

Groom whisked away from wedding to jail for failing to pay child maintenance

BY LOUISE DICKSON, TIMES COLONIST AUGUST 30, 2014



Newlyweds Claire and Shai Topaz embrace outside the Victoria provincial courthouse on Thursday.

Photograph by: Brianna Watkins, Times Colonist

VANCOUVER ISLAND — A groom spent his wedding night in jail instead of the arms of his beloved after a provincial court judge issued a warrant for his arrest last week because of his failure to pay about \$7,000 in child maintenance. Shai Topaz and Claire Fresneda planned to be married on Beddis Beach on Saltspring Island on Saturday afternoon. But as Claire waited in her wedding dress for Topaz to arrive at the ceremony, he was surrounded by RCMP officers, whisked away in his linen suit to the Saltspring detachment, then taken by police boat to the Victoria police station.

“I begged them to allow me to at least see my bride and to have some compassion,” said Topaz, a 47-year-old father of two who works for an international communications company. “Instead, I was taken into custody and my bride was not even informed.”

At the time he was taken into custody, Topaz had four warrants out for his arrest. Two were unendorsed warrants, which means the judge wanted him to appear before her. Two were warrants of committal, meaning he had to either pay money owed or spend time in jail.

“All required the police to bring Mr. Topaz before the courts without delay,” explained RCMP spokesman Darren Lagan. “The judge’s instructions on these particular warrants was very clear — locate Mr. Topaz, arrest and detain him and bring him before the court.”

Still, it was very difficult to make the decision to arrest Topaz an hour before his wedding and difficult for the officers who made the arrest, said Sgt. George Jenkins. "Obviously, when you're interrupting a wedding, it wasn't comfortable."

When Topaz didn't arrive, Claire knew something was wrong.

"I just had that feeling. I went to the police station because I had a gut feeling that's where he was. But he was already on the boat to Victoria."

Some guests had already left by the time Claire returned to the party.

"I was a puddle on the floor. Hysterical, actually. But people were very supportive and kind. Wonderful actually," she said.

Lawyer Tom Bulmer stepped in to assist the distraught couple after receiving a phone call from one of the guests.

"It was very difficult to deal with," said Bulmer. "Everyone was very upset. ... The bride was an emotional wreck and the groom was going to spend his wedding night in jail. I told him to try and not wrinkle his suit."

On Sunday morning, Topaz had a telebail hearing before a justice of the peace. Topaz said he did not know about the warrants. By that time, the wedding guests had passed the hat and \$1,400 owed on the committal warrants were paid, said Bulmer.

The justice released Topaz, who returned to Saltspring. He and Fresneda were married there that evening.

"It was very emotional," Claire said Thursday at the Victoria courthouse after Topaz paid the arrears in full. "All my friends had left. My mom had to redo the flowers in my headdress again. The flowers were a bit wilted. The glow sticks had dimmed and the honeymoon was a bit different."

Bulmer said he suspects Topaz's international work interfered with his ability to pay proper attention to the court system.

"But the lesson is, if you owe child support, you've got to pay attention to court dates. You have to pay attention to court orders because it can come and bite you at the most inconvenient time," said Bulmer.

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