



A Joyful Cry

After pushing for 34 years

Good news. Those cheers you heard wafting down from Salem a few days ago signaled a major surge toward justice. For the record, on May 9, Gov. Kulongoski signed two historic bills – the Oregon Equality Act and the Oregon Family Fairness Act – with all the pomp and ritual you'd expect after a grueling 34-year push for lesbian, gay, bi, trans and queer rights in our state.

I stood in the shadow of the Capitol that morning, as close as I could get to the podium and special signing table, wishing I'd worn warmer clothes but glad to be there to witness this long-awaited event. I snuggled up close to my friend from PFLAG, both for warmth and also for that kind of connection you need when something is just too good and amazing and wonderful to contain.

Beyond the gathered dignitaries and across the bank of media cameras stood a few hundred more supporters, squinting in the morning sun and poised to welcome a new era in Oregon's long struggle for equality. I felt so proud of our LGBTQ community, of the members of the Governor's Task Force for Equality, of our queer and queer-friendly legislators and of all our activist friends and allies who have worked so hard and so long for a victory like this.

The moment was ours. With one awesome sweep of his mighty pen (seven sweeps of seven pens, actually, for ceremonial purposes) the gov officially outlawed discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity and provided access to legal recognition of same-sex domestic partnerships. The crowd erupted. We whooped and applauded and dabbed our eyes. My PFLAG pal and I hugged. Everybody was cheering. Yeah, baby, victory is sweet.

Rather, we expect it will be. The new laws won't take effect until 2008, so I guess we're still fair game. If you're hot to fire, evict or exclude us from a public place, better make it snappy. Come January, time's up, buddy. After that we start exercising our newly legalized right to equal treatment under the law, and God only knows what that'll look like.

Speaking of God, there are a few exceptions to Oregon's new non-discrimination requirements. Houses of worship need not comply. No kidding. They're perfectly free to hang on to their parochial employment policies – an exemption they fought for dearly, lest they be forced to face the specter of a gay receptionist, a lesbian janitor or a transgender Sunday school teacher. Heaven forbid.

Any churches, synagogues, mosques, covens or other religious entities that value "all God's children" may continue to solemnize same-sex couples' holy matrimony as they've been doing, even though such marriages aren't recognized, even under the new laws. But come Jan. 1 (soon as county courthouses open after the New Year holiday), same-sex couples will be entitled, for a small fee, to register as domestic partners. That will get us all the state-regulated rights and responsibilities of marriage – most having to do with what happens in case of illness, death, divorce and being called to testify against one another in court. Hence, our elation.

Of course, passing these laws doesn't make the opposition go away. Expect an earful from the no-special-rights-immoral-behavior-save-our-children-yammer-yammer bunch. Their latest rap is that domestic partnership is "marriage by another name," and therefore unconstitutional given Oregon's one man-one woman constitutional amendment. Spoil sports.

Never mind that as domestic partners we aren't entitled to any of marriage's federal benefits, such as receiving a deceased partner's Social Security, filing joint federal income tax returns or keeping our status as a couple when we cross state lines. And, unlike legally married couples, our employer-provided spousal insurance is taxed as income. Kinda funky.

But let's not be greedy. Progress is progress. In just a few short months same-sex couples can register as domestic partners, and it will be illegal to discriminate against LGBTQ people in Oregon. Yay!

Award-winning columnist Sally Sheklow has been writing for EW since 1999.



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