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VOWS

A Music Festival Wedding with Two Grooms as the Main Event

Jamon Deaver and Joey Lawton created a weekend-long celebration for their wedding in the wilds outside of Berea, Ky.



Joey Lawton, left, and Jamon Deaver exchanged vows June 20 at their wedding festival in Berea, Ky. The Rev. Kent Gilbert, ordained in the United Church of Christ, performed the ceremony. Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times

By Jenny Block

Aug. 13, 2021 Updated 10:09 a.m. ET

The wedding of Jamon Deaver and Joey Lawton can best be described as a camping trip, music festival and immersive art show all rolled into one long weekend in the wilds outside of Berea, Ky. Big city fun meets country living; summer camp mixed with Bonnaroo and Coachella; one epic wedding weekend filled with love and wonderment, the invitation promised.

The wedding was even given a name: Wonder Woods.

“For two men who grew up in small towns in conservative states and never thought they’d have the chance to experience the same love and respect as those around them, this is literally a dream come true,” said Mr. Lawton, 37, a design principal at Media-Objectives, an experiential design studio he founded at the age of 26.

Mr. Lawton, raised in Wisconsin Dells, Wis., has a degree in architecture and urban planning from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Mr. Deaver, 35, born and raised in Berea, graduated from Hanover College with a communication degree and is an associate creative director of Golin, a public relations firm based in Chicago.

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The couple had spent the last 10-plus years in Chicago, where they met. But in November 2020, amid the [coronavirus pandemic](#) and working remotely, they relocated to Berea, “to invest in the community, renovate an old home, and prepare for Wonder Woods, our wedding festival extravaganza,” Mr. Lawton said.



About 230 guests were there for the weekend festivities, from family to college friends to work colleagues to Berea locals. Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times

The two met the old-fashioned way — in a bar. They were attending a birthday celebration at J Bar in the James Hotel in Chicago in November 2010. They were introduced by friends, later exchanged phone numbers, and met for lunch a few weeks later. They’ve been

together ever since.

Mr. Deaver proposed to Mr. Lawton in 2016 on the anniversary of their first official date, Dec. 16. As Mr. Lawton explained, “In a gay relationship, people always ask, ‘Who proposes?’ We made a point to clarify that early in our relationship, with Jamon taking ownership of the decision. He’s such a Leo.”

“Our engagement has been longer than originally thought for several reasons,” Mr. Lawton continued. “First, why the rush? Second, nothing we immediately started planning felt right and we wanted everything we did for the wedding to give us those warm and fuzzy feelings. Third, Covid.”

The proposal took place on the roof of Soho House Chicago, where Mr. Deaver is a member. “When we returned from dinner, I told Joey we should grab a drink upstairs,” Mr. Deaver said. “When the elevator opened, the space was empty except for a bottle of champagne, a few hundred candles, and a beautiful snowy skyline view. It took a moment for Joey to understand what was happening. He assumed we were trespassing on someone’s event.”

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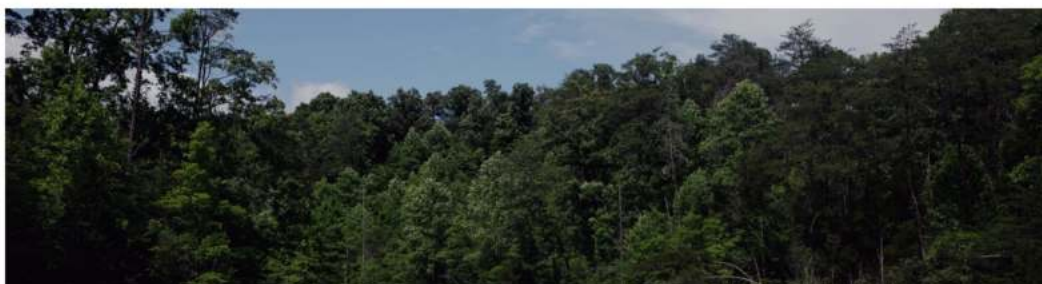
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But once Mr. Deaver presented the ring, a simple sterling band made by a Berea jeweler and friend of the Deaver family, Bobby Craig Thompson, Mr. Lawton knew it was all for him. After the proposal, Mr. Deaver and Mr. Lawton were escorted down a private back entrance to a waiting group of friends.

