

northwest

Couple Fight for Rights

Hospital trip illustrates need for legal protections

by Dee Duderstadt

When a straight couple say "I do," they are given rights and responsibilities that extend beyond a public ceremony, often ones they don't realize they have. But gay couples are painfully aware of the rights they are denied.

After an alarming incident at a Yamhill County hospital, Lafayette couple Michael Oravetz and Jonathon Brown learned this the hard way.

Oravetz, 37, grew up in the Yamhill-Carlton area of Yamhill County. He left for Portland years ago because he could not take the torment of his bigoted neighbors. Yet when he and Portlander Brown, 39, were looking for a more rural place to settle with their son and two daughters, Oravetz returned to Yamhill County because he felt the climate had changed. And, for the most part, the couple believe it has.

But recently Oravetz and Brown found out how important the domestic partnership license is for couples to have.

Brown was admitted March 10 to Willamette Valley Medical Center, where he was until March 21, for severe pancreatitis and gallstones.

While there, his employer requested that Oravetz get proof from the hospital that Brown was ad-

mitted so he could be excused on medical leave.

When Oravetz went to the hospital's administrative office, he was denied the documentation. Rather, the clerk demanded a copy of the couple's domestic partnership license, something they had yet to get.

Oravetz was upset because she "would not have asked a straight couple for their marriage license."

Hospital policy for such situations is to give the partner a copy of the privacy laws and hospital privacy releases. This can then be taken to the sick individual and he or she can sign it, allowing the partner access to medical information.

"She wasn't following hospital policy. It had to do with her own prejudice," Oravetz said.

After Brown's surgery, Oravetz returned to the administrative office, this time with one of Brown's nurses, and faced the administrator. Both he and the nurse pleaded Brown's case but were again denied.

As fate would have it, the woman's supervisor happened to be walking past. The matter was cleared up within minutes.

Willamette Valley Medical Center representatives agreed that it is the hospital's policy to provide a copy of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, privacy information

and release forms to unmarried couples. They also indicated that the incident occurred as Oravetz and Brown described it.

Hospital representatives indicated that they took care of the problem, although the facility's spokeswoman refused to confirm whether the employee was reprimanded.

Oravetz and Brown, who have been together for more than two years, registered as domestic partners immediately following Brown's release from the hospital. Since Feb. 4, there have been 15 applications for domestic partnerships in Yamhill County.

"It's the closest thing we can actually get to being married," Brown said of the license. "I am not looking for more rights and privileges. I am just looking for equal treatment."

The couple sat in their living room relaxing after an evening meal. Their children were in bed, and the chickens had been fed and penned. The rural atmosphere took over as insect songs began to compete with one another.



From left, Gabriel "Gabbie" Brown, Jonathan Brown, Jesse Brown, Andrew Brown and Michael Oravetz demonstrate the need for laws protecting nontraditional families.

"I am very committed to him, and I know he is very committed to me. I think what it gives us is an opportunity to show the world that gay people can get married and have a loving relationship just like my folks do," Brown said. "It's a step. It's the closest thing to actual marriage."

Oravetz interrupts, "to true equality that we've had in a long time...to be an equal part of society," finishing Brown's sentence. "You finally feel some equality."

"The only difference" between gays and straights, Brown explained, "is what we do in the bedroom."

Oravetz interrupted again: "We all choose different people. We just happen to choose people of the same gender. We're out, and they aren't going to be able to closet us again." 10

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