

Anna: "A Thousand Places to Fight Before You Die". This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 221.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Anna: I'm Anna Riley and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is it possible for a married couple to plan a vacation together, not kill each other through all the fighting, and come out as a stronger couple in the end? If you're like most couples, there just isn't enough time in the day to do everything that needs to get done. Between work and kids, you're lucky to squeeze in time just to brush your teeth, let alone take a vacation together. You have to balance your professional and home lives without dropping the ball on anything important, and that can be challenging for many people.

Our guests today are the brains behind a leading couple's travel blog, "One Thousand Places to Fight before You Die", and for those of you tuned in on your computer or laptop, you can check out their blog as we go along at 1000fights.com. Mike Willits and his wife Luci encourage busy couples to leave the kids with family members and get out to see the world together to reconnect and strengthen their relationships by planning and making an annual escape. Welcome to the show, Mike and Lucy. I'm so glad you guys could join us.

Mike: Thank you so much. We're so excited to be here, and thank you for all that you do for married couples. I mean I love the podcast, and there's a lot of strength there.

Anna: So you guys, I'm looking at your site and I see that it's a lot of it is about travel. So how did you guys kind of get into the whole travel thing?

Luci: Well, it really started on our honeymoon, and we got married very young, very young. We were poor and in college, and we started on our honeymoon, which was a fight. I don't know how much really we talked about that but it was a fight. I tried to leave Mike on the honeymoon. I mean, it was rough; it wasn't the Mexican Riviera, roses, and buffets. It was a really rough honeymoon and as we're getting towards the end of it Mike turned to me and he said, "OK. Well, where are we going next year?" And I thought, "I don't know, I don't know if I'm going to even be with you next year."

Mike: It wasn't that bad.

Luci: Well, it was for me. So he really said we've got to plan something every year, and that's what got us started. And how we did it is we said, "All right, we'll have a hundred dollars for every year we've been married." And that seemed like a fortune to us 15 years ago. So the next year, even though it was our first anniversary, we did 200, and then for the third year we did 300. Some of our trips were a night at a hotel and a concert.

Anna: Right.

Luci: Then as we gained in our careers and had more disposable income, we were able to do more but truly we still keep to that budget now when it comes to flights. We really try to do flights and hotel within that budget, but it forced us to plan, forced us to think ahead, and forced us to really consider what we were going to do as a couple. And we take turns, every other year it's my job to pick the place, and so I go to Europe and civilized places, and Mike takes me to the Amazon and Cambodia. So you get to see each other's interests, but that's how it all started was on our honeymoon.

Anna: OK. And I see that you guys seem like a pretty busy couple. Looks like, Luci, you're the chief of staff for the Idaho Department of Education, which is awesome. And Mike, you're the regional manager for an insurance company, and you guys have two kids, which seems like you have a very busy life, busy schedule. So how do you make the time to take a vacation away from the kids and away from everything, together as a couple?

Mike: We set it as a priority and we plan actually eight months to a year in advance. We set aside the time when we know we're going to go for a week or two together and it's on the calendar. Both Luci and I are planners. We sit down each week and say, "OK. What are we doing this week? Who's going to get the kids here? Who's going to take them there?" That sort of thing, so we plan and with our annual vacation we set aside this time and it's just us. And you're right, we do leave the kids and in our blog we encourage couples to leave the kids at home. There's so many pressures, work, the kids, family, church, you name it, all these different pressures on you, and the spouse comes last. And so what we encourage is to set that side of time and then over the year we plan what we're going to do, what we're going to see, and that's where we really found some meaningful couple time.

Anna: So do you guys typically plan these things together, or I know you were talking about how you make different decisions each year, each person get to decide where you're going, but what about the planning time? Do you guys do that together? Is that kind of like a couple building relationship strengthening time for you guys?

