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Spring 2017, Making It Work: An International Love Story at UNH

Allison Riley

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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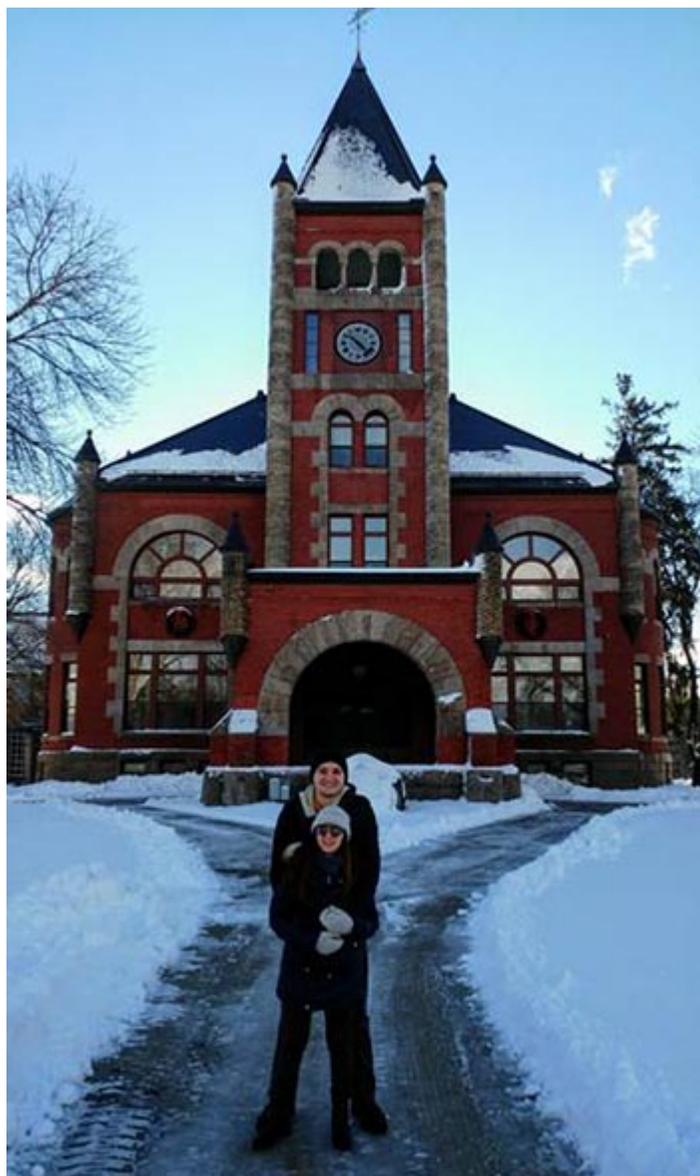
Making It Work: An International Love Story at UNH

Monday, March 13, 2017

When Jovana Milosavljevic Ardeljan and Milan Ardeljan began dating in 2012, they had no idea that their relationship would span continents and years living apart from one another. The two students, who are fixtures in the international community at UNH, are a case of missed connections making it work. Jovana, who goes by Yoka, met Milan in Serbia through mutual friends. However, it was their passion for education that brought them to New Hampshire. After dating for only a year, Milan would leave Yoka in their home country in January 2013, to begin his Ph.D. studies at the University of New Hampshire.

While long distance relationships are always challenging, Yoka and Milan were committed to making it work. Several months after Milan left Serbia, she traveled to UNH to visit him. “I think I’m the only tourist who came to America and studied my whole time,” she jokes. Although she came to visit her boyfriend, Yoka devoted much of her three-month visit to auditing a class and studying for her GRE in the Dimond Library, experiences that solidified her love for the university. Despite spending most of their days engaged in their individual academic pursuits, Yoka and Milan are a lesson in quality time – each day they set aside an hour to have lunch together at Holloway Commons, where they sit by the windows and catch up on the day’s events.

Eventually, though, summer ended and Yoka had to travel back to Serbia in October of 2013. Once there, she knew that her heart was still in New Hampshire, so she continued studying for the GRE and TOEFL tests, and applied to the Master’s program in English Language and Literature at UNH. Milan returned to Serbia for winter break at the end of the 2013 fall semester. After proposing marriage to her in January, he was back on a plane the very next day to return to New Hampshire. Yoka remained in Serbia where she awaited news of her acceptance to UNH. It arrived in the early



Yoka and Milan outside Thompson Hall, UNH

spring. She had been offered a full assistantship to study at UNH. Naturally, she and Milan were delighted. Their delight, however, was short-lived.

The day after Yoka received her acceptance, Milan received news that he had been accepted to do research at the National Laboratory in Los Alamos, New Mexico for the following year. It was an opportunity that both Yoka and Milan agreed was too important to pass up. By the time she arrived at UNH in September 2014 to begin her program, Milan was already engaged in his research in New Mexico, and Yoka settled into life in New Hampshire alone.

