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EDMONTON JOURNAL

ESTABLISHED 1903

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MONDAY, JULY 7, 2014

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MONDAY, JULY 7, 2014

Sixty years of love and determination

ELIZABETH WITHEY
Edmonton Journal

Loving one another was the easy part.

What proved arduous for Ardis and Krishan Kamra was having that love accepted in Edmonton in the early 1950s, when many believed brown skin and white skin shouldn't mix.

The Kamras are celebrating 60 years of marriage this year atop Mount Charles Stewart, a peak in the Rockies just north of Canmore that's named in honour of Ardis's late grandfather, who was the last Liberal premier of Alberta. They have enjoyed a long, strong relationship, though vividly recall the early years of their relationship, when naysayers tried to keep the interracial lovebirds apart.

"Going to the top of the mountain is symbolic," says Krishan, 86. "Here we are still together 60 years on in a marriage that was not totally



marriage that was not totally accepted by everyone."

Ardis grew up in a Christian household in Camrose, while Krishan, a Sikh, left his home province of Punjab, India, in 1948 after the tumultuous partition of India and Pakistan the year before.

"I really never thought that I was different except when I looked in the mirror, but in a sea of whites, I stood out," Krishan recalled in an interview with the Edmonton Journal in 2004, as the couple celebrated their golden wedding anniversary.

Not in his wife's eyes.

"There are no white people and no black people in the world," says Ardis, 84. "We're all shades of brown on a great long spectrum and people don't necessarily recognize that."

The couple met at the University of Alberta's first library in 1951. Ardis was a student library assistant overseeing the arrival of books at a new building that would open as the Rutherford Library the following year. Krishan, a student hired to haul in crates of books, found himself smitten by Ardis's beautiful smile. "I couldn't bring the crates of books back to her fast enough," Krishan recalls. "I'm sure



Jason Franson/Edmonton Journal

Krishan and Ardis Kamra are celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary with a helicopter trip to the top of a mountain named after Ardis's grandfather, a former Alberta Premier. The couple's union was one of the first interracial marriages in Alberta and initially they faced much criticism for their choice.

I was the hardest-working book man."

Ardis was equally intrigued. The two met for cantaloupe with ice cream at the university tuck shop that night and were soon an item on campus, much to the displeasure of some. Among them was the U of A's dean of women, who in 1952 summoned Ardis and told her she'd had a complaint about the couple holding hands in public. She said, "You know, the university is responsible for you, Ardis, and you should cool it." And the university provost told Krishan he had "no business holding hands with a white girl." An angry Krishan told the provost he wasn't the chief of police and that it wasn't an academic matter. "Get off your high horse," the provost retorted.

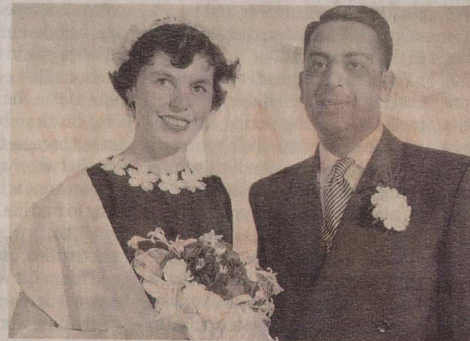
Ardis's family also opposed the relationship, though things settled down once

"Going to the top of the mountain is symbolic."

KRISHAN, 86

it was evident the wedding would go ahead. On May 8, 1954, Ardis and Krishan were married at Saint Stephen's College Chapel in Edmonton. Ardis's father said he'd give the marriage less than three years.

"My parents believed they should oppose the marriage up to the point it happened but then they should support it," says Ardis. "My mother never really totally got over it exactly. Sometimes she'd say things when she had dementia that made me wonder. But I never resented them. I always knew that what I was doing was right for me and



SUPPLIED

Ardis and Krishan Kamra on their wedding day in 1954.

if others resented it, it wasn't my problem."

That's all water under the High Level Bridge now for the Edmonton couple, who have two children.

"Those who did not take so well to Ardis and I getting married, including Ardis's two sisters, now they are just so much a part of our family as everyone

else," says Krishan. "The same goes with all our cousins and relatives — they are totally accepting now. I have no doubt at all that I'm just as much part of the family as they are."

On July 12, a helicopter will take the Kamras and their immediate family up the mountain for a celebration that includes champagne

and cupcakes, with extra for hikers who happen by.

"We used to climb mountains but we're kind of past that now," says Ardis, laughing.

Reflecting on the last 60 years, the couple says they're delighted at how inclusive their home country has become. "There's been a huge shift in Canada, an unimaginable change. Canadian society is so multicultural, multi-faced, multi-colored," says Krishan.

Adds Ardis: "My daughter's 50 and her friends don't understand why we had a problem in the first place."

What is the couple's secret to a happy marriage? Love, of course, and determination.

"You could say we had more to prove," Ardis says. "Having faced all that opposition, we weren't going to let anyone know they were right." ewithey@edmontonjournal.com