Luci: Absolutely. That's one of the biggest pieces of planning a trip together is the time that you spend together planning, deciding where you're going to go, deciding what kind of activities you're going to do, having a budget. It's all those things that you deal with it on a daily basis in your life but with a more fun purpose in mind. So yeah, we plan to plan. We sit down and we'll spend every Sunday afternoon and we'll go over, "OK. You've done some research in this area. I've done some research in this area. I really want to go here. You really don't, OK. Well, we'll spend a day doing what I want and then you'll spend a day doing what you want." There's a lot of planning that goes forward with it, and I think that's one of the most important parts because you learn about your spouse, you learn about what your spouse likes to do, what your spouse doesn't like to do. Every issue that you have in your marriage will come up when you plan, and it will come up when you're on vacation. So it's good to just get that out in front and have the opportunity to work together on it.

Anna: It's really interesting that you say that, that every issue kind of comes up at that point in time because you live your daily lives and everything is go, go, go. And then, when you really sit down to do something or when you take the time out to take a vacation. I totally know what you mean when you say that all those issues come out at that moment. And it's, like, wait a second, this is supposed to be our vacation, so that's interesting. It's OK. I guess, you guys say. It's OK to fight even on a vacation.

Luci: I think it is and particularly for us. I'm very strong and Mike does a very good job of supporting me, but we'll have issues we're I'll say, "Stop bossing me around, I'm my own person, don't get in my way. Why do we always have to do what you want to do, and your decision isn't the default decision." All those things are happening in your marriage, and they really come up when you're traveling but it's OK. Conflict is OK. And I think we've fooled ourselves into thinking that in order to have a perfect marriage everything has to be happy all the time and that you don't have issues. The fact is you're going to have issues, and it's the working through them that's the best part. And that's where the travel does it for us,

is where we go and we say we're committed to each other. We show our kids that we care enough about our marriage that we want to be together so we'll work on our marriage.

Anna: Right, that's good. It's definitely good for the kids to see that. It looks like on the blog I've seen a lot of pretty awesome vacations, amazing trips that you guys have taken. But the big question is why is it so important to set aside a solid block of time for the vacation without the kids?

Mike: That's a great question. Kids are important and I think our country, our culture, it's very kid focused. And we invest a lot of time, a lot of effort in making sure that they succeed, but really what's of most value to children? It's strong parents, a strong marriage, a strong home. And I think that couples need to invest more time in their relationship. And this traveling, it might not work for everyone; we can see that. But for us it really works. It forces us to work together on a common goal. And another thing, along the same lines of what Luci was saying, it gives us something to talk about. We've talked about Turkish politics and Turkish culture, and we've had discussions that most couples probably wouldn't have in light of preparation. We actually learn the language of places that we want to visit, we work together on it, and it's really helped our marriage.

Anna: Very cool. So it was interesting that you said that for you guys, and Luci you mentioned this, too, that for you guys the thing is the traveling. That's what makes you guys kind of come together, that's what kind of solidifies things for you and so for you it's that. And so would you say that maybe, for other couples it might not be traveling, it might be something else. They might have something that they do and I know that you guys are all about the travel. But would you say that for other couples, it could be something other than that. Maybe, that is there key to keeping their marriage alive and successful is something else?

Mike: Certainly. You need to follow your passion. But I do think the important concept here is working towards a common goal and having time away from the kids. And I know some people when they hear that it's kind of a visceral response like, "How can you leave your kids?" But then you stop and think about it, "You know what, maybe we do need to spend some time working on our marriage." These trips have become, like, mini marriage therapy sessions for us, kind of self- help marriage therapy because it gives us time to work on our marriage. So it doesn't need to be travel, no it doesn't. But it does need to be time as a couple, away from home, and away from the kids.

Luci: I think when people hear taking a week off, away from their kids, there's this instant reaction of, "I can't do that, I can't leave my job, I can't leave my family, I can't afford it." But consider this, can you not afford it? And let me give you an example, We decided early on in our marriage that instead of doing weekly dates that we would set aside the budget for a trip. So think about going to dinner every week or what it would take to get a babysitter. If you compound that, have a budget, and decide that you're going to do this over a year it can be done. It's a matter of priorities, and there's lots of ways to make it affordable. But for us, it keeps us married. It really does and we've joked about it, but it's really the truth.

