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Local touches for Giffords' vows

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When U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords exchanges wedding vows Saturday night with astronaut Mark E. Kelly, it will be under a traditional Jewish chuppah, a canopy meant to symbolize the new home the bride and groom will build together.

For this particular bride and groom, however, "home" will be defined more broadly than for most newlyweds. It has to be, when the groom spends many of his working hours in a flight simulator in Houston and the bride spends much of hers in the U.S. House of Representatives.

"It's true it is not really a traditional wedding situation," said Giffords, who represents Arizona's 8th Congressional District, in a phone interview from Washington. "But neither of us have traditional lives."

That might qualify as the understatement of the year.

For instance, while most brides spend the weekend before their wedding making final arrangements for the ceremony, Giffords spent last weekend in Iraq, getting updates on the U.S. troop surge and meeting Iraqi soldiers.

Meanwhile, Kelly - a pilot on the space shuttles Endeavour and Discovery - was continuing his training in Houston as commander of the crew of STS-124, the shuttle mission to the International Space Station planned for April 2008.

It is just part and parcel of their three-year relationship, a romance that has been built over long distances and many frequent-flyer miles.

Giffords spends most weekends visiting her southern Arizona district and weekdays in D.C. Kelly works in Houston with occasional trips to Florida for NASA. They see each other "at least every other weekend," said Kelly, 43.

Luckily, they had a wedding planner, said Giffords, 37.

"It was really helpful to have someone shepherd us through the process," she said.

As might be expected when a politician marries an astronaut, the guest list is a little more eclectic than that of other southern Arizona weddings.

The wedding party includes a NASA scientist, commercial pilot, astronauts, state Rep. Linda Lopez, D-Tucson, and former Democrat state Sen. Elaine Richardson.

Robert B. Reich, former secretary of labor in the Clinton administration, will deliver one of the blessings

during the ceremony.

"We expect between 300 and 350 guests, including some from England, Israel, Mexico and China," said wedding planner Suzy Gershman.

In keeping with their wish for an eco-friendly, local-focus wedding, Kelly and Giffords rented property on a working organic farm in southern Arizona for their ceremony.

The food - Gershman described it as "American meets Mexican" - is from local vendors, and some of the reception tableware is made from sugar cane fiber that biodegrades in 30 to 90 days.

In addition, Giffords is wearing a borrowed wedding dress and the wedding favors will be jars of honey from the Santa Cruz River Valley.

Neither Giffords nor Kelly is concerned about the long-distance aspect of their marriage.

"There's numerous couples in the astronaut office that have long-distance relationships," said Giffords, who also is becoming stepmother to Kelly's daughters, Claire, 10, and Claudia, 12, who live in Houston.

"I can't imagine a lot is going to change in our married life," she said. "This is what we've always known. I imagine it would be different if you had started in the same ZIP code."

Besides, said Kelly, the Tucson-Houston-Florida-D.C. merry-go-round isn't permanent.

"We will not live apart forever," the astronaut predicted. "At some point - probably within the next six or seven years, I'll be living in D.C. or Tucson."

The couple will not take a honeymoon for at least a year, Giffords said, "because he's in training until April and I'm facing a tough re-election year."

When they do, Kelly has expressed interest in a tour of the Orient, and Giffords, a motorcycle enthusiast, said she'd like to do a motorcycle tour.

Until then, it will be seeing each other "as much as we can with our jobs," Giffords said.

"People say you will know when you meet the right person, and you don't think it will happen to you, but it did," Giffords said. "And when you know you've finally found that person, of all the other people that you've ever met, you realize some of the little things - like distance - are just details."

Go to www.tucsoncitizen.com Sunday to see photos of the wedding of U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and astronaut Mark E. Kelly.

Caption: Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, (center) shown in January with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi performing a ceremonial swearing-in at the Capitol in Washington, will wed astronaut Mark Kelly (right) on Saturday.

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