

You Be the Judge: Gay Marriage from the Other Side

by Ray Mungo

When the call went out for volunteer deputy commissioners to marry the expected tsunami of gay and lesbian couples in LA County, the faithful responded in force. Grannies from Culver City, retired lawyers from West Hollywood, moonlighting social workers joined the crush of tattooed young dykes and flamboyant dressers congealing at the county clerk's office in Norwalk, CA, lending this crowd a distinct flavor of seniority and dignity. But the buzz was giddy. As we raised our right hands high in swearing to uphold the state and federal constitutions, even against "foreign enemies," we became living gods vested with the power to join unions which had been intractably denied the rite to wed.

Those foreign enemies bent on disrupting queer weddings had better watch out.

This crowd was hell bent on joining benders. Feverish questions rained down on the staff training the neophyte commissioners. The process of conducting a legal nuptial entails quite a bit of nitpicking paperwork. "What happens in the unlikely event that one of us makes an error on the license?" worried John, a 60ish librarian from Long Beach. (Disaster. The slightest uncrossed 't' or undotted 'i' can send the document back to the recorder and the couple back to being single.) "Will there be any provision for parking?" (Yes.) "Can we accept gratuities?" (No.)

In preparation, the county erected a massive air conditioned tent with 12 wedding chapels inside and prepared for an onslaught. Using their normal Valentine's Day turnout as a guide, they calculated that hundreds of gay couples would descend on the monolithic County Recorder's building, which already processes thousands of marriages, business registrations, and death certificates every year. The Norwalk facility is eternally busy, with long lines of people waiting for licenses on any given day. The addition of the newly liberated gays figured to overwhelm the system, and county officials scrambled frantically to meet the June 17 deadline.

When the long awaited moment arrived, the new commissioners were packed into the tent, draped in somber black robes and madly chatting up a storm, getting acquainted as they waited for the deluge of gay couples to arrive. Trouble is, they didn't arrive. A smattering of gay men and lesbians came to get married, but they were vastly outnumbered by straight couples. More gays chose to wed in West Hollywood, which had inaugurated a new service of issuing licenses from the city hall. Nonetheless, the atmosphere in Norwalk was festive and every gay couple passing through was greeted with applause and good cheer.

As I sat in my robe waiting for the next couple, a uniformed county security guard, white haired and pot bellied, approached me saying "Tell me the truth, what do you really think about the shit that's goin' on here?"

"Shit?" Hunnnh? "I think it's great," I replied. "I'm gay myself and married my husband in Canada."

"If everybody thought the way you do, we wouldn't even be here."

Hunnnh? I still didn't get it. We're here, aren't we? "NO, if everybody thought the way you do, we would never been born, nobody would even BE here."

While I absorbed this abuse in silence, the butch lesbian from The Center LB jumped right on him, reported him to the county supes, had him removed from the Love Tent posthaste. "I'm not going to take that crap," she said. "What about our dignity?"

As each new couple completed their documents, we were handed a sheaf of papers to review and fill in the commissioner's information, then call in Party A and Party B (the new designation replacing "bride" and "groom" on the license) from the waiting area. Every marriage, it seemed, was like a fairy tale. There was no evident difference between gay and straight ones. When people go out of their way to express their love and commitment, hold hands, kiss, cry, sometimes dance around, the commissioner can't possibly lose. It was an unspeakable joy, this uniting.

As the week passed and the couples grew fewer, the commissioners grew closer, like a family of eccentric do-gooders, ranging in age from the ragtag twenties to the liver spotted eighties, we had in common an experience not unlike Woodstock. Come to the tent, get high daily.

When I saw the three men and a young boy enter the waiting area, I nabbed them. I was the only male commissioner on duty at that moment, and figured they were my babies. The county clerk sweetly delivered them to my

robed embrace. Michael and Christopher had driven in from Nevada. They lived in a small town and were convinced they would never have the opportunity to wed there. Together 14 years, they were about 40. The kid, 9 or 10, was Romeo, a nephew they were helping to raise. Randy was their best friend and witness.

The ceremony was borrowed from the same-sex wedding in Vancouver, BC. Michael and Christopher promised to give each other "the love of your person, the comfort of your companionship, the patience of your understanding." They vowed to "recognize the need for communication and compromise in your marriage." The kid was the ring bearer. And they took each other as "lawfully wedded husband," not spouse. The very word "husband" has atomic, cosmic, soaring power for gay men.

I sent them off intoning "United in love, united in life, and now -- united in law. Congratulations!"

Randy cried so much he couldn't speak for minutes. Romeo hopped up and down clapping and shrieking. I puddled. Michael and Christopher locked lips in an X rated kiss that you won't ever see on TV, no, not even on Showtime.

Party on, Party A and Party B.

###