

“We All Made Sacrifices”: An Oral History of A Literal Marriage Between Families

In the summer of 2022, an extravagant wedding was held for Eli Waller and Grace Carpenter at Saint Jude Catholic Church near Lexington Park, Maryland. However, despite the ceremony’s traditional Catholic sensibilities and the lavish reception at a nearby hotel, the marriage was far from orthodox. Indeed, the Waller/Carpenter wedding would be the state of Maryland’s first and only double proxy marriage as neither the bride nor the groom were in attendance.

Months beforehand, guests received wedding invitations that clarified that Grace and Eli were to be portrayed by local theater actors, Russell Wilson and Jessica Straus. Images of the wedding invitations circulated on social media and the wedding soon gained notoriety. Unbeknownst to the hundreds of invitees and to the Internet at large, the celebration was neither legal nor was it authorized by the supplanted couple.

The wedding itself received national attention when Wilson and Straus were forced to drop out of the wedding, leaving Grace’s parents, Barbara and David Carpenter, to serve as stand-ins during the ceremony and Eli’s parents, Wendy and Bruce Waller, to take the couple’s place during the reception. The following is an account of the falsified festivities.

Testimonials have been edited for length and clarity.

Barbara Carpenter, mother of the bride: When we sent out the invitations, we really didn’t expect so many RSVPs, especially with the disclaimer we added. We did end up getting a few questions about things like the phrasing of “Eli & Grace, as portrayed by Russell Wilson and Jessica Straus”. Honestly, I think people just saw the modest calligraphy adorned with a gorgeous halo of asters, yarrow, and zinnias and they were too excited to look into the finer details. And, wouldn’t you know it, we were blessed with hundreds of acceptances.

David Carpenter, father of the bride: I think people were getting stir-crazy from all the COVID stuff from the past few years and would take any excuse to get out and party. A wedding is always a great excuse to get out of the house and have a good time with great people. It's a shame Bruce and Wendy didn't get to be themselves during the reception, especially since they were so instrumental in the whole thing. I'd love to claim credit for the idea. I'd love if Barbara could claim credit, but it was really the Wallers' idea initially.

Eli Waller, impersonated groom: It all started when I got frustrated with the constant pressure from both our parents. Grace got the brunt of it with her parents' ceaseless questions like "so when's the wedding?" and "how long can we wait?" I got fed up so I made an off-hand joke to my own parents. Would never have guessed they would run like hell with it. My "suggestion" for them was to take a cue from *Garfield Minus Garfield* - that meme where people edit Garfield [the cat] out of his own comic and make Jon [Arbuckle] look like he's having some kind of breakdown - and have the wedding without us. Like, have a priest stand there and officiate a wedding between an imaginary bride and groom. Just talking at empty air. Again, it was just a snide remark and the absurdity was the point, but I guess my parents told a similar joke to [Grace's] parents and, well, you know what happened.

Wendy Waller, mother of the groom: I called Barbara and said, "Barb, Eli gave me a great idea. Let's just do the wedding without them!" Barb and I were always on the same wavelength so she got it immediately and began pitching ideas for the venue and the invitations and the decorations. It was like she had been waiting for me to bring it up. I mean, she was *on* it.

Barbara Carpenter: Wendy gives me a lot of credit for a lot of ideas but she was the one who suggested hiring actors to play Eli and Grace during that first phone conversation. I think it was a

joke but it was such an inspired idea. She had a cousin involved in community theater and we eventually picked two young actors who were great for the parts.

Grace Carpenter, impersonated bride: Yeah, I couldn't help but notice that Jess, the actress who "played" me, was barely twenty and Russ, who "played" Eli, was pushing thirty. I brought it up once to my mom and she said the ages weren't that different from when she and my dad got married. I had no response to that. Anyway, that was the only time I ever spoke to my mom about [the wedding]. That is, besides our many heated arguments about their wildly irresponsible COVID decisions, as well as my sister Charlotte's blatantly absent invitation. Charlotte is an out and proud trans woman, to paint a clearer picture of what was going on there. Neither my parents nor Eli's ever acknowledged the exclusion. I guess they expected me and Charlotte to believe the invite got lost in the mail.

Bruce Waller, father of the groom: Nobody wanted to mask. Nobody wanted to test. Nobody wanted to even think about COVID. Everyone's been through so much and it was time to let the fear go and push forward. People of Eli and Grace's generation are so paralyzed in their fear. Each one of us has had COVID and we're all fine! Some folks in my family are unvaccinated *and* have had it multiple times but they're all doing fine as well. Even poor Jess and Russ recovered pretty quickly despite the bad timing.

Grace Carpenter: Both Jess and Russ tested positive the day after the rehearsal. Well, the *rehearsal* rehearsal my mom had the foresight to hold the week before so they could run lines with their jumbled-together wedding party like it's a theater production. Russ works in a nursing home and I swear Jess posted an [Instagram] story from a different club every weekend, so it wasn't *that* unexpected. I guess my parents should've gotten understudies.

