"During the dot-com era things got very elaborate," he says. At the time he was a concierge in New York City. "It wasn't unusual for people to ask to have 10 dozen longstemmed roses and bottles of champagne waiting in the room. There were a lot of horse-drawn carriages and turn-down services. Price was never a consideration."

But his favorite requests are small in scale and big in meaning - a quiet dinner, a single rose.

"We will do whatever they request, as long as it's not illegal or immoral," he says, calling his profession the "Yes, I Can" business.

"It's a challenge to keep pushing it every day, to come up with something creative."

But that is what makes his job so exciting, he says, and why he couldn't see himself doing anything else.

"I think it's my calling, really," he says. "To do this I think you really need to stay focused on

professionalism and ethics. And you have to listen, be patient and care about others. Patience, though, that's the biggest thing."

One of the most elaborate engagements Sofield ever planned happened last year. A gentleman asked to secure a secluded spot on the Hyatt property with a bench overlooking a lake and the mountains in the distance. The couple enjoyed dinner, then took a leisurely gondola ride around the property, serenaded by their opera-singing gondolier. Then they arrived at the bench.

As they watched the sunset, a clown passed by, stopped, turned around and looking at the man asked, "Will?" The man said he was not Will and the clown continued on his way. Then a woman in business attire passed and muttered "You." A little while later another clown came through the area, this one asserting the woman's name was "Mary." Then came a box from the man's pocket, with a diamond ring and a little note, asking only "Me?"

"She said yes, thank goodness," Sofield says. "That one was very elaborate."

While the events he plans happen mostly in the evenings, his job is 9-to-5 most of the time, spent on the phone, rushing around the hotel or running all over the Valley tracking down supplies - like the miniature cake molds he once had to find to re-create a wedding cake for a couple renewing their vows. They wanted a smaller version of their original cake; only three guests were attending the ceremony.

He says sometimes guests show up knowing exactly what they want to do to celebrate an anniversary or pop the question. But more often, they turn to him for advice on how to fan the flames.

"They usually need some help," he says. "Sometimes, with engagements, the parents will call. I talked to a father recently who was calling for his son who was nervous and didn't know what to do. That's actually very common."

#### CUPID'S LOVE LIFE

Sofield didn't plan to be a concierge. He wanted to study at Le Cordon Bleu and become a chef at a resort. Instead he became a doorman, then a bellman, then a page. One day his boss came to him and said that they wanted to have a concierge at the hotel and they wanted him to fill the spot.

"I didn't even know what a concierge was," he says. "I had to look it up in the dictionary."

He spent five years studying to join the elite group of concierge professionals of Le Clefs d'Or and has since spent his career perfecting his craft and networking with concierges around the world.

"I think it's neat, the magic of it all," he says about his job.

His own love life is filled with a lot of romance now, but there are times when he seems to be planning other people's rendezvous without any romance of his own.

"Sometimes I feel a little like the shoemakers whose kids don't have any shoes," he says.

After a whirlwind day of phone calls, candles, roses and gondolas, how does a concierge spend a romantic evening with a loved one?

"I know it sounds corny, but it's seeing the Arizona sunset," he says. "Especially from somewhere high above the Valley where you can see the whole sky just glowing. Some things are just always romantic."