



Winter Engagement: Walkowski Photography

## Perspective/Opinion

# Classmates to Soulmates

*By Joe Novak, MD and  
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*In honor of Valentine's Day, Dr. Joe Novak and Dr. Hilary Steltenpohl share their story of classmates to soulmates on the MCW-Central Wisconsin campus...*

Love happens in the moments we least expect it. If you would have asked the two of us before starting medical school, “Are you looking for love?” we both would have given you an inquisitive look. It had already been a journey to be accepted into medical school, as we both are first-generation college students with humble upbringings. To let a relationship be a distraction from our career goals seemed incomprehensible. But those initial thoughts could not have been more wrong. The most important lessons we have learned ultimately did not come from a classroom, a textbook, or a lecture, but from the connection of life and love.

### Part I: How We Met

We grew up in similar small, northern Wisconsin towns about 30 minutes apart: Joe in Antigo, and Hilary in Merrill. The small-town rivalry between Antigo and Merrill is commonly referred to as the “War on Highway 64” when their sports teams compete. It’s interesting how at one point in life, a highway is a division, and later, it brings us closer.

We each grew up with a desire to stay close to family and friends while studying medicine. That’s how we both ended up at MCW-Central Wisconsin. The satellite program, designed to both encourage local students to continue education in medicine and fight physician shortages in the area, became a common foundation for our separate career paths. We shared the values of community and ultimately choosing to practice medicine here.

When we first met during medical school, we would be lying if we said there was any romantic interest.

**Joe:** "I thought you were just completely out of my league. I was usually too shy to talk to you much until you did some tutoring in our anatomy lab and I got to know you better."

**Hilary:** "I thought you initially came off as a bit of a brown-noser and very nerdy, which is saying something given we were both medical students. I wasn't sure if we would have much in common apart from medicine."

Gradually, we got to know each other better. An on-campus movie night led to a deeper conversation about life, goals, and past relationships. Eventually, as our friendship grew and we began spending more time together on campus, one study area in the student lounge became endearingly known as the "Hilary and Joe spot."

## **Part II: First Dates**

**Joe:** *"Building up the courage to ask Hilary on a date was not easy by any means. Millions of scenarios buzzed inside my head: 'What if she is just super friendly with you?' 'What if this makes things awkward amongst an already small medical school class?' 'She's way out of your league, Joe.'"*

**Hilary:** *"Joe sent me a text that night asking me on a date. I was not all that surprised, given our friendship had grown quite close by that time. But I was incredibly hesitant to respond. I was not certain I was willing to risk our friendship at that time if things didn't work out."*

**Joe:** *"She was taking way too long to respond; minutes, even hours went by!"*

**Hilary:** *"Something stopped me that night from saying no. I think deep down, I wanted to say yes, but needed some encouragement from those closest to me, which of course, meant consultation with my closest friends first. Joe was just so different from anyone I had dated before. But one of my wisest friends simply said, 'That's the exact reason you should give him a chance.'"*

**Joe:** *"I was about to head off to bed, feeling defeated, when I finally got a response from Hilary."*

**Hilary:** *"I basically said, 'Sure, what did you have in mind?'"*

We agreed to go to Red Eye Brewing Company, a hipster restaurant in Wausau. Joe picked Friday February 15th, the day after Valentine's Day. Unbeknownst to Hilary, Joe had so much superstition surrounding Valentine's Day, due to broken hearts and dating let-downs, he couldn't let this one fall into the same bucket.

Many more "firsts" followed, including meeting each other's family. We both fondly recall the Freudian slip when Hilary's mother accidentally referred to Joe as her "other son-in-law" the first time she met him. It's amazing he didn't leave a Joe-shaped hole in the wall. We also fondly remember Joe meeting Hilary's nieces. Hilary's family, and especially her nieces, are her world, and she partly chose CW-CW to stay close to them. Despite a cup of spilled milk that left one niece in tears, they eventually warmed up to Joe. Thank goodness the relationship was not literally derailed by "crying over spilled milk."

There would always be a waxing and waning of time we could spend together as medical students. However, medicine taught us it's not about quantity of time, but quality of time. Time apart for rotations, studying, etc. required trust and commitment perhaps sooner than it would have for other relationships. We each needed to know our relationship could withstand the tests of distance and incredible stress as medical students, and the additional stress and flexibility requirements of being physicians.

