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Iris and Mike Flanigan on their wedding day. (Courtesy photo)

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Unbreakable bonds: For Iris and Mike Flanigan, a friendship that began at VCU transformed into love three decades later

After bonding as VCU Police officers early in their careers, the pair married different people and moved on to other jobs before finding their way back to each other – and to VCU.

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By Audrey Alder

Sometimes love is worth the wait. Even if it takes decades of friendship before it blooms.

Iris and Mike Flanigan, Ed.D., met in 1984 as officers in the Virginia Commonwealth University Police Department.

“There was an immediate camaraderie among all the people we were hired [with] and worked with, given the work experiences we shared,” Mike said. “That carried over to [Iris] and me as well. I think it accelerated the arc of our friendship in ways that would not have happened in other settings. VCU was a bit like a smallish town at that time, so it didn’t take long to get to know a lot of people pretty quickly. We were lucky enough to have gotten to know each other pretty well because of that and have never taken it for granted.”

But their happily-ever-after didn’t start then.

After working together for three years, Iris moved out of state and Mike moved on to another job at VCU (and then on to grad school in Arizona), each married to someone else.

Yet they managed to stay in touch – an invisible thread of shared VCU experiences keeping their friendship alive.

“Over the years, we built more experiences and history on top of those first shared VCU experiences as VCU police officers,” Mike said.

By the early 2010s, they were both divorced. During this time, Iris and her youngest daughter moved back to Virginia, where Mike extended his guest bedroom to them as they searched for a place to live. Their friendship picked up right where it had left off.



Iris and Mike Flanigan as VCU Police officers in the 1980s. (Courtesy photo)

It also began to reveal itself as something deeper.

“As I got older, I learned more about what things were important to me in a ‘significant other’ relationship,” Mike said. “Slowly, I realized that Iris and I had those things in our relationship already. My feelings for Iris transformed from friendship and grew organically into love from that basis.”

Turns out, Iris felt the same.

“I remember being a little saddened when Mike started dating someone, but I wanted him to be happy,” Iris said. “When they broke up, I wasn’t going to lose him again, and I told him he was the wonderful person I was interested in.”

Looking back, Mike reflects, “Life is rarely a straight line – don’t be afraid of riding the curves a bit and seeing where they take you.”

For him, every turn, every year, every memory has led back to Iris. “I always considered her a special and treasured friend, but omigosh – being able to consider her my wife is simply more than I have a right to,” Mike said.

Not only have they reconnected with each other, they’ve reconnected with VCU as well.

Mike earned his Ed.D. in leadership from VCU in 2017 and works on the Monroe Park Campus in the Division of Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success. Iris works as a registered nurse in Ambulatory Supplemental Services at VCU Health.

Now, they share not only memories but new adventures. “We love any time we can get away for a day, an evening or a week,” Iris said. “We just love spending time with each other. We genuinely love to laugh together.”

The VCU Police Department was Mike and Iris’s beginning, but life has since expanded their story. “I just can’t say how much having Iris in my life for the last 40-plus years has meant to me,” Mike said. “Even if it took 30-plus years or so to figure out she is the love of my life!”