Anna: Right.

Luci: We really enjoy it and it really forces us to talk about something other than, "OK. Well, you're getting so and so from ballet on Wednesday. Then I've got to go take her to piano, and oh my gosh the homework's not done, and why is this house always dirty, and why am I the only one that ever changes

the toilet paper?" I mean, these are the issues of marriage and it forces you to say enough. We're going to do some other things together.

Anna: Right, because there is more to it than just that stuff.

Luci: Absolutely.

Anna: And it has to be or else, we'd all go crazy.

Luci: Consider this. Your children are with you for 18 years or a little bit more if they're boomerangs. There's a lot of time where you're going to be alone with your spouse. As Mike said, "A strong family foundation is a strong marriage." And so that's important, I think it's important for kids to see that the parents want to spend time together and that's a good thing.

Anna: Mm-hmm. Definitely. So it sounds like your vacations kind of turn out to be more than just a vacation. Even the planning itself is an opportunity for you to reconnect and strengthen your bond through basically working together to get something that you both want. And the vacation, the actual trip at the end is just kind of like the bonus.

Mike: Exactly, it sure is. And what's neat is all through the year I'm looking toward spending time with just Luci and I think that changes your mind set. You're really looking forward to spending time with your spouse.

Anna: That's so sweet.

Mike: And it's a special time and we are very protective of that time. You can probably sense that, we really look forward to that. Obviously, year round we always need to be working on our relationship, we don't want to poo-poo that at all. You always got to be working on it, it's not easy, marriage is not easy, that's a given. But when you do have one annual time where it's just you two to reconnect, it's invaluable.

Anna: Definitely, 100% agree with you on that one. So now, let's talk about this fighting thing.

Luci: There's a lot of them.

Anna: We all love to talk about fighting, the drama, drama, drama.

Luci: Mm-hmm.

Anna: So your blog on 1000fights.com, it's all about the top 1000 places to fight before you die which, by the way, is a fabulous title. And you've got a good number of posts on your blog that actually had me really laughing about the fights that you guys have gotten into. So basically, your point is that it's OK to fight as long as you fight fair right.

Luci: Right. I've said this before but conflict is OK. Conflict is how you resolve issues. When you keep it bottled inside, you're not able to really work through things so yeah fighting is healthy, and fighting is what happens. Your two independent people who have different views and everything you feel and any issue that you have is going to come up when you're traveling, it just does. It's what happens when you

get two grizzly bears in the same den. That's what happens, you fight. But, there's making up, there's learning, there's all sorts of things that happen with it. And I would just encourage couples to say it's OK as long as we work through it. And fighting fair is OK. Fighting unfair means that you're damaging your relationship.

Anna: So do you guys have a particular fight that you had that was kind of crazy, but then you look back and actually just laugh about it.

Luci: Well yeah, there's some laughing but there's still some "I can't believe you left me, I can't believe how you value dinner over me.

Anna: I read that.

Luci: ... I can't believe that you ... you know." What I'm speaking out on is our fight called Crème Brulee, for one.

Anna: I saw that one on the website.

Luci: And when we came home from that trip, it was really funny. We thought it was a funny story, but it was also kind of emotionally raw. When we told people, they just looked at us wide eyed, and said, "I can't believe you guys are still married after that." And it just really started this, the idea for the blog, which was yeah, we are still married and my husband left me with no money and I had to beg on the streets of Paris in order to get home. Then I got mad at him and I cut off all my hair. But this is our life and I think it's similar to other people's life, our life is a sitcom and there's sometimes it's filled with drama, and sometimes it's a little bit documentary. But, yeah that's definitely the fight of the century, but every trip we have, there's something that goes awry. It's life.

