

tion? The question brings to mind a comment made by comedian Chris Rock in a recent HBO special: "I support gay marriage. Gay people have a right to be as miserable as everybody else."

We do

The Rev. Casey Moffett-Chaney, a lesbian who serves as senior minister for the Portland Center for Spiritual Growth, doesn't think marriage equals misery.

"The inability to make a marriage work in no way negates the importance or positive aspects of marriage itself," she says. "Marriage does not create failed relationships. Individuals create those failures."

Moffett-Chaney recently married her partner, Berdell, in Victoria, British Columbia, on the 21st anniversary of their commitment to one another.

"We live in a society which, despite the huge percentage of failed marriages, teaches us to value marriage as a worthy endeavor," says Moffett-Chaney. "We grow up defining marriage as the ultimate statement of love, devotion and commitment any human can give to another."

Another queer clergy member, Universal Life Minister and Wiccan the Rev. Cort Brumfield, thinks same-sex couples should consider marriage as a way of revitalizing the institution as a whole.

"What a contribution we can make to our culture," he says, "by getting married and making those marriages true expressions of love and commitment!"

Same-sex couples as marriage role models?

Tillay Christensen sits across the table from me at a cafe. Her face is a bright, happy moon, and her gestures are animated. She laughs easily and talks about marriage with genuine feeling.

"My parents divorced when I was 2," she says. "Sure, it altered my feelings about marriage."

Tillay (pronounced tih-LAY; call her TIL-ee and see how fast your head comes off your shoulders) Christensen is a 53-year-old self-proclaimed stay-at-home parent—actually, "domestic goddess" is her preferred term. Her wife, Mary, is 55 and works in the Portland Public Schools system. (Mary requested we not use her last name for fear of "that one parent who just can't understand and can make a whole lot of trouble.") On March 4 the couple went down to the Multnomah



"There is no question that actual lawful marriage, publicly acknowledged and socially sanctioned, creates a more solid sense of permanence"

—the Rev. Casey Moffett-Chaney, left with her spouse, Berdell

Building, stood in line for 4 1/2 hours and were legally married.

The two met in 1981 at a day care center that Mary had begun in Portland. They admit they had feelings for each other at the time but were involved in other relationships. Several years later, they ran into each other on the street.

"I remembered her," says Christensen. "She showed me a picture of her daughter she had just adopted and asked me if I'd like to come to meet her."

Christensen agreed to meet Mary's daughter, and after setting the date and time, Mary said goodbye. "I turned to my friend who was with me," Christensen says, "and I said, 'That's who I'm supposed to be with.'"

At first the relationship was overwhelming for them both. Mary's newly adopted child, a new relationship, work and living apart—the stress became too much.

"I was living by myself in a little apartment," Christensen says. "[Mary] said to me, about three months in: 'I've got a kid. I'm not fooling around. If we're going to do this, move in.' And I did."

That was 13 years ago. "It was permanent," Christensen explains. "Far more so than anything I'd had before."

If Christensen and her wife are marriage role models, then it seems commitment is not the product of marriage but the requisite of it.

"After 13 years, we knew we were committed," Christensen says proudly. "We'd been married. We even had the rings. We got them five or six years earlier. When we got married, we took them off and put them back on each other."

So if they considered themselves "married" already, why was it important for Christensen and Mary to get legally married?

Christensen's answer is multifaceted. She acknowledges that part of the impetus to marry

"Marriage is a way of recognizing legally that there's a commitment we've made to be a family"
—Tillay Christensen



Tillay Christensen and her spouse, Mary, display mementos of their wedding

was a civil rights statement. But there was something more personal, as well.

"As a family with children," she says, "it's also a way of recognizing legally that there's a commitment we've made to be a family. A validation that we've never before been allowed."

Christensen leans in and says in a serious voice: "We live in a culture where ceremonies are a validation. To be denied that validation because of who you love and then to have that validation open up for us was, 'Wow!'"

Christensen says she and Mary have already "proved themselves" as capable of long-term commitment. "But before, there wasn't the language of 'marriage' to show what we were doing. Why aren't we allowed the same language to define our family?"

Her eyes twinkle when she adds, "Especially when sometimes our kind of family is more successful at it."

We might

Molly Hershey, 38, lives in Portland with her partner, Lynnae Oxley, a 34-year-old professional chef. They met almost six years ago in San Francisco, where they both lived.

"It's not quite the lesbian U-Haul story, but in some ways it might well be," says Hershey, laughing.

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