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Affleck, Shaak to marry

Lights, action, marriage.

In what will probably go down as the biggest surprise in the Prince George Film Commission's short history, Sarah Shaak and Ben Affleck announced their engagement Tuesday.

Mr. Affleck met Ms. Shaak shortly after his arrival in Prince George to begin filming the John Frankenheimer flick *Reindeer Games*.

"I know it sounds like a cliché from a bad movie, but it was literally love at first sight," says Ms. Shaak, who, along with her groom-to-be, sat down with the *Free Press* for an exclusive interview about the flowering of this unexpected romance.

Ms. Shaak's position as director of the Film Commission has put her in close proximity to the stars of the latest production to hit town. Mr. Affleck plays an ex-con in the movie, which also stars Gary Sinise and Charlize Theron, who gets caught up in an elaborate scheme to rob a casino.

"I felt a little bit guilty at first, because I felt like I was taking advantage of the privilege of my position to get close to Ben," says Ms. Shaak.

"She didn't need to," counters Mr. Affleck. "I was actually doing everything I could to spend as much time as possible with her."

Although they have only known each other for three short weeks, Mr. Affleck says there is no doubt in his mind that Ms. Shaak is the woman for him.

Mr. Affleck denies the relationship is a rebound from a recent breakup with Gwyneth Paltrow. He says he and Ms. Paltrow parted amicably and that any suggestions to the contrary are simply tabloid innuendo.

Ms. Paltrow, formerly attached to Brad Pitt and this year's winner of best actress honours at the Oscars, was unavailable for comment at press time.

Her publicist, reached in Vancouver where Ms. Paltrow is currently filming, would say only that, while she is shocked at the sudden engagement, Ms. Paltrow is happy for both Mr. Affleck and Ms. Shaak,



Ben Affleck and Sarah Shaak gave in to the forces of nature after meeting on the PG set of Ben's latest movie project. It isn't just Shakespeare who can fall in love and enjoy a fairy tale romance. DOANE GREGORY PHOTO

whom she says she looks forward to meeting.

Mr. Affleck says, in fact, that it is Ms. Shaak's lack of involvement with the Hollywood scene that appealed to him at first.

"Ever since *Good Will Hunting* (the film that launched his and Matt Damon's careers) I've been living in this world that's totally foreign to me. Don't get me wrong, I'm enjoying life, I mean who wouldn't? But being in the public eye all the time takes a toll.

"That's why it was so refreshing to meet Sarah. We enjoy so many of the same

things: a good restaurant, walks down by the river, a quiet night with some videos, flyfishing. It all just came together when I met Sarah."

As for Ms. Shaak, she says it was the down-to-earth side of Mr. Affleck that appealed to her as well.

"I've been with the Film Commission for almost two years now. I've met enough actors that just being a star isn't really all that big a deal to me anymore. What I love most about Ben is that he's so, I don't know, normal. We could have grown up next door."

The couple plan to marry in Hawaii. A wedding date has yet to be picked, but they are thinking some time in early April, 2000.

Mr. Affleck has already got his best man picked out: his best friend and co-creator of *Good Will Hunting*, Matt Damon.

Reached Tuesday afternoon at his home in Beverly Hills, Mr. Damon says he is happy for his friend.

"You'd have to be an April Fool not to see that Ben's head over heels in love," says Mr. Damon.

Business cautiously optimistic about budget

By MICHELLE LANG

Free Press staff writer

The "health care budget" may be a positive step towards treating the ailing medical system, but the eighth straight deficit budget has the Prince George business community worried.

Yet, despite \$32 billion total net debt in 1999, many announcements

in Tuesday's budget, which focuses largely on health care and education, met with a positive reaction in Prince George. Many were pleased to learn that a \$615 million health care spending increase would help reduce surgical wait lists. Others focused on a new \$10 million regional economic strategy that will help cities such as Prince George diversify and on the Alberta-esque

tax cuts for small business.

Lorne Calder, the new president of the Prince George Chamber of Commerce, says the chamber is pleased to see tax breaks for small businesses. Effective July 1, Finance Minister Joy MacPhail is cutting the income tax rate for small businesses to 5.5 per cent.

Mr. Calder also applauded the government commitment to exam-

ine the cost of new government regulations.

As well, the chamber president felt the government had built in many of the Auditor General's review recommendations from the so-called "fudge-it budget", doing a better job reporting and documenting the province's finances.

But Mr. Calder says the budget wasn't all crystal clear. He argues

the deficit is about \$1.4 billion, including all Crown corporations, well over the \$540 million Ms. MacPhail cited in her budget speech.

"A lot of accounting is done off the books but it is still a direct cost to the consumer," says Mr. Calder. "We are very concerned about the size of this deficit."

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