

A Wedding Setting in the Hills

Who could guess that photographs in Australia would lead to a successful wedding and corporate event business in metro Omaha?

But it was while photographing an outdoor wedding in the Australian Outback that Erin and Marty Williams got an idea: create an outdoor setting for weddings with a facility for receptions. "I thought 'Why not do it here?'" she said. "People want outdoor weddings, so why not give them that option here in Omaha?"

Erin had already proved she had a handle on what the market wanted. Her husband Marty's family owned a closed hardware store in Tabor that got turned over to Erin as her photo studio. Business was so good that Marty left the family heating-and-air conditioning business to work fulltime with his wife.

"What seemed like a great idea to me didn't click with others, who thought there were plenty of churches to handle all the weddings," she said.

In 2007, the great idea turned into reality. Fountains Ballroom opened on a 10-acre site nestled in the Loess Hills between Council Bluffs and Glenwood.

The privacy of the surrounding hills,

the closeness to nature, and the splendor of the ballroom made it very attractive to engaged couples. A successful first year at the Fountains was going to be followed by even bigger growth in 2008 until disaster: an electrical fire that destroyed the ballroom.

"It was burning for five hours with us in it," Erin said. "It was an electrical fire and channeled through the walls until it finally burned through with 25-foot flames." They knew they'd rebuild, however, and many couples actually changed the dates of their weddings to wait for the new building to be completed.

The fire presented an opportunity to make some improvements to the 24,000-square-foot facility that were already necessary, such as going from a single to a double

grand stairway and increasing from one storage room to seven. "After the fire, we reevaluated our situation and worked with First National Bank to come up with a course of action," Erin said. "Phil Moyer and Doug Meggison believed in us from the get-go and helped us put together a plan quickly to help us meet all of our deadlines."

Government red tape slowed the start of the rebuilding but the Williamses were ready for it, having storage containers of construction materials and supplies

already at the site. "From the construction's approval to the building's opening, it was only 11 weeks," Erin said. "We actually had people living on the site waiting to start construction."

"We can move the wedding indoors with an hour's notice."

They've already booked 70 weddings this year (that's including being three months off per year) and are filling the 2013 calendar with more couples wanting their special day under an open sky and surrounded by cherry blossoms (for May weddings).

"We're close to Omaha, but being in a valley for this makes it much more private, much closer to nature," Erin said. "We actually had someone ask us to turn off the frogs – they thought we were adding the sound effects."

Marty said people do marry in city parks, but there's no controlling the environment or compensating for a change in the weather. "We can move the wedding indoors with an hour's notice," he said. "It takes a lot of the stress away from the bride."

The Williamses are expanding in Omaha, too, starting the Memrical Design Studio in Rockbrook to set up events,

and Erin Court north of 120th and Maple. That long-time ballroom is nearly 30 years old and has never had a total update in that time. That's not the case now: Erin and Marty have completely redone the interior and landscaped the grounds to create a little pocket of nature within an urban setting.

The name Erin Court has been around so long and is so well known that the couple have no plans to change it, even though Erin knows she'll always be asked if it's named after her. "The name is pretty embarrassing to me," she said, "but it would actually be easier to change my name at this point."

Erin & Marty Williams

In the Fountains Ballroom



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