Ask them to tell you about their wedding and they blurt out two words, in unison – “We eloped!” It’s like a stand-up routine, comfortable material they’ve been honing for a long time, a story they never get tired of telling. Then they look at each other and smile sheepishly, remembering how things were, almost 35 years ago.

It was a balmy August evening in 1974, soft pastel shadows overspreading the CCSU campus, when Charles “C. J.” Jones ’69, MS ’72, a black man from Bayside, Queens, and Linda Coggshall ’70, MS ’80, 6th Yr ’86, a white woman who grew up in Hartford, entered the courtyard at Central. Both had come to Central for an education, but they had found so much more.

Attended only by close friends Howie Dickenman ’70, MS ’72, a black man from Bayside, Queens, and Linda Coggshall ’70, MS ’80, 6th Yr ’86, a white woman who grew up in Hartford, entered the courtyard at Central. Both had come to Central for an education, but they had found so much more.

Photographer Jim Meyers recorded the little ceremony for posterity. There wasn’t much to record – just two folks, accompanied by their friends, tying the knot. That they were also committing an act of defiance against conventions of the time (only seven years had passed since the U. S. Supreme Court had ruled anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional) is not apparent in Meyers’ photos and may be hard to imagine for many born in the ensuing three and a half decades.

But C. J. and Linda were aware of the significance of what they were doing. “We hadn’t even told our families,” Linda confesses. “We weren’t sure what kind of reaction we were going to get.” So, to forestall having to break the news for a little while longer, they took advantage of an Alumni Association trip to Hawaii.

A couple of things are apparent in Meyers’ photos. One is their love for each other, an abiding affection that has sustained them for more than four decades now. And the other is the setting they chose, at the heart of the University that brought them together, and to which they have remained as committed as they have to each other.

The Good Life

C. J. was still an undergraduate, a rangy kid who was lighting up the basketball court, when he and Linda met in 1966. He was hosting a party at his New Britain apartment and she came by to help him get the place ready. She was supposed to have a date for the party, a friend of C. J.’s who was scheduled to arrive later. But wires got crossed, the friend didn’t arrive, and eight years later C. J. and Linda were married.

By that time he was directing the University’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), a job he had taken the summer after he graduated, and she had just wrapped up her fourth year as a teacher in South Windsor’s public schools. When they returned from Hawaii she joined the New Britain public schools, where she remained – in many different teaching and administrative roles – for the next 30 years.

Together they invested themselves in the fabric of Central. C. J. put his distinctive stamp on the EOP for 25 years, and for 19 of those years he also coached Central basketball, first as assistant coach and then, starting in 1987, as head coach. In 1995, he was named athletic director.

Linda, who helped plan EOP trips, recreational events and fund-raising, soon earned the nickname “Mother of the Team.” On a lot in Terryville they built a home in 1976. They settled in and built a good life for themselves, enriched by the many young lives they touched.

Regular contributors to the CCSU scholarship fund, they created their own scholarships in the 1990s, with funds earmarked for the EOP and athletics and New Britain students embarking upon careers in teaching.

Last year, in an act of exceptional generosity, they unified those programs by bequeathing their entire estate to the University. “Central gave us what we’ve enjoyed,” says C. J. “We wouldn’t have met if we hadn’t come here. We owe a lot to the University.”