

## EVERLASTING LOVE

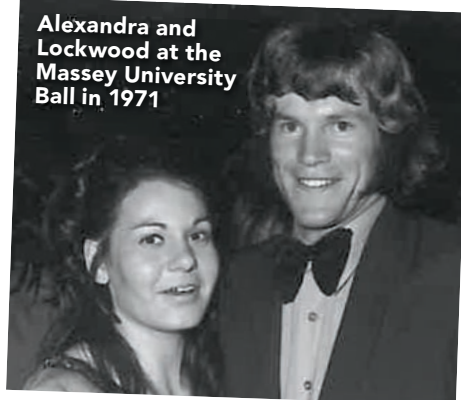


**It's been a long road to romance but MP Lockwood Smith has finally popped the question to the woman he loves**

**W**hen National MP Lockwood Smith handed his long-time partner Alexandra Lang her final Christmas present, she had no idea what was in the chunky crimson box.

Surrounded by her four children, two sons-in-law and grandson in the couple's newly built Northland farmhouse, she opened the card and read aloud: "Dearest Alexandra, more than 30 years ago, I made the biggest mistake of my life in not asking you to marry me. I was blessed when you came back into my life, bringing so much love and happiness. Today, in the presence of your family, I would be so honoured if you would accept my humble request for your hand in marriage. With everlasting love, Lockwood."

As Alexandra (57) twiggled that this was her longed-for proposal, her jaw dropped



Alexandra and Lockwood at the Massey University Ball in 1971

# THE SPEAKER IS SPOKEN FOR!



The couple will finally get their happy ending at Parliament on 4 July



Alexandra's engagement band (bottom) was designed to match her favourite ring

and she looked up in astonishment at a gently smiling Lockwood (60). Tears welled in both sets of eyes as she opened the camouflaged box-inside-a-box to reveal an 18-carat white-gold ring inlaid with 34 square-cut diamonds.

As she slipped it on, her family whooped and clapped. The new Speaker of the House topped up champagne flutes with a specially saved bottle of Bollinger as Alexandra's son John (23) observed with a grin, "Mum, you haven't even said yes yet."

"Haven't I?" she murmured. "Oh, yes! I dreamed of this moment 35 years ago."

Engagement is the latest chapter in a love story spanning almost 40 years. Back in 1970, 21-year-old Lockwood was flatting in Palmerston North when he was introduced to Alexandra (then 18).

A pianist, Alexandra offered to accompany baritone Lockwood at his singing lessons, concerts and competitions. She recalls, "I fell in love long before he did – within months of meeting him – but I didn't ever tell anyone." Including the man in question.

But after three years of friendship, the feeling became mutual and Lockwood declared his feelings.

Just two months into the relationship, however, Lockwood moved to Adelaide to start his PhD, leaving Alexandra in Christchurch at teachers' college. They attempted a long-distance relationship but, two years on, Lockwood fell for an Australian girl who would be his on-off partner for 20 years.

"Alexandra was very dignified but it was awful," says Lockwood, his voice cracking. Heartbroken, Alexandra didn't shed a tear at the time. "But afterwards I cried for months," she confesses.

Returning to Wanganui, Alexandra

married a colleague and devoted herself to teaching, bringing up four children and toiling on their small farm. Although she often saw her ex on TV – first as a game-show host, then a politician – she didn't see him in person until he turned up out of the blue to speak at her school as Minister of Education in the early 1990s.

## 'I dreamed of this moment 35 years ago'

She recalls, "I went up to him and asked, 'Do you remember me?' He threw his arms around me, picked me off the ground and swung me around in front of reporters and police. I got such a shock!"

Five years later, Alexandra, after leaving her unhappy marriage, decided to "exorcise the men who'd been in my life, out of my life. I wanted to sever those threads and move on." But on phoning Lockwood, she realised this was one thread she didn't want cut. "The soul connection was still there," she says simply.

Lockwood invited Alexandra to his 50th birthday party and pointedly seated her on his right-hand side. She smiles, "Sometimes his actions say as much as his words."

Though they lived in different parts of the country – he in Wellington and Ruawai,

she in Wanganui – they became an item for the second time, spending almost every weekend together for eight years. Lockwood says, "Alexandra made us possible. She put in the miles, literally."

Finally, when Alexandra's son left school, she moved first to Auckland, then to Lockwood's farm. In late 2008, with the National party back on the government benches and after a decade with Alexandra, Lockwood decided Christmas was his chance to propose.

But first he needed a ring. Not knowing exactly where to start, he enlisted the help of a close friend, businesswoman Diane Foreman. Jokes Lockwood, "After I mentioned it to Diane, the die was cast!"

The week before Christmas, he rushed to meet a sworn-to-secrecy jeweller at Diane's home. Grins Diane, "Imagine if a gossip columnist saw us buying an engagement ring together!" With no luck searching the house for one of Alexandra's rings, Lockwood had to try on rings himself to guess her finger size.

To combat nerves and ensure he expressed exactly the right words, Lockwood wrote down his proposal. And, come Christmas Day, Alexandra thought it was "absolutely perfect". She says, "He acknowledged the past, my family and the joy of our relationship. I was far too excited to cook Christmas dinner!"

A month later, with nuptials planned for 4 July at Parliament, the bride-to-be's eyes sparkle as brightly as her new diamonds, especially when she says the word "fiancé". Alexandra says, "I'll enjoy even more calling him my husband, and hearing him call me his wife. It's taken us 35 years, but we've got there."

**Sarah Lang**