

Here Come the Brides



Finding a way to change red tape into a red carpet, two Portland women will legally wed on Dec. 14

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It's about 4:15 pm on Nov. 15—tax day for some unfortunates. A line lingers along in the Multnomah County Division of Assessment and Taxation office, where a hodgepodge of bureaucratic undertakings occur, including the issuance of marriage licenses.

The willowy Buckwalter, wearing a black skirt and top and white stockings, and Contreras, dark-haired and significantly shorter than her partner, walk into the office to apply for their marriage license.

They seem a tad giddy, as one would expect pending newlyweds to be. They appear a touch nervous, too. After all, who knows how county employees will react?

Close by is their attorney, JoAnna McNamara, ready to provide assistance if the division resists the couple's request. Donna Red Wing, a longtime lesbian activist, rolls a video cam. She is warned several times not to tape anyone applying for a passport.

"You can only film them," says a bureaucrat, meaning Buckwalter and Contreras. "Don't take anyone else." Red Wing swears she is not interested in anything or anyone else.

For her part, Buckwalter has come prepared with her birth certificate, which proves she is still legally male, and thus entitled to marry a woman if she pleases.

At first things seem to be going smoothly. The couple fill out the appropriate paperwork, walk over to the counter, and present it to the clerk, a thin older man. For some unknown reason he disappears, and a twentysomething woman eventually fills his slot. She seems ready to OK the application, treating it like all the others. That's when an older supervisorsque woman steps in, ponders the application, and informs the duo she's going to get one of her superiors to check it out.

That turns out to be Kathy Tuneberg, a county tax collection manager. She walks over, and McNamara tells her that Buckwalter is preop and still legally male and thus can receive a license. The birth certificate is inspected.

Not entirely satisfied, Tuneberg asks the Contreras/Buckwalter party to step into a private conference room, and proceeds to call county counsel for its input.

Via telephone, Tuneberg explains the situation, as does McNamara. County counsel says they'll get right back to Tuneberg. They hang up, and everyone makes quiet conversation. Buckwalter pulls out a brush and begins stroking her long hair.

A few minutes later, county counsel calls back. Yes, Buckwalter and Contreras can receive a marriage license, but before their \$60 registration fee is processed, Tuneberg says she must receive a letter from Buckwalter's physician stating Buckwalter will not have gender-reassignment surgery until after the wedding.

No problem, says McNamara.

Contreras and Buckwalter beam. Each grabs a corner of the license, and together they hold it up. They're smiling. A photo is snapped to memorialize the occasion.

Buckwalter's journey toward self-discovery has taken a lifetime. She moved here from Pennsylvania five years ago, living life as Lorin, a man who was already married and the father of two children.

She has studied martial arts for more than a decade, and was a member of the U.S. World Championship teams from 1988 through 1990. She is also a certified international instructor of taekwon do.

Lori Michelle Buckwalter deeply loves Sharon Contreras. The Portland couple will formally honor their commitment on Dec. 14 when they will be legally married during a small ceremony.

Two women legally marrying? Impossible, you say.

Well, hold on. Come their wedding day, Buckwalter, a preoperative transsexual who has undergone hormonal therapy for nearly a year, will still be legally male, though she lives her day-to-day life as a woman.

In early 1997 the 46-year-old plans to undergo gender-reassignment surgery and, as Oregon law permits, legally change her sex to female.

"We will be a legally married lesbian couple," says an earnest Buckwalter, who at 6 feet 6 inches, with platinum blond hair, cuts quite the distinguishable figure. "It has always been a dream of mine to be a part of the lesbian community. I know there are some people who may be judgmental, there always are, but this is something that I have always felt and yearned for."