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PEACH BUZZ

Mr. and Mr. Who

As more gay men wed, traditional models of name changing merit re-examination

by Kevin Isom

I didn't set out from law school to become a gay lawyer. Like sexual orientation itself, it wasn't a choice. It sort of happened. Though I was probably predisposed.

Most people—despite the overwhelming abundance of lawyers—see law from the outside looking in. I see it from the other way around. One of the things I've seen a lot of lately is some very serious goings-on when gay men commit to each other. You can approximate most aspects of marriage by contract. But symbols are important, and one of the things that happens a great deal these days is the changing of names.

It's simple in most states. You can give any dumb reason you want for changing your surname, like "I think Rockefeller sounds good on

agency room.

The problem with the traditional model is its origins: in property. Most people don't realize that until about the last hundred years or so, marriage was a property deal, and names reflected that fact. A woman was legally her father's property (hence she bore his last name) and upon marriage she became her husband's property (and was forced to take *his* last name). Not exactly Barbara Cartland, when you think about it.

So the question comes to mind, why would gay men want to change their names to follow in the exchange-of-property tradition? Is this a tradition that we want to be a part of? Or think about this: Since there's no legalized tradition of property exchange or marriage for gay men, is it somehow *better* when we change our names as an expression of love and commitment to each other?

I can't really answer those questions, but I can describe some real-life experiences. Like the name change I did for the partner of an Atlanta social worker, Richard Alston. On the day of the hearing at the courthouse, Richard waited in the corridor while his life mate and I went into the judge's chambers. I couldn't tell who was shaking more, Richard or his partner. When the hearing was over, we went back out into the corridor and I announced, "Richard Alston, I'd like to present to you James Matthew Alston."

They embraced and kissed there in the corridor of the Fulton County Courthouse. My eyes began to tear up, and I looked quickly down at my case file, blinking hard to hide the tears. After all, it wouldn't do for a client to see his lawyer cry.

Then there were the clients who had met each other at the gay rodeo circuit (a rather amazing phenomenon, rife with comic

potential). Bob and Earl wore matching boots and cowboy hats to their wedding, and a Clint Black look-alike sang a country wedding march. But on the day of the hearing, only one of the two showed up at the courthouse. The other was sick. As the elevator doors closed, the one confided to me that in fact his partner—I think he actually said "pardner"—had AIDS, and that they had known that he was HIV positive for two years before the wedding. My heart sank as the elevator climbed to the fifth floor of the courthouse. There was no embrace this time outside the judge's chambers, but I put my arm around my client as we walked back to the elevator.

The point of all this is not the Bob-and-Rod, who's-on-top debate or the eternal honey-will-we-wear-spurs-to-our-wedding question. It's the outward indicia of two human beings joining themselves together as a team to embrace tomorrow. It's hope and love and commitment and a desire to be together for the future. Traditional values, by any other name.

Kevin Isom is an attorney and writer in Atlanta, Ga. His work has appeared in several magazines.



You can give any dumb reason you want for changing your surname, like "I think Rockefeller sounds good on me" or "I want to be named Stevens because I always liked Samantha in Bewitched."

me" or "I want to be named Stevens because I always liked Samantha in *Bewitched*." Some people tell the truth, as in "I'm in a committed relationship, and I want my name to reflect that." Which brings us to the question, why does anyone want his last name to reflect his relationship status?

But before we get into that, we should look at the patterns. There are three basic patterns that gay men and lesbians are following in changing their names. Most people hyphenate their last names, as in Bob and Rod Paris-Jackson. (Have you ever noticed that they're always mentioned as Bob and Rod, with Rod getting second billing? Perhaps it's because Bob got to be on top in the surname.) Other people change their last names to something else entirely. A Jewish lesbian couple changed their last names to the Hebrew word meaning "hope." And finally, still others follow what some would see as a more traditional model. One partner changes his or her name to the last name of the other. This third model can be very convenient in overcoming some sorts of red tape—if you go to the hospital and you have the same last name, everyone assumes you're related, so they're less inclined to kick your lover out of the emer-