Anna: Between the fights on the actual vacation, what kinds of things do you suggest to really connect as a couple?

Mike: Great question. For us, part of it is the preparation, getting ready for the trip. We look at it two ways; there's travel and there's vacation. Vacation is when you vacate; you sit in the sand and you leave everything behind. What we choose to do is a little bit different; we choose to travel. I love watching Luci experience something new, like, when we went to Africa, for example. Here you are in a foreign country, another continent, and you're experiencing everything new. The food is new, the language is new to us, the experiences are all new, and you're going through this together. There's nothing like it. It is so neat to actually do all this preparation and then experience that together. It's great for couples.

Anna: Yeah, that's absolutely fascinating to see it from that point of view. To see it from, like, if you guys are going somewhere that of you have been and you're both experiencing the new things at the same time, I'm sure that would be kind of cool to see how the other person reacts to things and how you adjust and stuff. That's definitely something that would be interesting to see.

Mike: And without starting another fight, Luci's kind of an indoor girl. But a few years back she was brave and we went up the Amazon River and camped at this remote camp, she was such a trooper. She sacrificed because it was something that I wanted to do and it was neat.

Luci: Yeah, that's in my fight card. Like, "But you took me to the Amazon and I did it, so you can do this, too." So yeah, it's in my bag, it's in my bag of tricks. I think also on that note I think it's really important that you share what you learn with your children. So, when we come home, we show our kids our pictures, we talk about where we've been, we talk about the stories, and it helps them, too. It gives them a different perspective on the world around them and I really like it. Let me give you an example. Our littlest one met a child who was from South Africa, who was Zulu. And she was able to say "sibona" which is hello. She learned that because we had talked about it when we went to Africa and that's how you say hello. That's invaluable, that helps expand your kids' horizon at the same time that you're going as well. It's not just all about you, in the fact that you can still share what you did with your children and I think that's important.

Anna: All right. I absolutely think that doing all that is definitely enriching for the kids. If you guys are talking about a two week get away. From your own personal experience, what about this two week get away, what does it do for your marriage and how can it help other couples?

Mike: Well, first off for what it does for us personally. First off, it recharges us. It's hard for me to do. It's hard to leave that Blackberry at home. It's hard to leave work and stop thinking about all the pressures, but it's got to be done. When you come back, you're recharged, you think of new solutions for the problems that you have, and you take a different approach with your kids, too. And Luci and I have traveled to Third World countries. It also makes you grateful for warm water, indoor plumbing. These things all of a sudden become much more important to you, and it makes you more grateful for what you do have. So I think the benefits for me personally are significant. Besides of all the ways that we've listed that it's helped our relationship.

Luci: I also think there's some challenge there. Consider, in our case and I think this is not unusual; we live our own lives. I have a job, Mike has a job, we have kids. The challenges of spending 14 days together, only together is different. It's different than what you have at home and I come home glad to have spent time with Mike but I also say, "You know what, life's OK. I like having other things, too." It's not always rainbows; it's hard to spend 100% of your time with your spouse because you just don't do that on a normal day. Mike and I maybe, get a few minutes together at the end of the day, "Hi, how was your day, it was great." That's all that we get because that's life here. So I would just put that caveat in there that it is hard but it is worth it. And I always come back knowing Mike better than I did before, his strengths, his weaknesses, everything.

Anna: Is there anything else that we should know?

Mike: Well, we just covered the tip of iceberg in terms of the fights. So if folks are more interested in learning about some of the interesting experiences we had, or need some ideas to help them convince their spouse to go somewhere, check out our blog.

Anna: For sure.

Luci: Our mission is to have couples leave their children at home, and to go someplace different, and then how not to kill each other once you are there. It's important, and we've done it, and we say to other couples, just do it.

Anna: OK. Well, Mike and Luci, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today. To find out more about Mike and Luci and their blog, "A Thousand Places to Fight before You Die," you can

visit their website at 1000fights.com. Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Anna Riley, until next time stay happily married.

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