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SHARING THEIR LIVES, NOT A PIECE OF PAPER

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Memo: A Female Point of View

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THE OPPOSITE SEX

Edition: FINAL

My mother asked me recently when my boyfriend and I would marry.

"I don't know," I said.

"You tell him," she said, "that you're not going to wait around until you're 90."

But I prefer the romantic notion of emulating French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir and French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

De Beauvoir was at the bedside of Sartre when he died on April 15, 1980. She died April 16, 1986, and was buried in a grave with him in the Montparnasse Cemetery, exactly six years to the hour he was buried.

She was his friend, colleague and lover for 50 years. They shared weekends, vacations, incomes — their lives. Sartre called her his muse and confidante. She read and criticized every word he wrote, and he read and criticized every word written by her.

They traveled together to China, the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Japan and the Middle East.

Sartre offered marriage during an imposed separation early in their lifelong relationship, but de Beauvoir declined.

De Beauvoir always had a strong sense of being her own person in control of her own destiny. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, she made it clear that even at a young age she felt herself to be complete and intelligent — a whole person.

Today women have more choices than ever about whether to marry and how to live their lives, including greater career opportunities and advanced birth control.

Marriage as an institution may never die, but the number of unmarried-couple households in the United States has grown from 523,000 to 3.5 million since 1970, according to the Census Bureau.

About 42 million American adults have never been married — about twice the total of 25 years ago.

At first my boyfriend and I lived only a few blocks away from each other, but less than a year later I moved to a building half a block from him, and a couple of years later he moved into my building. He lives on the first floor; I live on the third. When my neighbor moves, we plan to occupy two apartments next door to each other. A balcony connects them.

When I think of our future, sometimes I picture a fabulous wedding on the roof of a tall building or in the drugstore where we met. I picture a silk Calvin Klein dress and all the accouterments I was taught as a child to want for my Barbies and myself.

But then I picture separate lofts with a spiral staircase connecting them or side-by-side brownstones. I picture us lifelong partners like de Beauvoir and Sartre, traveling together, nurturing each other, reading each other's words.

And I know we don't need a piece of paper.