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TALES OF COMMITMENT

Same-sex couples tell their stories BY JES BURNS

Most couples plan for months or longer for their wedding; Diane DePaolis and Nadia Telsey had a week. DePaolis, a lawyer in Eugene, had a friend in the Oregon ACLU who tipped her off that Multnomah County would begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples in March 2004. The couple had been together since 1988, but DePaolis says, "I never really thought it was an option, so I just didn't think about it." With the tip came a proposal and a short drive north to get the license.



Carol and Amber Dennis

Telsey and DePaolis decided they wanted to have a ceremony even though the whole business of wedding-making was discouraging to them. "It seems like it's an obligation to spend thousands of dollars, and you have to wonder about the money spent on huge marriage ceremonies and receptions where the marriages don't last long," DePaolis says. But DePaolis wasn't discouraged by the concept of making a public statement of commitment in front of family and friends.

In a week, they rented the ballroom of the Downtown Athletic Center, put out the invite, ordered cakes, arranged for über-gay rainbow decorations and planned the party. Telsey is Jewish, and the couple decided to incorporate an aspect of that wedding tradition called the chuppah — a canopy supported by friends and relatives that symbolizes the home the couple will create. They marched in to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." They were united with the words "I hereby pronounce you legal spouses" — "legal" being the operative word.

Of course the legality of their union didn't last long — not much more than a year. But Telsey and DePaolis still consider themselves married. DePaolis says she didn't realize how moved she would be in pledging her commitment publicly. She sees the act as a deeply personal *and* political gesture. And she finds a subtle satisfaction in "tweaking" those so opposed to same-sex marriage, defying them in an open, honest and public way. Of course, she says, there's love. "After 18 years, we are still each other's best friends, and we love each other with all our hearts. Don't leave that out!"

Amber and Carol Dennis had a bit more time to plan their wedding. On New Year's Eve of 2004, the couple and two friends were entrenched in a game of Trivial Pursuit. At the stroke of midnight, Carol dropped to one knee and proposed — well, tried to propose. Before she could finish, Amber began yelling, "You're doing it now? It's happening now?!" It was. It did. And Amber said yes.

The couple took the next year and a half to plan for the big day. The July 4, 2006, wedding was truly a community affair. Nearly 180 people attended their wedding, and many of them helped. A close friend of the couple made their cake as a gift, other friends helped to plan an all-vegetarian potluck reception, the minister was a friend and many of the decorations were donated from previously married friends. Like DePaolis and Telsey, Amber and Carol incorporated religious tradition into their ceremony. They had a chuppah, but also followed the Quaker tradition of

having the guests sanction their marriage in writing. Their marriage certificate is a signed chuppah canopy; it's hanging on their family room wall.

Carol and Amber consider themselves married but refer to each other as "partners" instead of spouses. Amber sometimes jokingly refers to Carol as her "lusband" — short for lesbian husband. The couple is hopeful that with the new Democratically-controlled State Legislature, a law supporting meaningful civil unions will be passed.

With vows such as "I promise to speak from my heart so that you can always hear that I love you" made before hundreds of people, Amber and Carol promised to never hide from each other or those around them. But the couple faces the same challenges of other same-sex couples all over the country. Amber says, "Our relationship is invisible unless we make it otherwise, and even in Eugene, it's not always easy to gracefully counter the assumption that we're married to a guy."

And then there are the guys who have to counter the opposite assumption. Carroll Noel and Paul Rohde did not take the traditional path — even when compared with other same-sex couples. They've been together for nearly 20 years, and they've started a tradition of celebrating major anniversaries. They held a big blowout to celebrate their first 10 years together; now they're planning a small gathering for their 20th and are contemplating another big party to mark their 25th.

Even though the first celebration was technically an anniversary party, it had many of the same elements (and stresses) of a more traditional wedding/commitment ceremony. Rohde says, "We wanted it to be a celebration of our ten years together and our relationship rather than a promise of future plans." But at the event, the couple exchanged vows and rings, their close friends made speeches to honor them and they had important people in their lives light candles. They even had their three-year-old son as a ring bearer.

Of course, liberties were taken. "We didn't get dressed up, didn't have a cake and had dance music but not an official first dance," says Rohde. And they also had a close male friend perform as "Mrs. Malaprop" and MC the event.

In the end, the intense sentiment of laying a relationship bare before others could not be avoided. "I thought I'd be the one crying, but Paul cried the whole time" says Noel. Rohde agrees: "I got choked up from some music before it started and pretty much cried through the whole thing." ■

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