

Wedded Bliss

by Meg Daly

"It's amazing to me to have my personal life be so political," says Elizabeth Lavenue. We are sitting in her comfortable living room with her wife, Myra, and their 5-month-old daughter, Aria. The baby, dressed in a Mia Hamm-inspired soccer shirt, smiles and chews on a toy, then drifts off to sleep.

The Lavenues were married March 3 at Keller Auditorium along with hundreds of others, and are now one of the 3,000-plus queer couples married in Multnomah County awaiting word on the union's legal status.

But emotionally and spiritually, Elizabeth and Myra have been married for several years.

The 30-something couple, whose love for each other is apparent in their every gesture, had a commitment ceremony Oct. 5, 2001. Elizabeth took Myra's last name. Friends and family helped celebrate. Elizabeth says the ceremony "was a way to feel more secure in our relationship before having a baby."

Last spring, when news of the impending same-sex marriage licenses broke, Myra rushed home, dropped to her knee and asked Elizabeth to marry her. Again.

Myra says she felt validated March 3. "And really moved by straight allies."

As the struggle for marriage equality heated up with Ballot Measure 36, Myra says she and Elizabeth became "instant activists." They use the word "wife" frequently in reference to one another, both as an affirmation of their relationship and to educate others that wife can mean lesbian partner, too.

Full marriage is of heightened importance to a family like the Lavenues. They are anxious to secure whatever protections they can for their young daughter. Myra was not allowed to sign the birth certificate the day Elizabeth gave birth to Aria. She has since adopted Aria, and both women are listed as the child's parents. But they worry that same-sex adoption rights could come under fire from the conservative right in Oregon.

Elizabeth says marriage has "added a deeper level of commitment, seriousness and stability" to their relationship.

"It's not a guarantee that you won't have a hiccup in the relationship," Myra chimes in.

"But it gives you a foundation."

The Lavenues try to remain optimistic in the face of the conservative backlash against queers. Elizabeth calls it "a great lesson in patience." She credits community leaders for helping her keep the faith.

"It's so inspiring to have leaders like Roey [Thorpe, executive director of Basic Rights Oregon] who have the smarts and can talk about the big picture," says Elizabeth.

Myra says the path to full marriage equality is "just a matter of educating people. 'I have hope about that.'"

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Jim Morris and Richard Colombo also had a commitment ceremony a few years prior to getting married March 3 in Multnomah County. The two men, now in their early 50s, traveled to Vermont to get a civil union license in 2002. They

brought along some best friends from Portland, and their union was solemnized in a small town where the justice of the peace was also a massage therapist. A farmer at the local courthouse waved to the couple as they left the building and said, "Good luck to you!"

Like the Lavenues, Morris and Colombo have felt married for years.

"As a gay person, you learn to create your own values and traditions because you have to in order to survive," says Colombo.

Morris says their wedding day in March was "surprisingly emotional." Both men glow as they talk about the day.

But Colombo adds that he knew "in all that joy, there was going to be a hellacious backlash."

Now that the backlash is in full swing, the husbands have somewhat different levels of optimism about what is next on the political front. Morris says he is "confident there will be

marriage equality in Oregon."

"I'm not as optimistic," says Colombo. "We've taken a major setback."

Colombo says he would be OK with civil unions, with the caveat that all couples, regardless of sexual orientation, had the same status.

"The thing that will never cease to anger us is that we pay our taxes...we're great citizens and great neighbors... and yet we don't get the rights and responsibilities of marriage," he says.

Morris has encountered a uniquely frustrating situation of being a second-class citizen within the very business he owns. The insurance carrier he has for his small consulting firm will not put Colombo on his plan. Yet one of his straight employees could have a quickie wedding in Vegas and get his or her spouse on the health plan with no hitches.

Colombo says marriage is just the latest

front in the battle for queer liberation. "As soon as our marriages are finally validated, it will be hard to look at us as second-class citizens."

Looking at the two

bright-eyed, attractive men as they sip coffee at a cafe—each with his salt-and-pepper hair and comfortable weekend clothes—it is hard to imagine anyone could miss the couple's boundless humanity. Morris says the November election has changed his approach to activism. He now looks for any opportunity to talk to any individual or group about his life and the rights he is denied.

Colombo—who, like Morris, came out later in life—says that "being a gay person can bring you enlightenment."

"I am so glad I am who I am," he says. He gestures to his heart and says that the movement for equal rights "all starts here."

Morris, beaming, nods his head in assent.

"I am so glad
I am who I am"

—Richard Colombo

The Year in Local Victories: Sam Adams Plans for the Future

by Patricia L. Macaodha

With the challenging election finally finished, one of the first actions of Portland City Commissioner-elect Sam Adams was to contact rival Nick Fish.

"I thanked him for being such a good and tough campaign opponent," Adams writes in his online letter to supporters. "He assured me he would continue to stay active in Portland's civic life. I look forward to working together with Nick to make Portland an even greater city."

Just Out took the opportunity to talk with Adams about his plans and hopes for service to the city. Amid all of the depressing results for Oregon's sexual minorities, his election was a small victory.

Adams is both the first openly gay city commissioner and the first to be elected from North Portland's Kenton neighborhood since 1972. The area strongly supported him in the election. He's also the first city commissioner to have received food stamps, lived in public housing and experienced, as the result of a medical emergency, a bankruptcy (all of which, by the way, he repaid).

Adams was born in Butte, Mont., because there were no hospitals in the rural community of Whitehall, where his father taught special education at the high school level. The family moved to Richland, Wash., in 1965 and to Oregon a year later. He attended school in Newport and Eugene, graduating from South Eugene High School in 1982.

By then, his parents were divorced, and Adams had experienced the maze of low-paying jobs, subsidized student housing, student loans and food stamps when his mother had to find work in Portland. "I know firsthand how families can struggle and how the combination of hard work and the right kind of government can get families through the rough patches."

These experiences drive the new city commissioner to prioritize jobs and education by "getting Portlanders, the unemployed and

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the Hetero States of America." —Former Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura speaking against the proposed Massachusetts constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, in an appearance at the Massachusetts Statehouse, March 22. >>