

For 60 years, waiting for the freedom to marry

BY EUGENE WOODWORTH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

When I first met Eric, I got cold all over and couldn't move. It felt like destiny: I'd just met the person I was going to spend the rest of my life with. We both knew we were gay, even though we didn't have a word for it, and we both knew, deep down, that we were OK with our identities.

That was 60 years ago, and we've been a couple ever since. Now in our 80s, we're still waiting to have the freedom to marry in Oregon, but our time is running short. I have congestive heart failure. In the last four months, my energy has plummeted. My doctor estimates I have 12 months to live.

We'd like to marry before I die, but travelling to Washington is an onerous journey for someone who can barely walk a block. Nobody should be told it is illegal to marry the person they love, and it saddens me that Oregon is the last state on the West Coast that doesn't allow same-sex couples to marry. I'm doing my best to change that, and I hope you will get involved with Oregon United for Marriage as well.

My relationship with Eric has a long history. That first day we met, we went to a friend's party, and then went out afterward. The waitress in the restaurant said, "Are you twins?" "Yes," we said. We used that cover for decades. It was an intuitive thing. In hindsight, it was also an affirmation. Everyone would ask us, "Are you twins?" or "Are you brothers?" It was like they knew there was something deeper between us. They knew we were family. At the time, the safest way to refer to each other in public was as brothers. It protected us, while also

affirming our love, commitment and sense of family.

Coming to Portland also felt like destiny. We were riding the train down from Seattle. When we passed Longview and crossed into Oregon, we started feeling at home. Within a few minutes, we were thinking, "we really like this place. And we weren't even in Portland yet. When we did get off the train, we just felt at home. That was 1955. Portland was much more conservative then, but it was safer than Chicago.

Everybody lives in a closet. And you've got to discern what that closet is and get out of it so you can live a full life, rather than one of partial secrecy. We didn't come out of the closet until 1977. Eric was Catholic. He had even spent several years in a monastery before we met. I converted. And a rogue Franciscan friar married us right here in our living room, with friends looking on. There was even an article in The Oregonian. It felt like an enormous step, to come out, to admit that this man was not my brother but my husband, and to stop leaving him at home the night of the office holiday party. It wasn't a marriage sanctioned by church or state, but it mattered to us.

In 1993, we were married again. We had both converted to Buddhism, and we were married at the Dharma Rain Center in southeast Portland. Ten years later, we publicly renewed our vows again. And each time we got up in front of our loving friends to publicly state our love and commitment to each other, it mattered. But it also mattered that they were not legally recognized weddings.

Being married says something to others about our aspirations in relation to another human being. Marriage says "family" in a way no other word does. That social recognition is extraordinarily powerful, and marriage would help Eric and me to have the protections and responsibilities we need to take care of each other.

I never get tired of waking up next to Eric, listening to him, watching him or feeling his hand squeeze my shoulder as he passes by. I felt when I met him that it was the first day of the rest of my life. I hope that some day soon, all Oregonians will have the freedom to marry.

To get involved with Oregon United for Marriage, go to www.OregonUnitedForMarriage.org.

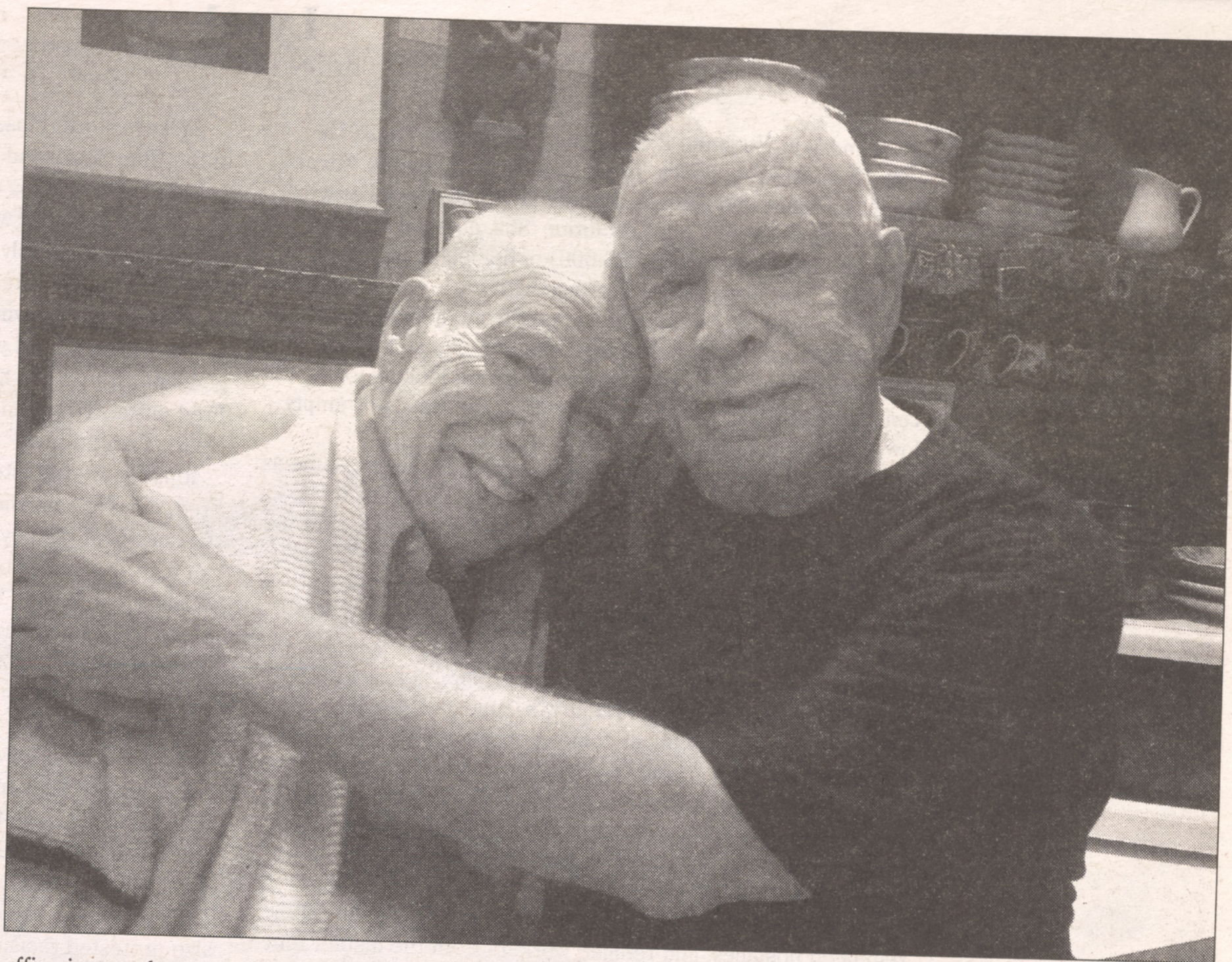


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HENRY BENNON

Eugene (left) and his partner, Eric, have been together for six decades, waiting for the state of Oregon to allow them to marry.

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