Wendy Waller: Again, Barb was right on it. Bruce and I were just about ready to call off the wedding when Barb suggests we don't need actors as stand-ins. I say, "What do you mean?" And she says the four of us could be the bride and groom. It doesn't technically matter who plays Grace and Eli since it's not a "real" wedding, so why not us? I start to say, "that's the line," y'know? People will think we're crazy or something, but then I think back to my own wedding. It was nice, obviously, but it wasn't the kind of wedding you dream about. Why not pull out all the stops this time? Why not give our children the best wedding possible? Not to mention the embarrassment of having to postpone a mostly fictional wedding after all the publicity.

Bruce Waller: Maybe it was a "sunk-cost" thing, but we just rolled with it. So much money had been spent on the damn thing, it was way too late to back out. We had the hotel and the DJ and photographers and videographers and caterers and the cake and decorations and the church and Father Neil and the seating chart. Might as well go through with it after you tally it all up. I suggested a coin toss over who takes the ceremony and who takes the reception, but Barb made the argument that since it was a Catholic ceremony it would make more sense for the Catholics to participate. I didn't have a better argument and neither did Wendy so it became a Carpenter ceremony and a Waller reception.

David Carpenter: I'll admit I was the one holdout. It was just too weird. But Barb and [the Wallers] were set on it. Barb was already calling around for a wedding dress and spoke with Father Neil - God rest his soul - about the change-up. I wouldn't have had the balls to tell a priest I was gonna pretend to be my daughter's boyfriend during a fake wedding. That I'd be essentially lying to his face at the altar in front of God and all our guests. Barb, however, was fearless in that department.

Barbara Carpenter: It wasn't too much of a stretch to substitute us for Eli and Grace— or Russell and Jess, rather. The vows and speeches were already drafted and we just needed to practice a few times, which is what the rehearsals were for anyway. Father Neil - may he rest in Christ's love - was very open-minded for such a stern old man and, bless him, he rolled right along with the punches. The biggest obstacle was my dress. I had one custom-made within the week. It took a few dozen calls, but I managed. I felt like I was the president in the Situation Room or something. Wendy still fit in her wedding dress. She still *had* her wedding dress. And the boys found decent tuxes. So many miracles in such a short amount of time.

Grace Carpenter: My parents never ran into a problem they couldn't throw money at. It's like waving a magic wand for them. Of course, they never had any to give when Eli fell behind on rent, or for Charlotte's medical procedures. The money's there when *they* need it but gone when it's needed most. "Schrödinger's wealth" is what Charlotte calls it. And Charlotte was effectively homeless throughout all the wedding planning! I love my parents. I do. I just don't understand their priorities. Or maybe I do but I want it to be another way. I don't know.

Eli Waller: Grace and I never asked how much the wedding cost. I think any answer would shatter my brain. It's probably way more than I think and I'm thinking it's pretty up there.

After a week of scrambling, the Wallers and the Carpenters held the pantomime wedding for their children in front of a packed church. Saint Jude's Father Neil Laurence, who recently passed due to complications related to COVID-19, officiated the marriage between Barbara as Grace and David as Eli. Bruce walked Barbara down the aisle to the altar as the contextual father of the bride. A Catholic mass was held before Grace and Eli were married in absentia. Wendy and Bruce would, in turn, portray Grace and Eli during the reception with Barbara and

David as the mother and father of the bride. The groom's parents were omitted as roles altogether. Neither Grace nor Eli attended the ceremony or reception.

Barbara Carpenter: I'm being walked down the aisle by Bruce of all people and I'm already sobbing. I'm tearing up just thinking about it. Then when we get to the altar and take Holy Communion, I have kind of a revelation. As I receive the Eucharist, I feel closer to the Lord and to Grace than I ever have in my life. Grace and Jesus are in me and I am in them and we are all together. We are all whole. David and Eli, too. It was all so beautiful. It was divine. I'm glad I could have such a profound experience with my daughter.

David Carpenter: We read our vows and it's bizarre because I'm reading them as Eli to Barbara as "Grace". It's bizarre, but I remind myself that I'm doing this for her. For Grace, that is. So I'm making these vows to my daughter as I look at Barbara and in that moment I am Eli and she is Grace. Like I'm seeing Grace through Eli's eyes and I just feel this overwhelming love for Grace and Barbara and Eli. And that love spreads outward to our guests and to [Charlotte] and to God, obviously. It's so overwhelming and I'm just a mess. I fell to pieces. We managed to finish the ceremony but both me and Barbara were absolute wrecks. I'm glad we could take a step back for Bruce and Wendy during the reception, but we were still so raw.

Barbara Carpenter: I almost couldn't let go of it all when it came time for the swap. It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, to spiritually separate from my daughter, but it's not something I regret. Hard to believe I almost didn't experience any of it if Russell and Jess hadn't gotten sick. I prayed for them throughout our wedding day. Er, Grace's wedding day.

