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Massachusetts Couples Seek Right to Marry

BY CHUCK FRANKLIN

Seven gay and lesbian couples in Massachusetts filed suit on April 11 seeking the right to marry. Each couple had previously been denied marriage licenses at their city or town halls.

New England's Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD) filed the suit on behalf of the couples in Suffolk Superior Court. The defendant is the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH).

The seven couples have been in committed relationships between five and 30 years. Four of the couples have young children, while others have faced health crises. All are concerned about providing the security for each other and their families that automatically comes with marriage – and is not available to them. Many of the couples want to be married in order to make a statement to their families and friends about the commitment of their relationships.

Hillary and Julie Goodridge, one of the seven couples, have been committed partners for several years. In anticipation of the birth of their daughter, Annie, they both changed their last names to Hillary's grandmother's maiden name. Annie is now five years old.

Hillary Goodridge spoke

with *OITM* by phone and said that having Annie caused her and Julie to look at a lot of scenarios and legal situations. In spite of the legal precautions they took, they realized that they and Annie still would not be fully protected, she said.

"We followed the Vermont situation with interest, how it unfolded and what the couples went through," said Goodridge. "Vermont brought the issues close to home – how absurd it is that gay and lesbian couples can't get married."

Hillary is the director of the Unitarian Universalist Church funding program, and Julie has her own investment advisory firm that specializes in socially responsible investing. Both reside in Boston.

Another of the seven couples, David Wilson and Robert Compton, also from Boston, had a commitment ceremony in October 2000 that left many of their friends ironically believing that they then had all the rights and benefits of marriage.

Wilson and Compton both said the Vermont civil union case was "a step forward and a ray of hope." They said the Vermont Supreme Court's ruling was "full of humanity."

"The ruling in Vermont created a feel of optimism that people are willing to look at us as human beings," said Compton. "The same thing could happen in

Massachusetts."

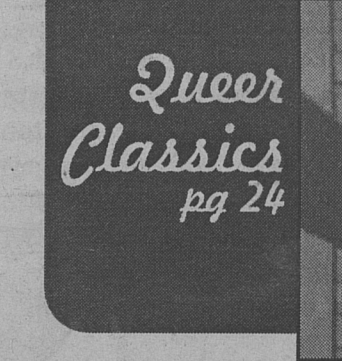
Compton said he was cautiously optimistic about the outcome of the suit. Recognizing that it is a passionate issue with many people, Compton stressed that they were seeking only the benefits and protections afforded by marriage, not "holy marriage" itself. He said he hopes that people in Massachusetts will understand the difference.

The other couples named as plaintiffs in the suit are: Michael Horgan and Ed Balmelli of Boston; Maureen Brodoff and Ellen Wade of Newton, who have a 12-year-old daughter; Gloria Bailey and Linda Davies of Orleans, who have been a couple for 30 years; Richard Linnell and Gary Chalmers of Northbridge, who are the parents of an eight-year-old daughter; Heidi Norton and Gina Smith of Northampton, who have two young sons; and Robert Compton and David Wilson of Boston, each parents of grown children, and Wilson a grandfather of four.

The organization representing the plaintiffs, GLAD, has played a leading role in the struggle for the freedom to marry and work with many grassroots freedom to marry organizations. They also are willing to assist same-sex couples throughout New England to fulfill the promise of equality that now exists in Vermont.



A Conversation with Jeff Walt
pg 19



Queer Classics
pg 24



Attack on Civil Unions Continues

The Republican majority in the Vermont House appears to be determined to force a vote on repeal of civil unions, even though it can't pass the Senate.

Judiciary Committee Chairwoman Peg Flory has been holding hearings on a bill she's drafted that would provide "reciprocal partnerships" in place of civil unions.

Flory's bill would repeal the existing law and offer the new partnerships not only to same-sex couples, but to any couples not currently permitted to marry.

That would include blood relatives, such as two sisters or a woman and her father.

Flory insists that her bill is not intended as a way of getting rid of the civil unions law. She says her intention is to eliminate sexual orientation as a criteria for getting the rights and benefits of marriage.

"What it purports to do is

convey the rights, benefits and protections to both gay people and other people that cannot currently be married," Flory said.

Her arguments have been rejected and the need for the bill has been questioned by people who have testified before the Judiciary Committee.

"If we truly wanted to take sexual orientation out of the issue, we would totally open up the marriage statutes," said Middlebury lawyer Susan Murray. "The reciprocal partnership legislation is based exclusively on heterosexual sexual orientation. And the attorney general's office has basically told Flory not to try to enact her bill."

"To the extent you want to conform to Baker, you've done it," Chief Assistant Attorney General William Griffin said.

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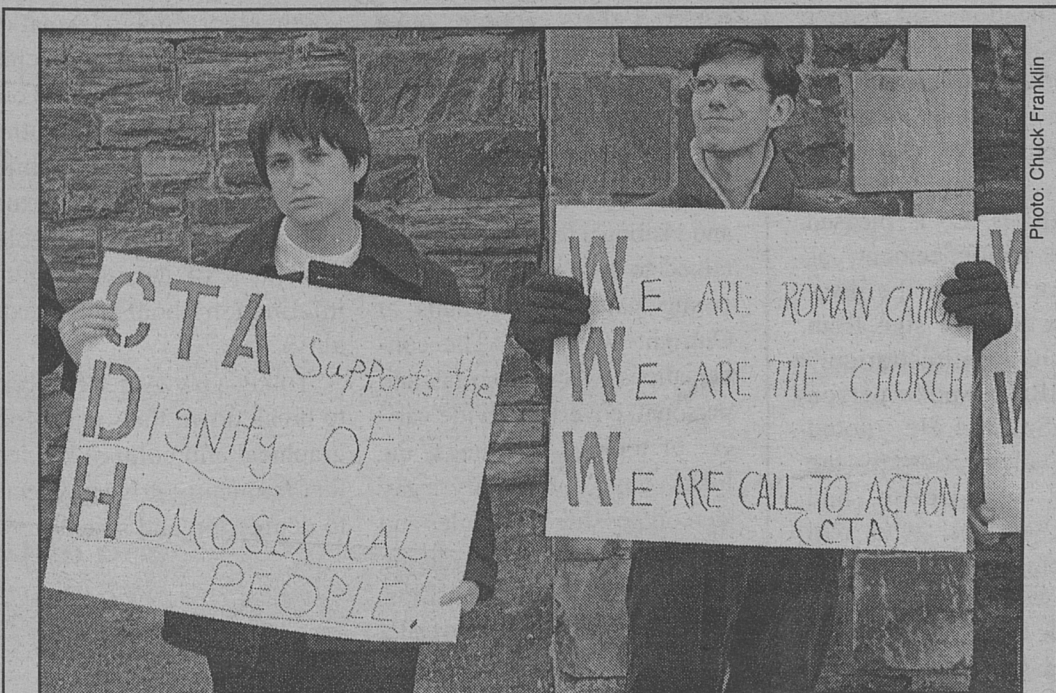


Photo: Chuck Franklin

D. D. Taylor-Garcia (l) and Peter Thomas (r) were among about a dozen people who conducted a twilight prayer vigil outside Saint Joseph Co-Cathedral in Burlington on Good Friday, April 13. Sponsored by Call to Action of Northern Vermont, the vigil sought to publicly call for the Catholic Church to rethink its position on civil unions and the ordination of women and men, whether or not they are married.

inside

Arts.....	19
Calendar.....	27
Classifieds.....	33
Columns.....	13
Community Compass.....	26
Letters.....	5
Replay.....	8
The Source.....	29
Views.....	9