

## Vernon Malone: Man of a Thousand Marriages

Before he unites couples in matrimony, Hope Town Marriage Officer Vernon Malone offers some advice.

"I tell them, 'Pretend you've come here today to plant a garden of the most beautiful flowers you can find anywhere. You'll water and fertilize this garden, and show it off proudly to your family. But one day you go out and tiny weeds have sprung up, threatening to choke out your beautiful flowers.'

"Those little weeds," says Malone, "represent the little spats and misunderstandings we have as married couples. When there's a misunderstanding or upset, just think to yourself, that's a weed that I have to pull so I can enjoy being with my wife or husband. I think that's the best advice I can give them."

Eighty-six-year-old Malone, who's operated Vernon's Grocery and the Upper Crust Bakery since 1962, and who serves as lay minister for the island's St. James Methodist Church, became a marriage officer in 1994.

Since then, he's performed more than a thousand weddings. "One thousand and forty-four in total," he says. "And that doesn't include vow renewals. I've done a couple hundred of those, too."

Though most ceremonies have been on Elbow Cay, Malone has also performed weddings in Marsh Harbour, Cherokee Sound, Guana Cay, and Man-O-War. He's married couples on boats anchored in Hope Town Harbour, and even at the top of the Elbow Reef Lighthouse. (These days, he limits his lighthouse weddings to the ground floor only.)

Malone has officiated at a number of celebrity weddings, including that of Chad Smith from the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and his wife Nancy Mack. "He's one of the nicest people you've ever met," he says. "We get a Christmas card from him every year."

"Once, I was working with a young woman to plan her wedding, and she said her last name was Bird. I asked if she was related to Charlie Byrd. He was a guitarist, and I knew his music. She said, 'No, my father's name is Larry.'"

On the day of the wedding, Malone says, people were pointing at the father of the bride, saying "There he is! There he is!"

"I had to come home and ask my wife, 'Who is Larry Bird?' I had no clue who he was."

Not surprisingly, given that his shop is lined with funny signs and amusing one-liners, Malone says, "I like when the couples have a sense of humour. If something goes wrong, they laugh at it and not get upset."

He understands first-hand that sometimes things can go wrong at a wedding. At his own 1968 wedding to wife Barbara (Bobbie), Malone says, "There were candles in the area where we were going to cut the cake. Bobbie's veil brushed up against the flames, and her Dad, who was a volunteer firefighter, had to rush to put her out."

Though couples are certainly welcome to add their own touches, Malone is proud of the ceremony that he and Bobbie have put together. "It's not just the legal requirements, we make it very personal. It's a warm feeling when you look down at the congregation and see people wiping tears when the couple is making their vows."

It also makes him happy when couples he's married return to Hope Town to visit. "They come by the shop and bring their children, and tell them I'm the person who married them. I love when people come back years later and tell me, 'We're still pulling out the weeds.'"



Photo by Gabrielle Manni Sawyer