Grace Carpenter: Our phones were blowing up throughout the entire day. We turned them off and had Charlotte and some friends over for a movie night. We ordered from this great Indian

place and just chilled. It was pleasant but I could tell Charlotte was hurting. We talked and had probably the best talk we ever had. That's the silver lining to what was probably the strangest non-experience of any of our lives. It's very thin, but it's there.

Wendy Waller: The ballroom at the hotel was magnificent. There were these stunning chandeliers that looked like something out of a fairy tale. The food was great, too, which was a surprise. Grace is vegan so we wanted to stay authentic to her preferences, but it was actually very good. And authenticity was on my mind the entire time. When the toasts began, I asked myself, "what would Grace think?" and, "how would Grace feel?" Grace ended up having a great time.

Bruce Waller: I wasn't really thinking about Eli at the time. Or I wasn't trying to think like him, I should say. I was more focused on Wendy's enjoyment. Our wedding - our real wedding, that is - was a travesty. I won't go into too much detail but our parents gave us a hard time and Wendy cried the whole night. We were kind of forced to speed into ours with Eli and Sam on the way, so it was good not to have that tension. On one level, I wish Wendy's mom was still alive and her dad wasn't sick with dementia so they could see a real celebration of love, but, in reality, they would've hated it all the same. I myself am not on speaking terms with my own parents and I know that, if we had invited them, they wouldn't be able to look past the artifice. Is that the right word? Anyway, they just wouldn't get it.

Matt Camp, best man: Yeah, I knew Eli in high school. We weren't really in touch, though. When Mrs. Waller asked me to be the best man at Eli's fake wedding, I was like, "ehhh, I don't know." But I have a pretty big following on TikTok and my followers were super supportive, so I was like, "what the hell?" It was still weird to toast to Eli's parents like they were Eli and his girl,

but I was pretty drunk and I just had to read off a prewritten script. I think I did a pretty good job and I had a lot of fun during and after the reception.

Jess Straus, maid of honor: After [Eli's twin sister] Sam pulled out of the wedding for work reasons, Wendy called me back - after I recovered, obviously - and recast me as the maid of honor. I wasn't at a hundred percent, though, so I sat for most of the ceremony and went home right after my toast. They were all very nice and the food was good. It's sad, though, because I feel like I would've made a great bride.

Wendy Waller: Barbara's speech was the only real surprise out of the whole thing. She went totally off script - the script she wrote, by the way - when she was toasting us as the mother of the bride. I can't remember a lot of it but it was full of Bible stuff. It played pretty well for "Grace", however. Something Barbara said that stood out to me as myself, however, was how we all put in so much work for the sake of this wedding and for love. That was so true. The wedding was a culmination of a labor of love. And the rest of the night was just dancing and being present in all that love and celebration.

Barbara Carpenter: I was sure I embarrassed myself after going off like that, but everyone was a little drunk at that point and a lot of the party complimented me about the things I said afterwards. I wish Eli and Grace were there to hear the speeches. They would know just how much we love and cherish them. They would see that we all made sacrifices for *them*. I know they know that already, but this was the purest way it could be expressed, I feel.

Grace Carpenter: What gets me is that Eli and I eventually got married - like they all wanted - a few weeks back, almost a year after the "wedding". We went to the courthouse with Charlotte and a small group of friends. The ceremony - if that's what you call it - was short and sweet, and

the whole thing was completely COVID-safe with everyone masked, boosted, and tested. We even had a remote option. The original plan was for a small crowd of loved ones, including friends and *some* family, but neither Eli's nor my parents showed up despite being invited. Can you believe that? After all that spectacle, neither of our combined immediate families came to our actual legal wedding besides Charlotte, who sewed this gorgeous dress for me. I cried when I saw the design for it and then cried again when she was finished. But I guess everybody else got everything they needed from the fake wedding. We did our best to compromise and meet them halfway, but there's only so much you can do. We wanted to have our wedding on our own terms at our own pace. And there was absolutely no way we were putting up with their treatment of Charlotte or giving up on COVID precautions just to appease our more "traditional" family members. This is what we wanted. We couldn't care less about a fancy, bloated wedding. We just wanted to be together and do it our way with the people we loved. In the end, however, our parents are just going to do what they want. It stings a little, but at least everyone's satisfied. Everybody got what they wanted. They can have their crazy as long as they do it far away from us.

Eli Waller: I guess their plan worked, right? We're married now, aren't we? So we're just their puppets. They burnt their Eli and Grace effigies for their creepy magical ritual and it made all their dreams come true. It'll be a while before they realize what else they burned. Until then, we're on about as good of terms as we can manage. One last thing I'll say about it is that Grace and I never received an invitation. We weren't invited to our own wedding! How ridiculous is that? We also never received any of the creepy photoshopped wedding photos or whatever found-footage horror film was produced by that poor, underpaid videographer. We were robbed

of memories, too, I guess. I'm joking, of course. Let everyone and God know that I'm fucking joking.