Luckily for Yoka, UNH already felt like home: “I knew what to expect, and I loved it,” she recalls. “For me, it was way easier. I had already made some friends, and I’d been to classes, so I wasn’t adjusting to everything at once. It was much harder for Milan.” Their compassion and respect for each other is one of the fundamental

principles of their relationship, and it helps to explain how they’ve made so many years of long-distance struggles seem easy. “We bring all decisions together, and I love that,” she continues. “We can share what we think and feel about things, but we respect what is best for both of us, not just one of us.” With her fiancé living half a continent away, Yoka began her life at UNH.

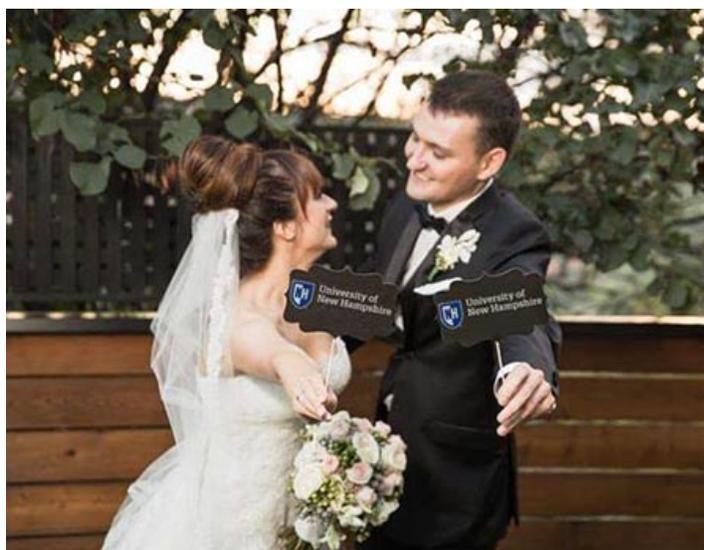
It helps that they’re both workaholics. While Milan was busy dedicating himself to his research, Yoka was becoming a fixture at UNH. If there’s an opportunity to engage with the university community and give back, Yoka is probably involved. She sits on the Graduate Student Senate, the Faculty Senate, the Alumni Board, and she created and runs a linguistics group as well as a writing group for

graduate students. Despite her all-consuming academic and professional commitments, Yoka always prioritizes her relationship with Milan. “Finding those quick moments to send a text, or Skype, really helps,” she notes.

In May 2015, Milan’s research came to an end in New Mexico, and he returned to UNH. This was the first time Yoka and Milan had ever had the opportunity to live together, and they actively made their home in Forest Park. “Since I live on campus, I really feel like UNH is my home,” Yoka explains. “We are starting our family, our life together, and we are in the same school. I already feel like our [future] kids are going to be Wildcats.” This sense of school spirit is uncommon in Serbia, Yoka clarifies. With the exception of some athletes, students do not form an attachment to their university.

One of the reasons Yoka feels so much pride in being a Wildcat is that UNH has given her a home and a sense of community when she was alone in a foreign country. This is something that many, if not all, international students struggle with at one point or another. The friends she has made at UNH have become a surrogate family for her. “Being this far away really made me think about who I am and what I consider family,” she explains. “My idea and definition is so much more expanded now. I really feel that this place, and the friends, colleagues, and professors I’ve met at UNH, have made it my home.”

When Yoka and Milan married in August 2016, they held their wedding in their home country of Serbia. Despite being an ocean away from New Hampshire, many of the faces smiling back at them on their special day were familiar faces from UNH. “We had eight people from UNH at our wedding. Some of them had never heard of Serbia, and some had heard of it but didn’t know what to expect,” Yoka recalls. “There was this moment when we walked out onto the terrace and I saw them all together, and I couldn’t believe it. It was the most beautiful feeling ever.”



Yoka and Milan showing love for UNH on their wedding day in Serbia

Part of UNH’s mission as a university is to internationalize the educational experience, and students like Milan and Yoka are making that happen. They are not only students at UNH, but active community members who are adopting a new culture while sharing their own – look no farther than Yoka’s Thanksgiving turkey recipe, which she has added her own spin to with the addition of Serbian paprika. The friendships they have formed, and will continue to form, during their time in New Hampshire will leave a lasting impression on everyone they’ve met.

When asked what advice they have for international students coming to UNH, or students studying abroad in other countries, Yoka is emphatic: “Think about the bigger picture, no matter how difficult it is. Don’t always think of the moment. Ask what is the point of it all? What is it that you’re making this sacrifice for?” And although she and Milan spent years apart, waiting for each other to come or return to UNH, they remain undaunted. Laughing, Yoka says, “I told him, if you go to the moon, I’m going to come to the moon.”

WRITTEN BY

Allison Riley | Center for International Education and Global Engagement | allison.riley@unh.edu
(<mailto:%20allison.riley@unh.edu>)

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