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Wonder Woods was held on a 40-acre property owned by Mr. Deaver's mother, Teresa Cole, and his brother and sister-in-law, Strider Deaver and Laura Poulette, as well as part a neighbor's adjoining land. “The main campground, overnight parking, and portion of the volleyball field was located on our neighbor's property, Mike and Lorna Deane, who graciously allowed us to use their land for the weekend's event,” Mr. Deaver said.





Guests relaxed on a man-made lake filled with oversize novelty floats. Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times



Wylie Caudill, a mural artist based in Kentucky, painted on a vintage BMW. Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times

It was Mr. Deaver who first brought up the idea of a music festival/wedding hybrid in the woods of Kentucky. “It was the place we first said I love you under the stars,” he said.

The first major hurdle was getting Mr. Deaver’s family onboard. “We literally pitched the wedding to the family,” Mr. Deaver said. They created a formal presentation, “complete with a Power Point deck of the vision, the vibe, the story, the narrative,” Mr. Lawton added.

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Mr. Deaver's family didn't hesitate. "They were 100 percent in from the first second," he said. "My mom was so excited that we wanted to do this on the property."

When they told friends about their plan, they were all in, too, despite camping being outside most of their comfort zones. "Everyone was excited but no one wanted to camp," Mr. Deaver said. "People told us, 'We'll do it because you're asking us to.'"

The original wedding date was Labor Day weekend 2020. The pandemic made sure that couldn't happen. Instead, Wonder Woods took place in 2021, from June 19- 21, with the wedding ceremony on June 20, the night of the summer solstice.

The couple, along with family and friends, built a stage, D.J. booth, bar and an outdoor shower pavilion. Porta-potties were set up. Signage, maps and information cards were created. Guests crafted temporary tattoos. There were even custom welcome bags with Wonder Woods swag and festival essentials, including a T-shirt featuring the artists who performed, a custom Wonder Woods bandanna, a map of the festival grounds, ear plugs, sleep masks, homemade insect repellent, and packets of Liquid I.V. electrolyte drink mix.



The wedding festival, named Wonder Woods, included numerous activities for guests. Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times

Gates opened on Saturday at noon. Guests spent the day swimming in Cedar Moon Lake, a nearly two-acre lake added to the property by the Deaver family, filled with oversize novelty floats. They explored the extensive grounds, hula hooped on the lawn, and played volleyball. Jenga Giant, corn hole, and Frisbee games were available. That night everyone enjoyed dinner and the official kickoff with performances by the drag queens Izzie Contagious and Nita Bevv, the folk band Zoe Speaks, and the DJ Matt Suave.



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Food and drink was readily available throughout the weekend, from purveyors like the Epic Cure food truck, the Rooster's Whistle coffee cart, the Native Bagel Company (the owner Katie Startzman, is the twin sister of Mr. Deaver's sister-in-law), and the Kitchen at Noland Creek Farm.

About 230 guests were in attendance, from family to college friends to work colleagues to Berea locals, and about 125 of them camped on the festival grounds for two nights in the 75 tents that were set up. Two of the couple's friends drove out and stayed in their camper vans (The majority of the guests at the outdoor event were vaccinated and guests wore masks if they preferred).

And none of it would have been possible without their families and their event crew, Ali Blair and team, the couple agreed.

Some friends wore matching solar system-patterned rompers and flower crowns and braided one another's hair. People who had never met before became fast friends, laughing and crying and playing and dancing together all weekend long.

"There was a sense of everybody cares and everybody gets it, and everybody wants these two to live the longest and happiest life they possibly could," said Betty Who, a singer who also performed at Wonder Woods.

