



*civil union
special*

A June Day in the Life of a Justice of the Peace

BY MARC AWODEY, JP

June is a busy month for every Justice of the Peace, and on Friday June 14th, 2002 I had four civil unions scheduled. They didn't all work out as planned, but three out of four is not too bad. Here's a day in the life of one Vermont JP. By coincidence, it happened to be Flag Day.

My first appointment was 10 a.m. at Burlington City Hall. It was two guys plus their four kids, and we found an auspicious location in City Hall Park for the officiation. This was their third commitment ceremony so they insisted it was no big deal. Their first was with just a few friends. The second was a traditional Jewish wedding with a lavish reception and all the relatives. This one was simply them and the kids. No big deal. Well, the customer is always right so I gave them the quick 'two I dos' and an 'I pronounce you' format and that was that. They all headed up Church street to see if Ben and Jerry's was open yet – destined for the breakfast of champions.

At noon I met two older ladies at Shelburne Farms and we went to their rented cottage on the lake. They were from New Jersey and had been together for 22 years. They had beautiful vows written, and also read prayers and passages from *The New American Bible*. They gave thanks for finding each other, and for having a fine life together. They were also grateful for the state of Vermont, and asked the Almighty to keep us in His care.

My 2 o'clock appointment is the one that didn't happen as planned. It was supposed to be with a young lesbian couple from Chicago. They were driving east with an entourage of friends, kids, and dogs in a three-car convoy. I got a call at about 12:45, asking if it would be OK if they were a little late. I said fine, as long as they make it to a Vermont city clerk's office to get their license, anytime is fine for me. The next question was how far is Vermont from Buffalo?

At 7 p.m. I met two fellows at the Radisson, and we went down to the boardwalk near the Boathouse. One of them was a history buff, so we chatted about the history of the lake. After a brief and informal ceremony we enlisted a passerby to take a picture of the three of us. Both halves of the happy couple were about a foot taller than I am, so that picture will look like one of those elegant photos from the 1920s of Europeans posed with grinning little natives. Being local color is sometimes part of my job. I guess we do have a few strange customs – sugar on snow, civil unions, fish hunting – so I don't mind at all.

It's actually very sad to realize that what I do as a Vermont Justice of the Peace is illegal in every other state. But by the power vested in me by the People of the State of Vermont, I've pronounced at least 100 couples joined in civil union since July 2000. Signing a civil union

"What I do as a Vermont Justice of the Peace is illegal in every other state. Every stroke of the pen pushes history forward!"

Marc Awodey at Burlington's City Hall



By the Power Vested in Me...

Four Vermont Justices of the Peace Reflect On What Performing Civil Unions Means To Them

license is always a humbling experience. Every stroke of the pen pushes history forward.

I have joined friends and fellow Vermonters, Americans from every corner of the country, citizens of a dozen foreign countries ... and even those women driving in from Chicago. They finally showed up on Sunday, and got to a city clerk on Monday. Their new anniversary is June 17th. ▼

Marc Awodey is a Justice of the Peace in Burlington.

By The Power Vested In Me

BY LINDA MARKIN, JP

I am 47 years old and female. I came of age in the 1970s as much a feminist as a lesbian. Up until recently, marriage, if I thought about it at all, had mostly negative connotations – a trap, a patriarchal institution, an economic arrangement. But mostly it wasn't a goal of mine and I thought

about it rarely. Then the Vermont Supreme Court ruled and the whole state was catapulted into action. I did my part too, testifying at the legislature, and appearing in a television news story. My ideas about marriage began to change as I listened to the eloquent testimony of my community at the State House, and gave serious thought to the meaning of the protections that marriage provides. But it was a year later as I attended my first civil union and heard those words, "by the power vested in me by the State of Vermont," that I thought, "I

want to say that!"

I became a Justice of the Peace the following November in an uncontested election of twelve JPs in my town. In my case, it was simply a matter of saying I was interested in the position. I have officiated at eight civil unions and two marriages to date. I'm listed in the Mountain Pride Media register and my town clerk knows I'm happy to officiate civil unions, so I have received cold calls from newspaper readers and web surfers, and referrals from the town clerk's office and friends.

Being a Justice of the Peace also means I sit on the Board of Civil Authority for my town. I hadn't given much thought to being an out lesbian and interacting with other townspeople in that capacity. But it has been an additional benefit to me, and to my town too, that I am more deeply involved with my neighbors and larger community.

I've performed civil unions in a backyard with an infant son as the only witness, by the side of a peaceful pond on a perfect summer day, in a small home filled with friends of the partners and wonderful food, and at the Inn at Essex with a large contingent of out of town guests. Each one has been different, far more different from one another than the weddings I've attended. We are a people who insist on our right to free expression and civil union has provided us a new platform for creativity.

Performing civil unions feels more a privilege than work to me. In keeping with that feeling, I've chosen to ask for donations to community organizations rather than pay to put in my pocket. I think both the celebrants and I compound our joy by sharing it further.

My partner Marie and I had our own civil union on December 2, 2000, on our 21st anniversary. It was an amazing experience for us both – much more poignant than we imagined it would be. I think that having gone through it ourselves and experienced the depth of feeling we did (especially having so many dear friends and family members there), definitely informs my sense of what it means for others. I try not to be disappointed when some couples want a very simple ceremony and no witnesses.

I sometimes wonder whether that brevity, that desire for just the legal necessities might reflect internalized homophobia, a sense that we – or our relationships – are not worthy of something more. That simplicity, that brevity was our first (and second, third, and fourth) idea of what Marie and I wanted for our ceremony. It was only after fighting the demons together that Marie and I could say, "We deserve this, we can ask people to make this long trip in the winter, we can spend this money." Though I know that there are as many reasons for brief, legalities-only ceremonies as there are people who request them, there was something more sinister lurking in our own initial hesitancy to have the celebration we ultimately decided upon.

A few of my ceremonies have been for couples who had recently found one another. But most