

Bowman's perspective on marriage opposes a strategic plan she sees as crafted by Christian conservatives.

"You can't turn on a TV or radio right now, or read a newspaper, where the issue of gay marriage is not being used to be incredibly hurtful to some people," she says. "What good does it do to oppose it? It's not about personal feelings right now. It's a political battle that has to be fought."

The Alternatives to Marriage Project advocates for equality for unmarried people, including people who choose not to marry, cannot marry or live together before marriage, according to its Internet

site, www.unmarried.org. Though the national nonprofit organization supports same-sex marriage because of the discriminatory nature of current law, it adheres to a broader view of recognizing family diversity in all its forms.

The Web site states: "While access to marriage will provide important legal protections and social recognition for those same-sex couples who choose to marry, it will not guarantee equality and fairness for unmarried people. Many of these existing inequities should be remedied by changing government policy so that it does not discriminate on the basis of marital status."

According to U.S. Census data, the number of unmarried adults steadily increased tenfold between 1960 and 2000. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of unmarried couples living together increased 72 percent.

Cohabiting same-sex couples in the United States represent 1.2 million of the population. Of the total number of unmarried partners nationwide, 11 percent are same-sex couples, according to the 2000 census.

Those in the queer equality business say a visceral reaction to the marriages last March changed the minds of many cynics.

"When you are systematically excluded from a rite of passage that most people go through or think about going through, you do a lot of things to protect yourself from the pain," says Rebekah Kassell, a spokeswoman for Basic Rights Oregon. "That can include denying it as important, dismissing it as outdated, saying it's not a part of your life, not something you want for your relationship. But what happened last year is that many people felt for the first time what being equal is like and were surprisingly moved by what that felt like for them, and found their perceptions about marriage shift dramatically." ■

WHY I CHANGED MY MIND ABOUT MARRIAGE

A CONVERSATION WITH WILLAMETTE WEEK COLUMNIST BYRON BECK

by Sarah Dougher

Some people think Byron Beck is cranky. This could be because he often takes an adversarial stand in his *Willamette Week* column, "Queer Window," which he has written for almost five years. From this soapbox he comments on everything from suit fetishes to Portland gay celebrity gossip, such as it is.

But he also discusses politics. For a long time, Beck was ambivalent about same-sex marriage, and said so on the pages of the paper, much to the consternation of many pro-marriage queers. Now he and his partner, Juan Martinez, are suing for the right to ask each other to get married.

Why this change of heart?

"I think I could call this past year 'the year I grew up,'" Beck says. "Buying a house didn't make me grow up, having too many pets didn't make me grow up, and being in a nine-year relationship didn't, either."

As Beck watched the first same-sex weddings March 3, 2004, something fundamental changed for him. "Before that, I didn't want to get married. I didn't know what it meant, and I thought it would change people negatively. Now I see that sometimes it helps two people become more themselves."

In addition to witnessing weddings, the year brought personal changes for Beck: His mother was sick with breast cancer, his father had a heart attack, and his grandmother fell ill. It took such life-altering events to prompt him to think of himself as over his "disco queen faggot self" and to start accepting himself, flaws and all. For the first time he really started thinking of someone other than himself. "Instead of me, me, me, I realized it was 'us' for me and Juan."

When the courts suspended the possibility for same-sex marriage licenses in April 2004, Beck suddenly realized he had missed an opportunity. The issue of same-sex marriage began to take on per-



sonal elements that he had not previously pondered. He and Martinez were celebrating 10 years together, but they did not want to have a commitment

ceremony, or something that only mimicked a straight wedding.

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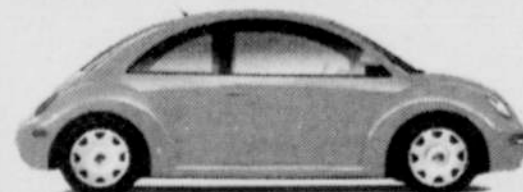
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