



'It's the best place in the world to live'

Andy Sneddon
Imagine contributor

Alanson High School sweethearts create a life they love in their native Emmet County

In one sense, Stephanie and Eric Baldwin are a case study in the modern American family. In another, they're as old school as black-and-white TV.

The Harbor Springs couple met in elementary school in Alanson, began dating before either could legally drive a car, and celebrated 18 years of marriage in May 2014. Both in their early 40s, the Baldwins have known one another for some three decades. Theirs is a relationship marked by loyalty and longevity, with its strong foundation

in the days of mullets and mousse, parachute pants, Flashdance and Miami Vice. "Oh gosh, four homecomings and three proms," Stephanie says when recalling their early days.

And as much as their experiences have been shaped by living in Emmet County, they have greatly impacted their community in return.

Both are Emmet County natives; Stephanie from Alanson, Eric from Oden. They graduated from Alanson High School, a year apart, in the late 1980s. Stephanie went on to Michigan

State University before transferring to, and graduating from, Lawrence Tech with a degree in architecture. Eric earned a degree in sociology from Central Michigan.

They were married back in their hometown, at the Church of the Nazarene, in 1996.

Their courtship was straight out of traditional wholesome middle America, and their life after has been an example of moving forward professionally and giving back with their time and passions.



Stephanie spent some 17 years at Town and Country Cedar Homes in Boyne Falls, starting as a designer and working her way up to president. She struck out on her own in 2011 as the owner/operator of Edgewater Design Group, an architectural design and engineering services firm in downtown Petoskey.

A class in building construction management at Michigan State, Stephanie says, piqued her interest in the field. Always willing to embrace a challenge, Stephanie plunged into the male-dominated world of architecture and the construction business.

"Did I dream of running my own business?" asks Stephanie. "Not really. But I guess I realized over time that it really can be done, that it's not as difficult as I might have thought. I learned a lot from Town and Country to make that transition possible."

Stephanie's visibility in the community has risen along with her career, and she counts membership in several civic organizations and business-leadership groups among a burgeoning list of commitments, beginning with her family and the business. She served for seven years on the Board of Education of Alanson Public Schools, including a stint as its presi-

dent. She has also served for a number of years on the Northern Lakes Economic Alliance board, an organization promoting business investment and success in Emmet, Charlevoix, Antrim and Cheboygan counties.

"You don't feel like there's enough time in the day sometimes," Stephanie says. "But that's the challenge of being a new business. You don't have a lot of spare time. I'm not able to enjoy Emmet County as much as I'd like to. But we still get the opportunity. We love going out on Crooked Lake, we love boating. If you can get one day a week to unwind, that's a special treat."

Both Stephanie and Eric have given back exponentially to the school system that helped to mold them into the adults they are today. Eric spent 12 years coaching high school boys' basketball and continues to fill coaching roles in Little League baseball, Pop Warner football and travel basketball. Their son, Gus, is a sixth-grader at Petoskey Middle School.

"We like the area, we both grew up here, went to school here and had good experiences," says Eric, whose soft-spoken nature belies a man who can command a room with his quick wit and affability. "It's a great place to raise a family and run a business. We had opportunities growing

[INVITING]

Both Stephanie and Eric have given back exponentially to the school system that helped to mold them into the adults they are today.

up in a beautiful area that offered so much to us and with Gus we encourage him to participate in everything. We're hopeful he will enjoy similar experiences. I think that's important."

Eric relinquished his high school coaching duties with the opening of Edgewater Design Group. A new business is like a baby, the couple said; it requires near constant attention and care. It wasn't easy for Eric to leave the program after devoting much of his adult life to it, particularly in the same gym and the same school where he himself had grown up.

But in the end, it was a happy tradeoff for Eric, a Senior Marketing Specialist at McLaren Northern Michigan (formerly Northern Michigan Regional Hospital), one of the region's largest employers. It freed up his time to spend with Gus, a sturdily built 12-year-old who has yet to meet a sport he doesn't love.

"It's such a beneficial thing to be able to spend as much quality time with him in the activities that he's involved in," Eric says. "We get to spend a lot more time together as a family."

The Baldwins spend much of that time in their beautiful spacious home – designed by Stephanie, of course – overlooking the 18th tee at Chestnut Valley Golf Club. It's a blend of log home and Northern Michigan cottage, and it has a warm, comfortable, welcoming vibe.

It's been their home for 12 years, and it sits just a stone's throw from where they both grew up. "In our area, there's so much available to us," Stephanie says. "Every season, there's something to do. We're just very, very fortunate."

"It's just the best place in the world to live," Eric adds. ■