

BEVERLY BECKHAM

‘Not me, we’ and 24 other ways to keep love alive

By **Beverly Beckham** Updated July 29, 2021, 4:52 p.m.



“First there was a beer, now there is a book.” Plymouth resident Tom Murphy with dedications to his late wife, who died after a long battle with cancer. MAURA BALL

Plymouth resident Tom Murphy may be on to something. His newest novel, “The Anniversary Box,” which will be released on Aug. 2, could well be the next “The Elf on the Shelf” — not because it’s a Christmas story written for children. But because it’s an all-season love story for adults, a compelling tale with an even more compelling

message.

Twenty-five of them, in fact.

If the book were packaged with a small wooden box, the way “The Elf on the Shelf” comes packaged with a small stuffed elf, it just might become a tradition.

It could become a tradition anyway.

What is “The Anniversary Box”? It’s truth wrapped in fiction. It’s Tom Murphy’s homage to his wife, Barb, who was diagnosed with non-smoker’s lung cancer in 2007. It’s wisdom he learned as he watched his beautiful, loving, marathon runner wife fight this disease for six years. It’s an old-school love story with a modern-day twist: a list of 25 ways to keep love alive.

In the fictional story, the characters’ names are Peggy and Michael. They’re planning their wedding. And they argue. And the argument escalates and everything good that’s happened in their two-year relationship is about to go south because Peggy wants the kind of marriage her parents had. Her parents, she believed, never argued. Their marriage was perfect.

But then Peggy finds out that it wasn’t perfect, that after she was born her parents had separated. What happened, she wants to know? And why did this happen?

Because her mother is dead and her father has had a stroke and is unable to speak, she contacts an aunt who tells her that yes, her father moved out for six months when she was a baby. “But they found a way to patch it up.”

And then she tells Peggy about their Anniversary Box.

“Your parents saw the folly in letting ego dominate. Both had hurt each other but they chose to put their pride aside. That’s why they created an Anniversary Box,” a box in which together, they would write down on their anniversary every year a lesson they

had learned that had strengthened their marriage. They began with “Build on what you’ve built.”

And so begins Peggy’s hunt for the polished wooden box with its lessons for staying in love.

Murphy says the idea for “The Anniversary Box” came to him while his wife was fighting cancer. “I was constantly inspired by her. I learned so much from her ... But I thought then that Barb would get better and it would be a story that would end that way, with the wife getting better ... but then Barb passed away and writing a story was the furthest thing from my mind.”

Murphy, instead, dove back into his work. The director of the Human Resiliency Institute at Fordham University in New York City, he is also the creator of [Edge4Vets](#), a program that helps military veterans get jobs. For six years, he spent his days and nights flying all over the country conducting workshops for veterans.

Then came COVID-19. And the workshops stopped. “I had no place to fly to and I had time, plenty of time to reflect and think. It was during this period that I revisited the things Barb and I used to talk about — the ways to stay strong in adversity — and I decided to use the time to write “The Anniversary Box.”

At home in Pinehills in Plymouth last summer, Murphy wrote non-stop for six weeks. “I had specific things that Barb had said that became ‘messages,’ such as ‘Adversity is a teacher — listen to the teacher,’ and ‘Not me, we,’ and ‘When you win, I win,’ things that reinforced the theme I was trying to express in the story — that couples do well when they look to identify what’s most valuable to the other and strive to meet that. And so it’s a fictional story, but all the messages come in one form or another from things we used to talk about.”

Shortly after his wife died, Murphy created Barb’s Beer — along with the [Barb’s Beer](#)

[Foundation](#), a 501c3 charity — to raise funds to help find a cure for lung cancer. “First there was a beer, now there is a book,” quips Murphy, who is contributing a portion of the proceeds from “The Anniversary Box” to continue to fund the foundation.

On the book’s website, theanniversarybox.com, there’s information about workshops and roundtables and how to make your own Anniversary Box. There’s also a place for readers to share their own words of wisdom. “In 25 words or less what’s the secret to success in your relationship: what do the two of you do RIGHT to keep love going strong?”

It’s easy to fall in love. The tough part is staying in love. This little book, which was created because of love, tells you how.

Beverly Beckham’s column appears every two weeks. She can be reached at bev@beverlybeckham.com.

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