

Dearly Beloved

If only couples worked as hard at marriage as über wedding planner Donnie Brown

By [Andrea Grimes](#)

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KRIS CHAU



For thousands of years, humans have constructed shrines and places of worship to honor the things we value most. These physical manifestations of holiness give our souls a place of refuge—from China, where many-layered pagodas rise toward the sky, to Europe, where the great, gilded cathedrals of Christianity inspire awe even in today's secular atmosphere, to Plano, where we build fancy places to shop.

StarDust Celebrations is one such modern shrine, a monolithic block of white concrete dedicated to that most sacred of institutions: marriage. For when two people, after drifting aimlessly in a sea of false promises, bad dates and broken hearts, finally find each other and declare that they have found the soul with which theirs will be eternally entwined, they cannot help but profess this undying love in front of family and friends. Two clans unite, forever bonded by the passion of two lovers.

Such an occasion demands nothing less than an 8,140-square-foot department store. At StarDust, brides can find everything from invitations to bridesmaid dresses to gowns to customized cami-and-panty sets that read "Mrs. Whoever" in rhinestones. There are walls of tiaras and gift books with titles such as *I Do. I Did. Now What?*

Sure, this wedding thing is about finding your soul mate and true love and all that crap, but it means nothing if the pen that goes with the embroidered guestbook doesn't, you know, really *feel* like Tim 'n' Stacy or Kristie 'n' Anna or Fred 'n' Steve. That's where Dallas' Donnie Brown, wedding planner and reality television pseudo-

celebrity, comes in. A fixture at StarDust and on the Style Network's wedding-themed reality programs *Married Away* and *Whose Wedding Is It, Anyway?*, Brown guides harried brides and grooms through the increasingly stressful process of planning the perfect wedding.

Originally from Lubbock, Brown started in floral design before setting up shop in Dallas as a wedding planner. Brown got his big break when the reality television boom hit and producers realized that weddings might produce just as much drama as putting a bunch of self-obsessed, sex-crazed people on a beach.

Television producers came to Dallas to scout for talent, where "they kept hearing my name," Brown says. With an expressive pair of painstakingly coiffed eyebrows and a head of hair most newscasters would kill for, Brown was just what the Style Network was looking for. As a bonus, of course, Brown says, "I've got some humor and people always enjoy sitting and listening to me talk."

That was back in 2002, and today Brown is the only wedding planner to last six seasons of the show. "Sometimes I scoot around on the fan [online message] boards," he confesses. There, they just can't get enough of Donnie, who combines a know-it-all persona with an unflappable, sunny attitude. When he comes across as a know-it-all, though, it's probably because he does, at least when it comes to weddings and reality television.

Filming an episode of *Married Away*, a program about exotic destination weddings that planners have mere weeks to arrange, Brown ushers his latest bride, Zibbora, and her group of tag-alongs, her grandmother and a couple of friends, all around StarDust Celebrations so that the one-camera film crew can get the shots they need.

"I can't wait to see your gown on you!" Brown exclaims as the group is filmed outside walking into the store, slipping from his easy drawl into the declarative tone he takes in front of the camera. The sentence is phrased as if Brown is recording affirmations for a talking doll. When the cameras roll, Donnie Brown's pull-string is yanked, and he goes into reality mode. Zibbora, a beautiful girl with long, dark hair, giggles on cue.

The group must re-create their entrance to be filmed from the inside, and after a few minutes of figuring out who opened the door first (reality demands continuity!), the scene is shot again. Zibbora's gown fitting is next.

"Everybody have a big reaction!" the segment director says to Zibbora's friends and family, even though a couple of them have already seen the dress. Cameras roll, and appropriately sized gasps are gasped. While reality is orchestrated in the fitting room, Brown paces in and out and around the store, trying to solve the problem of where the wedding, scheduled for the next week, will actually be held. It seems God has had the nerve to schedule rain at roughly the same time that Zibbora decided she wanted a sunset wedding on the beach.

"They may have to evacuate," Brown explains, hanging up his cell phone. The tiny 5-acre lump of sand in the Florida Keys called Munson Island is home to a resort called Little Palm Island. There, peace and quiet is harshly enforced: The only phone is in the resort offices, televisions are outlawed and all music must be of a native variety. Zibbora and her fiancé, Torei, had to sacrifice a hip-hop DJ for a reggae band at their reception.

While Brown scrambles to call other resorts that can give Zibbora the sunset beach she wants, the bride is turning circles in her fitting room so that the camera can get close-up shots of its intricate beading. Zibbora's grandmother, who raised her, is having trouble with the question-and-answer portion of *Married Away*.

The segment director asks Zibbora's grandmother questions like, "Are you excited to see Zibbora get married?" and gets answers like "Yes" and "Umm-hmm." These are major reality faux pas, since complete sentences tell the story. Finally, Zibbora's grandmother gets it down, with her own version of the pull-string toy phrasing: "Yes, I am excited to see her get married. We have been waiting for this for a long time."

But while her grandmother dabs at her eyes with Kleenex upon seeing the gown and her wedding planner scrambles outside to actually find a place for the nuptials, Zibbora remains calm, even stoic. Is it weird getting married on television? What if the resort doesn't work out?

"I don't really stress about it," says Zibbora, shrugging in her blindingly white strapless gown. And that's that. No "bridezilla" here, just a pretty 20-something girl in a pretty dress, hugging family members on cue and twirling when she's told. That's the kind of bride Brown looks for. With a reputation like his, he can now afford to be selective about the couples he works with.

"I can pick and choose the weddings I want to take, on whether I think it's a good personality fit," he says. And since Brown works nearly every hour of the day, either filming shows or planning boring, old non-televised weddings, getting a bride he can stand is of the utmost importance. Even if her taste sucks.

If brides ask for "something that looked like a combination Mexican/Mardi Gras," Brown says, "I say, 'We need to trim these colors down. Get some sophistication.'" And if, as Zibbora did on camera at the *Married Away* shoot with a \$1,400 tiara, a bride declares she must have something way out of her price range, Brown just keeps offering new suggestions until they find a compromise. After all, with 8,140 square feet of marital shrinery at StarDust, there's always something else to buy to build the perfect wedding.

In the end, Zibbora and Torei didn't get evacuated. Brown says "everything went beautifully" on Munson Island. No matter what happens in the first half of the reality wedding show, in the end, perfection is always achieved—or orchestrated, if you've got the right wedding planner.

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