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NORTHWEST news

RUNAWAY BRIDES
(AND GROOMS)

Portlanders tie the knot in San Francisco

by Floyd Sklaver

Jason Evans went to San Francisco with a migraine and came home with a husband. The financial aid officer and his partner, Bob Richardson, were among the hundreds of couples who lined up at San Francisco City Hall during Valentine's Day weekend to become the first gay Americans to legally marry in the United States.

Last month, newly elected Mayor Gavin Newsom asked city clerks to remove all references to gender on marriage forms and promised to begin issuing licenses to same-sex couples. Conservative groups threatened to sue under Proposition 22, a 2000 ballot initiative that says California will recognize only marriages between a man and woman as valid. And so, in a display of heroic civil disobedience, Newsom sped up his timetable and ordered city officials to begin issuing the licenses immediately.

Newsom says the California Constitution's equal protection clause makes denying marriage licenses to gay couples illegal and therefore nullifies Proposition 22. Regardless of which

side wins, San Francisco hasn't felt an explosion like this since the famous earthquake in 1906; so far, more than 3,500 couples have been married.

Evans and Richardson have been together for 3 1/2 years and became engaged last summer when Evans proposed at Bridal Falls near Skamania Lodge. The only hitch was that Richardson didn't want to marry until they could do it legally in the United States. So, after Mayor Newsom issued his proclamation, Richardson says, "I got down on my knee when Jason got home from work and asked him to elope with me."

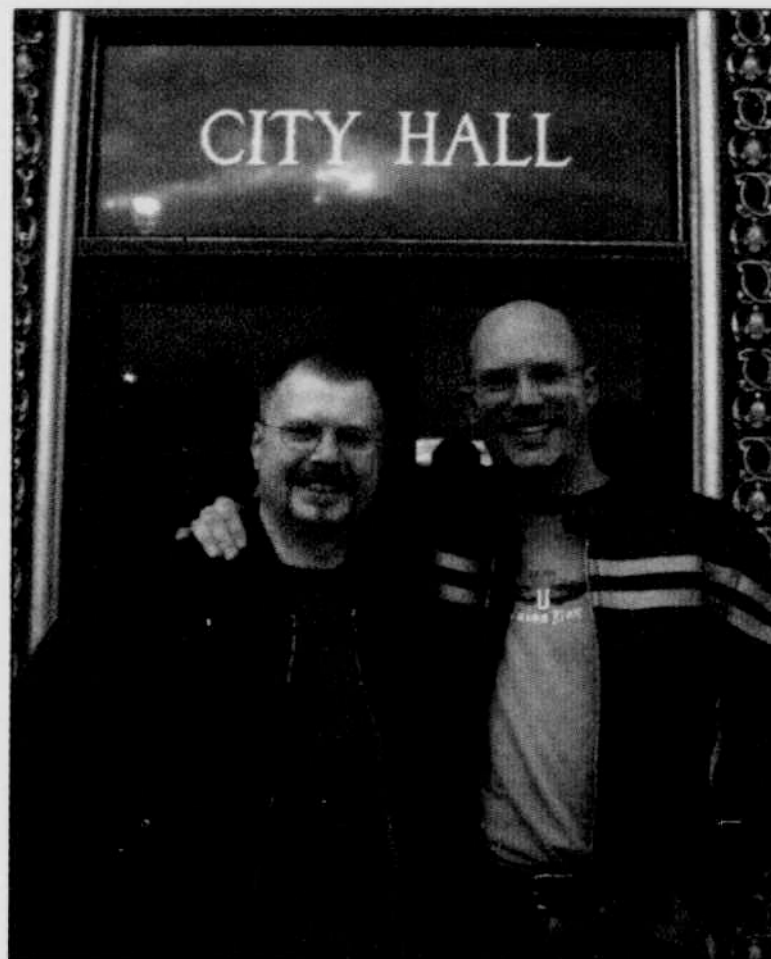
Despite Evans' migraine, the couple jumped into a rented Pontiac with an assortment of snacks and a six-pack of Red Bull to sustain them throughout the 12-hour drive. They arrived at City Hall at 6 a.m. Saturday, pumped full of caffeine and excitement. One other couple already were there. Since it was so early, Evans and Richardson drove the car to a friend's and returned at 7:30 a.m. to find that the line was now more than 40 people long.

Fortunately, the first couple had told everyone about the boys who drove all night from Portland and so, according to Evans, "when we arrived everyone was waving and cheering to us, and they rushed us up to the front of the line." As they did, cameras arrived and the telegenic couple were interviewed by several journalists. (In fact, footage of them ran all weekend on CNN, which is how Richardson's paternal grandmother learned he was gay.)

At 10 a.m., the doors to City Hall opened, and Evans and Richardson proudly entered the building, a sense of awe and history overwhelming them. They were married on the balcony of the rotunda by a city worker who was deputized to perform weddings. A number of other ceremonies were going on at the same time.

"It was really pretty," Evans says. "The ceremony took about four minutes, and we cried like big old sissies."

When the couple finally left with their marriage license in hand, the line stretched almost



Bob Richardson (left) didn't want to marry Jason Evans until they could do it legally in the United States

completely around the enormous building. As one of the first couples married on Valentine's Day, the newlyweds were greeted by cheers from the waiting throngs.

As Evans puts it, "We wanted to be a part of the most important homosexual event in history since Stonewall."

Waiting 2 1/2 hours feels like child's play to Portlanders Tay Juncker and Kathy Belge. The couple, who have been together for 12 years, were also in line that weekend. But for most of their wait, they didn't know whether they would get in.

Like many gay Portlanders, Juncker and Belge were carefully following the developments in San Francisco. On Saturday morning, when the city was still issuing licenses, Belge turned to Juncker and said, "Honey I don't want to regret that we didn't take part in this historic event." They jumped onto the Internet, found inexpensive plane tickets and were at the airport three hours later preparing to board.

After a quick tour of the Castro, where the mood was jubilant ("People were everywhere looking at rings, and you could tell they had been doing a booming business that week," Belge says), they turned in early because they had been warned that the line would be long.

On Sunday morning they arrived at City Hall, where more than 50 couples already were in line. "An hour or two later," Juncker explains, "some guy came out and told us we were on the wrong side of the building. We ended up being even further back in line."

But then came potentially devastating news: 320 couples who had waited in line Saturday had been told to return at 10 a.m. Sunday, when they would be brought to the front of the line. That meant only another 80 couples would be married that day.

"They handed out 80 tickets, and we were about 14 couples behind those 80," Belge explains. "At that point, the liaison to the mayor pointed to a woman in a white sweater behind us and said:

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