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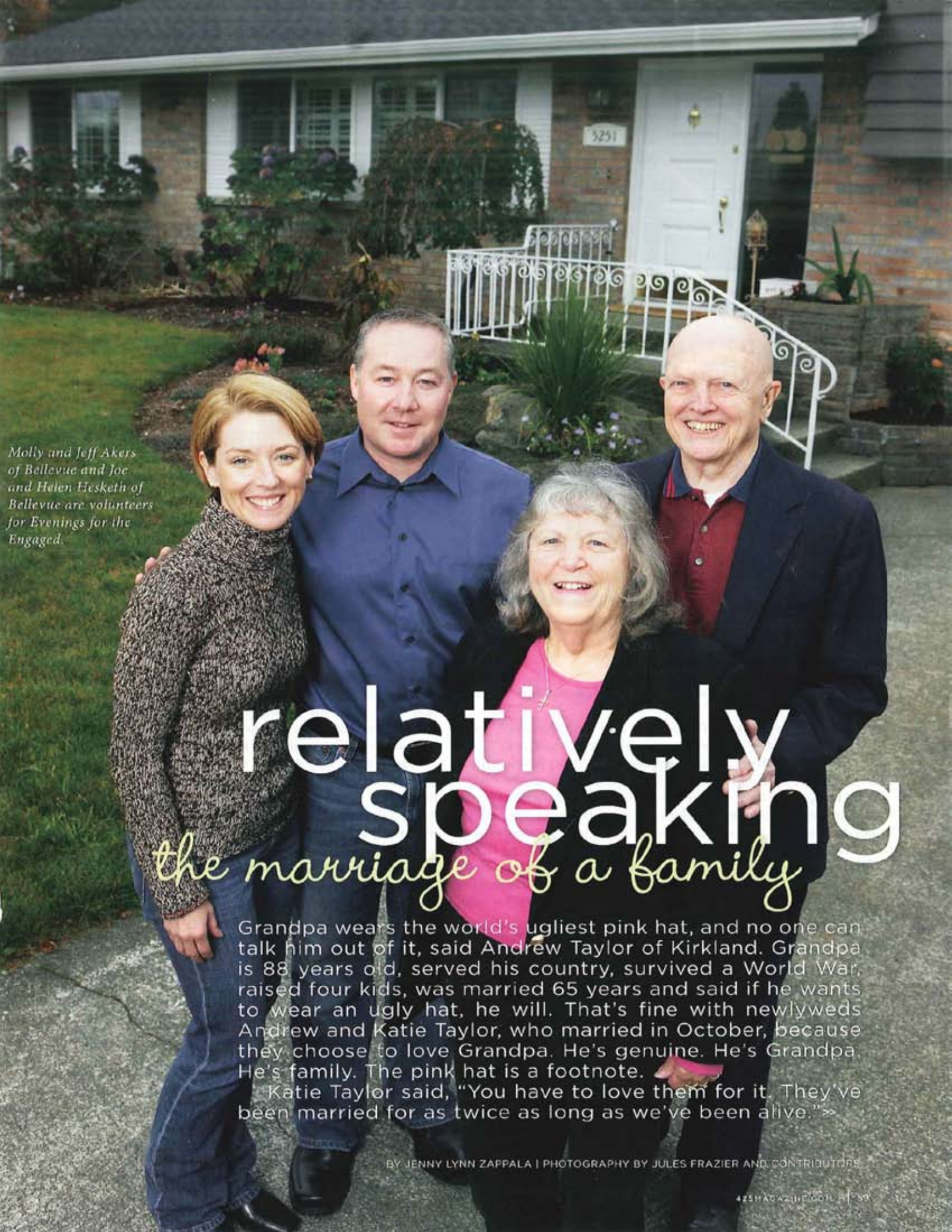
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Molly and Jeff Akers of Bellevue and Joe and Helen Esketh of Bellevue are volunteers for Evenings for the Engaged.

relatively speaking

the marriage of a family

Grandpa wears the world's ugliest pink hat, and no one can talk him out of it, said Andrew Taylor of Kirkland. Grandpa is 88 years old, served his country, survived a World War, raised four kids, was married 65 years and said if he wants to wear an ugly hat, he will. That's fine with newlyweds Andrew and Katie Taylor, who married in October, because they choose to love Grandpa. He's genuine. He's Grandpa. He's family. The pink hat is a footnote.

Katie Taylor said, "You have to love them for it. They've been married for as twice as long as we've been alive." >>

BY JENNY LYNN ZAPPALA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULES FRAZIER AND CONTRIBUTORS



<< We can't choose our relatives, but we can choose how we relate to them.

Andrew Taylor said, "If you can't deal with the family now, how will you deal with it when your son wants a mohawk?"