On Sunday, the day of the wedding ceremony, guests listened to performances by Ellie Grace, a singer and songwriter, and Kelley Jakle and Jeff Hortillosa, the musical duo of singer/songwriters known as Robin Alice. (They were also in the "Pitch Perfect" movies.) Throughout the day, Wylie Caudill, a mural artist based in Kentucky, live painted on a vintage BMW with a unicorn and the Wonder Woods logo.

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The couple, who recently relocated to Kentucky, met in 2010 at a birthday celebration in Chicago. Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times

There was also the opportunity to practice lakeside yoga; take a bootcamp class; craft beaded energy bracelets and mini terrariums with creative coach and intuitive energy guide Amethyst Forest; create iron hooks with a blacksmith and longtime Deaver family friend, Bob Montgomery; and even try a pottery wheel with Mr. Deaver's mother, a ceramics artist.

Late in the afternoon, the Season 14 "American Idol" finalist, Rayvon Owen, performed, dramatically entering from the audience and commanding the stage in an electric yellow jacket. Then the wedding ceremony began, which included performances by Mr. Deaver's sister, Virginia Deaver, who sang an acoustic version of "Silk City" and Dua Lipa's "Electricity," as well as Mr. Owen and Ms. Jakle, who performed a cover of "Latch" by Disclosure featuring Sam Smith.

The Rev. Kent Gilbert, ordained in the United Church of Christ, performed the ceremony. He currently serves at the Union Church in Berea. "It is the first abolitionist and interdenominational church established in a slaveholding county in Kentucky," he said.

Following the ceremony, everyone encircled the couple and joined hands. Guests then enjoyed dinner on the lawn that included Asian pork mini tacos and samosas from the Kitchen at Noland Creek Farm and coconut rice balls with jerk chicken or shrimp and grilled watermelon salad from the Epic Cure food truck. A concert by the Australian pop singer Betty Who had everyone dancing and singing.

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"There was something that felt really special about how much everybody wanted to rally around these people," the singer said. "I was like, 'I don't even know these people and I'm sobbing.' I felt really moved."

After the show, Megan Taylor, a D.J., kept everyone on the dance floor until late into the night despite the heat and the hour. Early in the set, the grooms even jumped onstage for a spontaneous first dance to Silk City and Dua Lipa's "Electricity," during which guests sang and danced along.

"Jamon and Joey really brought forward the idea of what love can be — I think we were all changed," Ms. Taylor said. "The wedding was an expression of — when we really show up with love — what's possible in our lives."

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A Million Dreams Mr. Deaver's only brother, Strider Deaver, and Mr. Lawton's brother, Chris Lawton, earnestly read the lyrics of "A Million Dreams" from the movie "The Greatest Showman," as part of the wedding ceremony. When the singer Betty Who performed later that night, she gave an impromptu performance of the song.

Smashing Stereotypes The couple hoped that the wedding wouldn't be just about their hearts, but also about changing the hearts and minds of others. "I wanted people to walk away with a different opinion of Kentucky," Mr. Deaver said. "Over the years I've learned how much misinformation is out there. And how places like Kentucky are stuck because of people's attitudes."

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The Wonder Woods Effect Wonder Woods certainly delivered on the invitation's promise, said Kyle Hadley, whose alter ego is drag queen Nita Bevvv. "Everyone seemed so taken by the Wonder Woods effect. A weekend that was so intensely packed with love and a sense of community that I left on a 'high.' When friends asked, 'How was the wedding?' I would throw my hands up and shake my head with a giant smile and just say, 'Insane.' A drag queen being at a loss for words says a lot," Mr. Hadley said.

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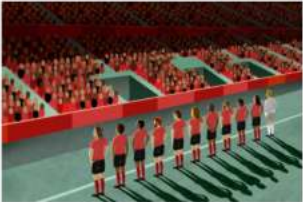


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