

Wed a Minute

Remembering seven weeks of same-sex marriage



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BY MARTY DAVIS

Where were you seven years ago, in early March 2004?

I, along with many other sodden persons, spent many consecutive days hanging out at the Multnomah County Building on SE Hawthorne. Why? Because late in the evening of March 2 it was announced that, starting the next day, Multnomah County would accept, and process, applications for same-sex marriages.

If you were there you remember the ripple effect of the shock as news spread across Portland. You see, this was completely out of the blue. No one had a clue. Well, a handful of people knew, but the greater community was caught totally off guard. That would be the greater community right on up to the governor's office, by the way.

Word spread quickly—very quickly, given it was a time before Facebook. Before, I even think, most of the local media had websites with blogs and daily, hourly updates. Can you imagine? People had to use phones and emails to spread the word. Funny thing, though, it worked and word spread rapidly. The story immediately became easy to follow, what with all hell breaking loose like it did.

All this is coming to mind now, not on the fifth anniversary, now quietly past, nor on the 10th, as would seem logical, but now marking the seventh anniversary—thanks to the First Unitarian Church of Portland setting the celebratory stage with its Politics of Love event.

There are enough stories, memories, pain, turmoil about those seven weeks in Multnomah County to fill several books. What was at best well-intended, at worst foolishly thought out impacted lives in a way no one

ever could have predicted. Political careers were destroyed and friendships were cast aside. The "Mean Girls" were bred, creating the lowest point of what was by then a total debacle. An unknown Ted Wheeler, now Oregon state treasurer, was cast into a role that could eventually lead him to the governor's seat, as then County Chair Diane Linn was sent into political and personal exile. Wheeler would not be where he is today if Basic Rights Oregon had not sat down for tea and talk about same-sex marriage with the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners.

My memories start with the first night. As word spread that the county would accept marriage license applications the next day, eager couples lined up to be the first, with many staying in line overnight. My memory, now seven years older, recalls Christine Tanner and her spouse-to-be camping out to be the first in line. Tanner is known for Tanner v. Oregon Health Science University, a landmark lawsuit that won the right for OHSU same-sex couples to receive health and life insurance benefits for their partners. It seemed more than fitting that she would be among the first of many same-sex couples to be wed in Oregon. Basic Rights Oregon selected Mary Li and Rebecca Kennedy to carry the honor as first to be married but that was a staged media opportunity—as were many of the events surrounding this very interesting moment in Oregon history.

The lines grew longer and longer and stayed wrapped around the Hawthorne building for several days. I recall it raining pretty much the whole darned time. It was cold and wet; it was festive and happy. People came by and handed out flowers, cookies, hot beverages

and snacks. Cars honked, people waved. One lane of traffic in front of the building was blocked off for protestors. And protestors came and took their place. It was in front of this building that I first met Nelson Jones, holding his sign of support for people who were about to obtain a right for which he'd waited a lifetime.

In another eyebrow-raising move, the Board of Commissioners waived the standard three-day waiting requirement and allowed marriages to be performed immediately upon receiving the application. Couples were literally coming out of the doorway and being hustled off to a corner to be married by waiting clergy. Basic Rights Oregon set up camp in the upper balcony of the Keller Auditorium, where hundreds of wedding ceremonies were performed. It was surreal, at best. Ceremonies were also held at Holocene, where I encountered a lesbian couple who had flown out from a southern state to take this opportunity to be wed. They were so fearful someone at home would find out that they would not allow their picture to be taken or share their full names. They lived completely closeted lives in their home state, but they felt compelled to fly to Oregon and have this memory, this moment for themselves. Some months later they would, along with all the others, receive a refund for their license fee and a notice that their marriage was voided.

I hurriedly went from location to location, taking hundreds of pictures, all of which I now cannot find. I know they are here somewhere, in a yet-unopened box from our move of nearly four years ago—and I will find them. Seven years ago I was still using film, so there are no digital copies of these archives. I will find these photos—a 10th anniversary is coming up, photos will be needed.

Memories are one part of this story, questions are another. Did the Multnomah County Commissioners make the right decision? Would Ballot Measure 36 have been passed had this not happened? Was it the right thing to do?

I don't know, what do you think? ☺



REFLECTION

15 Years Ago in *Just Out*

- San Francisco's new Main Library opened April 18 with a unique and historic archive. The library contains the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center, named for the gay philanthropist who is its biggest benefactor. The center is the first specifically devoted to documenting gay and lesbian history in a public library.

- The Ladies Professional Golf Association has its first out lesbian player. Muffin Spencer-Devlin, 42, told *Sports Illustrated* that she plans to marry her lover, musician/composer Lynda Roth, in May.

- Keith Meinhold, the only person to successfully challenge in court the old ban on gay men and lesbians in the military and remain on active duty, retired from the military on March 27. He ended his 16-year military career by deciding to take a package of early retirement benefits.

- The Metropolitan Human Rights Commission approved on March 12 two resolutions expressing its opposition to a series of proposed ballot measures that it contends would negatively impact upon the civil and human rights of the people of Portland and Multnomah County.

- Barry Burns seized the title of Mr. Portland Leather 1996 during the Contest Weekend held Feb. 23-25. Burns will represent Portland in the International Mr. leather competition in Chicago from May 23 to 27.

- With a pending court decision in Hawaii

that could pave the way for legal marriage between same-gender couples, the culture finally appears to be catching up—and, not surprisingly, many people as well as panicky lawmakers nationwide appear alarmed by the concept of equal marriage rights for same-gender couples.

- To put it simply, most of us would not want to be in Chuck Carpenter's shoes. During the past year, the 34-year-old Republican legislator lost his job with Nike and generated a torrent of bad feelings among many within the gay and lesbian community due to his public campaigning on behalf of Gordon Smith, a failed (now resurrected) U.S. senatorial candidate who believes that it is a "special right" for people to receive legal protections from discrimination based on sexual orientation.

- Oregon's first and only lesbian and gay softball association is starting its second season on April 21. Rose City Softball Association will pitch off as Margie Boulé, *Oregonian* columnist and jazz vocalist, sings the national anthem, accompanied by the Rose City Gay Freedom Band.

just out

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