Our first "I love you" followed our final exam of the year, which happened to be pharmacology. We both needed solitude that sunny afternoon and found it – not surprisingly – beside the Wisconsin River, enjoying lunch and congratulatory drinks.

### **Part III: The Engagement**

Joe loves to plan surprises, and his idea for proposing to Hilary was no exception. Hilary finds comfort in knowing what's coming. She is not a fan of most surprises. Joe found the perfect ring for Hilary, with the help of her older sister, and began planning his marriage proposal.

He let a few months pass to build suspense and ensure the day would be memorable. He purchased a personalized stethoscope with the words "Will you marry me?" engraved on the bell.

On a sunny weekend we both had off (August 1st, 2020), Joe scheduled a photoshoot for residency application headshots with his cousin, a professional photographer, at the top of Rib Mountain -- a ski hill with a panoramic view of Wausau.

It's important to note that Hilary did not have to enter the Match application system, since she matched a year early with the Wausau Family Medicine residency program. Joe reminded Hilary to bring a stethoscope and her medical school white coat to the photoshoot.

Predictably, **Hilary's** questions started to fly:

*"Aren't you supposed to wear a business suit, not your whitecoat?"*

*"Isn't the school putting on an official photoshoot?"*

*"You don't wear your stethoscope in a headshot!"*

*"Isn't the backdrop supposed to be plain, not the outdoors?"*

*"Why am I getting a headshot? I already matched!"*

Joe explained his cousin wanted white coat photos prior to business professional attire. Joe had even attempted to hide Hilary's current stethoscope in a closet so he could give her the one with his engraved proposal. Hilary became very worried when she could not find her regular stethoscope. "You can just borrow mine," Joe offered. Hilary was determined to find it. She was confused when she saw the stethoscope hidden in her closet.

After making it to the top of the ski hill and open pavilion, Joe and Hilary started with headshots. Then, photos together before Joe bent down on one knee, and pulled out a moleskin notebook -- a gift Hilary bought Joe for clinical notes at the start of his medical school rotations. Although Joe never took notes on medicine, he had been journaling regularly about our relationship, with today's engagement date opened to the words he planned to recite. He placed the ring on the notebook and gave Hilary the personalized stethoscope. With tears streaming down her face, almost unable to get any words out, she said, "Yes!"

#### **Part IV: Marriage & Residency**

Relationships are never easy, as they must adapt to change.

The Match was upon us as we approached graduation from medical school as an engaged couple. Hilary was set through early acceptance with the Wausau Family Medicine Residency, but Joe planned to apply to Wisconsin and surrounding states for pediatrics residency, as there were no local pediatric residencies. We both knew this would mean being apart for three years, including our first years of marriage. Match Day was a day we joyfully and fearfully awaited, as we understood it would be bittersweet. MCW-Central Wisconsin chose a 1950s drive-in theme for Match Day. As Joe opened his vinyl record-decorated match location, to his surprise, it was his first choice: a Mayo Clinic Pediatrics Residency, in Rochester, MN. We have always been

supportive of each other's professional career, but this would be a test. Not many physician couples can say they were able to do long-distance during residency.

Planning a wedding during a pandemic and our first year of residency was a whirlwind. The anticipation of our wedding day kept us going during tense times as intern residents, in a long-distance relationship, while attempting to plan a wedding with little spare time. The rare times we could plan our weeks of vacation together gave us a small sense of normalcy and made our wedding day feel like a day for which we had waited our whole lives. We had both been searching for a person who truly understands the unique challenges and lifestyle of a career in medicine, and who could relate to what we had both been through and would continue to go through in the future. Our MCW-Central Wisconsin family who had been with us from the beginning and supported us every step of our medical path attended our wedding.

The wedding vows Joe wrote reminded us not only of our commitment to one another in marriage, but our commitment as physicians, supporting each other on that path – today and always.

*Joe is a second year resident at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota for pediatrics. Hilary is a second year resident at Aspirus in Wausau, Wisconsin for family medicine. They hope to practice together in Wausau, and teach at MCW-Central Wisconsin.*