Katie and Andrew Taylor make family a priority because that's how they grew up and intend to live. While courting, the couple went camping, skiing, fishing and horseback-riding with relatives to nurture family relationships. Katie's father-in-law taught her how to ride a horse. For his bachelor party, Andrew went fishing with family. A wedding is just one reason to bring family together. Consider backyard picnics, bonfires, clam bakes, family vacations, holidays, sailing or tennis tournaments. "Our family is the people we choose to spend time with," Andrew Taylor said. "It's having things that you enjoy doing together."

The more time you spend with family, the more you might notice differences. Perhaps the bride's family is big, busy and talkative, while the groom's family is small, calm and quiet. Different family styles can be treasures or land mines for any relative, from young cousins to grandparents, depending on who is aware and prepared.

Evenings for the Engaged, a marriage-preparation program, encourages couples to consider these issues before and during their marriage. St. Louise Parish of Bellevue started Evenings for the Engaged in the 1980s. Married couples in the 425 area volunteer to lead the weekly discussions in local homes.

Joe and Helen Hesketh of Bellevue, longtime program volunteers who have been married 54 years, said Evenings for

the Engaged encourages couples to raise questions, discuss issues and make decisions. It can be challenging for a young couple to assert themselves as a new family unit, make decisions on their own and communicate that to other relatives. Each family has a unique style that governs how the family celebrates success, communicates information, handles money, makes decisions, prioritizes values and resolves conflict — among other things. A good first step is awareness. Questions to consider: What does our family value? What traditions will we keep or blend or create? What are the expectations in our family? What opportunities will we create for relatives to meet and relax?

Joe Hesketh said, "A wedding is a day. A marriage is a lifetime. Many couples spend more time planning for their wedding than their marriage."

"A commitment to family needs constant renewal," said Molly Akers of Bellevue. Molly and her husband, Jeff, are Evenings for the Engaged volunteers and apply similar lessons. It's tempting to find reasons to complain about or alienate relatives, she said. What one family considers thrifty, another family might consider miserly. One way to overcome this is to discuss family origins. What is the family history? Where did the family come from? Who has what role? If you understand the family origin, it's often easier to comprehend and react to the present and the future.

Molly Akers said: "I am choosing to love his family because he loves his family. ... It doesn't mean you have to do everything like them. There are some things you have to negotiate. ... Respect the fact that your spouse is the product of that family. If you love your spouse,

smiles with family elders who primarily spoke Vietnamese. The Haines believed it was important to give their daughter and son-in-law space to make their own decisions. Sharing traditional foods, music, stories and customs are great ways to bring families together. Bill and Gina Haines, both Evenings for the Engaged volunteers, know families often experience these successful exchanges.

Gina Haines said, "We need as a nation and as a people to look at difference as acceptable instead of odd. ... Just because my family has done it this way doesn't mean that's the only way to do it."

Bill Haines said, "The kids are going to make their own traditions."

The kids might pleasantly surprise you. Joe and Helen Hesketh happily remember a last-minute surprise party invitation. At the party, they discovered their son's house filled with friends and family, including relatives of their granddaughter's longtime boyfriend. At that moment, Joe and Helen's granddaughter and her longtime boyfriend were out for dinner, where he planned on proposing marriage. Afterward he was supposed to bring her by to see her parents. But she had no idea that the house was full of family and friends and that cake awaited – an instant surprise engagement party. Joe Hesketh said his granddaughter was "so surprised she ran out the door." The two families happily bonded because they felt part of something special. Joe Hesketh said, "It was a fun night." *SHR*

Jenny Lynn Zappala is a writer who lives in Kirkland.

Tips for Family Involvement

A wedding is a festive time to strengthen family ties, and there are many ways to put family first and have fun too, said Stacy Kvam, an event planner and founder of SK Wedding and Event Design in Kirkland. First, remember that the hard work is over. The happy couple found each other, and the wedding is their celebration. "It is too important of a day. You need to embrace that moment and enjoy it. Planning a wedding is an art form. It takes time," said Kvam.

- Be clear about who makes the final decisions, whether that is the engaged couple or their parents. Start planning early and invite family and friends to participate in imagining the wedding. Balancing a couple's decisions with family expectations is a challenge. Wise couples pick their battles; they decide which issues are most important and which ones to let go.
- To keep the peace, talk early and often. Couples usually know the hot spots and should approach them with sensitivity, Kvam said. Sometimes a different voice, like that of a wedding planner, can smooth tough discussions.
- Ask friends and family to get involved. Then the journey becomes a series of small parties, Kvam said. Strongly consider delegating wedding day duties to a wedding planner or family friends so the bridal party can bond and enjoy the wedding. "It's important to find tasks for family to do so they feel a part of it," Kvam said. "There's always something to tie a bow around, and there are always 300 of them."
- Most importantly, take time out. During the engagement, throw parties for relatives to relax and bond – no planning. Have fun!

Event planner and founder of SK Wedding and Event Design of Kirkland, Stacy Kvam, specializes in quality by limiting the number of couples and events she works with. On the web skweddingandeventdesign.com.

