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OPINION

Willing to Live Life with Integrity

Marriage equality matter of justice and freedom

BY MICHAEL SCHUENEMEYER

The plaza steps in front of the U.S. Supreme Court were filled with thousands of people earlier this year as the nine justices heard oral arguments in the two cases dealing with marriage equality.

There was a sense of history in the air as Edie Windsor emerged with the entourage of family, friends and lawyers, and made her way down the steps.

Edie Windsor is 83 years old. She met Thea Speyer, the love of her life, in 1967. They were together 40 years when Thea was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and they decided to go

to Canada and get legally married. Edie tended to Thea's care until Thea died 21 months later.

As anyone could well imagine, Edie was devastated by the loss, but then came the tax bill from the IRS for \$363,000 on the share of the homes Edie and Thea had bought early in their life together and which Edie had just inherited.

For all intents and purposes, the federal government treated Edie and Thea as strangers. That was something Edie could not accept and she filed suit.

In the U.S. v. Windsor, the court is considering whether the Defense of Marriage Act, passed by Congress in 1996, is constitutional. The law prevents the federal government from recognizing same sex marriages, and thus denies legally married same sex couples more than 1,000 federal rights and benefits

offered to legally married, different-sex couples.

But more than the financial consequences, laws like the Defense of Marriage Act and the myriad similar state laws, some of which have been enshrined in state constitutions, lack integrity and violate the principles of justice and freedom.

When my partner and I filed our taxes and refinanced our home in Ohio this year, the fact that neither Ohio law nor the federal government recognizes our legal marriage from California made us betray each other when we had to tick the box which reads "single." It may not seem like much, but it is a constant and not-so-subtle reminder that our relationship has little status and that we are vulnerable.

Edie Windsor commented in an NPR interview the week before the oral argu-

ments, "Marriage... symbolizes commitment and love like nothing else in the world. And it's known all over the world. I mean, wherever you go, if you're married, that means something to people, and it meant a difference in feeling the next day."

As we wait to learn whether the justices will allow the government to continue to treat Edie and Thea as strangers, it has become increasingly clear that the question of marriage equality is no longer if, but when. This isn't to say it is just going to happen.

A change is happening because of people like Edie Windsor, who refuse to be strangers to others, are willing to live their lives with integrity, share their stories, and stand against injustice.

Michael Schuenemeyer is executive for health and wholeness advocacy for the United Church of Christ.

Vote Tipped the Scales in 2012 Election

Black turnout proved decisive

BY MARC MORIAL

It's official: African Americans are the nation's most important swing state.

Last summer, I predicted that the African American vote would tip the scales in the 2012 election of President Barack Obama. My organization, the National Urban League, foresaw a continuation of a trend that proved to be a decisive factor in Obama's 2008 campaign.

The Census Bureau has now confirmed our analysis. Not only did the 2012 black vote make the difference in several key swing states, including Florida, Pennsylvania, Virginia and the biggest prize of all, Ohio, but black voters turned out a higher rate than white voters.

The Census Bureau found that about two in three eligible blacks, about 66 percent, voted in the 2012 presidential



election, higher than the 64 percent of non-Hispanic whites who voted. This marks the first time that blacks have voted at a higher rate than whites since the Census Bureau started publishing statistics on voting by the eligible citizen population in 1996.

Black voter turnout rates have risen 13 percentage points over the past 16 years, and the number of blacks who voted in 2012 rose by about 1.7 million over 2008. This is even more remarkable given that overall voting among eligible citizens declined last year.

This boost in turnout also demonstrates that, in the face of a widespread voter suppression campaign, a record number of blacks heeded the National Urban League's call to "Occupy the Vote" — a campaign that reached 10 million people through traditional and social media, phone banking, and grassroots and community outreach.

In fact, all Census divisions where voting rates of blacks exceeded those of whites included states that introduced major voter suppression tactics in the year leading up to the election.

While the National Urban League

doesn't endorse individual candidates, we do encourage civic engagement, and our affiliates have always played leading roles in voter registration drives. That's why we are also pleased that African Americans registered in record numbers last year. The registration rate for blacks rose from 69.7 percent in 2008 to 73.1 percent in 2012 — the highest registration rate ever recorded.

In Ohio, where Obama won 96 percent of the African-American vote, the black registration rate was 74.4 percent. In North Carolina, a state he lost this time around, African-American registration increased from 71 percent in 2008 to 85 percent in 2012 with 80.2 percent of eligible black voters going to the polls, up from 68.1 percent four years ago.

The increase in black voter participation is a turning point for several reasons.

First, it's clear that Mitt Romney would have eked out a victory in 2012 if voters had turned out at 2004 levels. White turnout was higher and black turnout was lower in that presidential election.

Second, due to an increase in overall

minority voting, people of color will be wielding even more electoral clout in the coming years. According to the demographer William Frey, "by 2024, their vote will be essential to victory."

Third, this demographic shift is prodding both major political parties to increase their outreach and appeal to minority voters and to reassess the impact their policies are having on those communities.

As the Associated Press put it, "The findings represent a tipping point for blacks, who for much of American history were disenfranchised and then effectively barred from voting until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965."

There's no doubt that the opportunity to re-elect America's first black president contributed to record black turnout last year. But, no matter who is on the ballot in 2014 and 2016, we must continue to exercise our voice and Occupy the Vote.

Marc Morial is the president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League and the former mayor of New Orleans.

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