

DUTCH TREAT

Gay couples legally marry in the Netherlands by Rex Wockner

It was probably the most important moment in the history of the worldwide struggle for gay equality.

Four gay couples were legally married April 1 in the Netherlands under the exact same laws heterosexuals use. It was a world first.

Several nations have registered partnership laws under which gay couples can obtain up to 99 percent of the rights and obligations of marriage. But only the Netherlands now lets gays simply marry.

"All the other countries have marriages specially made for gay people," said Henk Krol, publisher of *De Gay Krant* magazine and the driving force behind the 16-year process that led to legalized marriage for same-sex couples. "What we have in the Netherlands is civil marriage open to everyone. That's the big difference. That is the news."

Amid an international media frenzy, the weddings took place at Amsterdam City Hall as

do with monogamy. Real fidelity is something else, something in your soul, something that attaches you to each other. Monogamy can be a sort of contract if you choose it. But if you marry you don't have to choose monogamy. You have to choose for fidelity."

His partner, Frank Wittebrood, added: "Maybe you've been told that homosexuals are not monogamous. I think we are more honest. A lot of heterosexuals are like homosexuals, but they do it in hiding."

Groom Ton Jansen, 63, married his partner of 36 years, Louis Rogmans, 72.

"Marriage gives you all the rights that other married people have," he said. "Marriage is the most intimate bond two people can enter into."

Former Labour Member of Parliament Mieke van der Burg, who fought hard for the marriage legislation, said the political process was arduous.

"In the beginning, I did not believe it would pass," she said. "It was very difficult in my own political party and in the other parties."

Krol had some advice for activists in other nations working toward gay marriage: "You have to discuss it over and over again with the politicians...until they understand there's no reason not to allow it. People are against it not because they think negatively about it but because they feel negatively in their lower body."

Krol added: "The thing that finally got us over the hump was when we did a survey of the Dutch population proving that a large majority was in favor of gay marriage. Everyone in Parliament wants to do what the majority of the people want. That made the difference."

University of Utrecht professor Rob Tielman said it also helped that "Dutch society is

the most secular one in the Western world. This explains Dutch attitudes toward voluntary euthanasia, recreational drugs, sexual self-determination, the legal right to be nude in certain public places, mandatory sex education in all schools, the lowest percentage worldwide of abortions and unwanted pregnancies, the constitutional equal treatment of gays and lesbians, the recognition of gay and lesbian parenthood, etc. The fact that same-sex couples can marry now in the Netherlands is not a miracle but the consequence of a long history of respect for human rights based upon the principle of the right of every human being to give meaning and shape to his or her own life as long as the rights of others to human self-determination are respected."

One law change remains—which is expected to pass shortly—before same-sex marriages are identical to opposite-sex couplings. It will grant lesbian couples who give birth to babies automatic joint parental authority. At present, they have to petition a court for that authority.

It might take some time before gay spouses will be able to adopt children from other nations. Not because the Netherlands has a problem with it but because the Third World nations from which Dutch couples adopt children are presumably hostile to the idea. JW



Ton Jansen and Louis Rogmans celebrate during the reception after their wedding

the law became effective at the stroke of midnight. Mayor Job Cohen officiated.

As he finished his opening remarks at 11:58 p.m., the audience members in the City Council chambers began syncopated clapping as they waited for the room's clock to click over to midnight. When it did, cheers erupted.

The ceremonies themselves took about a half-hour. Cohen stood where individuals stand to address the City Council. The four couples sat in the front row of the seats where the councilors sit.

Cohen read the marriage vows once for each couple, and they individually responded, "Yes." Each couple shook hands, kissed and signed documents, which then were signed by the mayor.

A reception followed in the City Council foyer, and the couples departed in four brightly colored Volkswagen Beetles for a party at a gay club.

"The most important thing is that we love each other like everyone loves each other and gets married. There's no difference," groom Peter Wittebrood-Lemke said. "The whole world has to learn that love is between people and not only between a man and a woman."

Asked how marriage fits together with gay men's reputation for nonmonogamy, Wittebrood-Lemke said: "Real fidelity has nothing to

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