

have been for couples who already knew what long-term commitment means. With little or no road maps, they have imagined lives together and built committed, loving relationships in the face of terrible odds. Civil union gives us an opportunity to appreciate and celebrate these tremendous achievements. More than a second-class sister to heterosexual marriage, civil union is a profound evolutionary step in the movement toward full equality for GLBT people. It is a powerful new institution we are already claiming as our own, shaping it to reflect our unique selves and relationships.

I am proud to play a part in making civil unions happen. ▼

Linda Markin and her partner Marie live in Hardwick.

Historic, Quiet Normality

By OLIVIA GAY, JP

It's July 3, 2000. On a Bolton mountainside, two couples wait for me just off the inn's graveled parking lot. Matthew and Steven are from Buffalo in sober suits and ties; Kirby and Allen are from Arkansas in matching black tuxedos and ruffled white shirts. The pairs have offered to stand up for each other so we all cross a short wooden bridge into a clearing bounded by young maples and marked by pots of flowers, a place intended for ceremonies. The innkeeper is welcoming and ready with each couple's camera. His basset hound lumbers through our midst intent on his doggy business and ignoring our activity. Under the leafy canopy, we join each couple in civil union with music, vows, rings, pronouncements, kisses, hugs, and champagne toasts.

Even though a Brattleboro couple captured the primary historic moment with their civil union just after midnight on July 1, we are firmly placed among America's notable civil rights events with our double ceremony in the trees. I sense our unity with the women who cast their first ballots and the African Americans who first sat where they wished at lunch counters in the south. I feel proud and privileged to be the government representative at one of the first legally recognized same-sex marriages in the country.

Now, two years and many civil unions later, this sequence of events has become familiar to me though always resonant with the implications for social justice. Through my business, O Gay Weddings, I perform civil unions around Central Vermont generally for out-of-state guests, usually small ceremonies and often just the couple and myself. Most often I drive to inns where couples have arranged a combination of lodging and space for a ceremony. Sometimes I meet people at a restaurant or we hold the ceremony outdoors like the several I did during the sparkling cold of last February — one in the orchard behind my house in Calais.

One of my favorite experiences was with Heidi and Laurie who

drove here from Madison, Wisconsin. When I met them at the inn, they were flushed with excitement in matching white lace dresses with coronets of flowers resting on their hair, all prepared for a real wedding. I got to be bridesmaid, minister, congregation, reception line and photographer all rolled into one. As always, I welcomed the opportunity to stand in for a couple's community, to be a channel for the love of their family and friends, and to make this special part of their Vermont stay as welcoming and as personal as possible.

After the ceremony, I met Laurie and Heidi in Montpelier for a photo in the governor's office under the golden dome. As we curved our way up the stairs, the guard asked what was going on. Caught in flight, the two brides were like white birds against the dark wood. I stopped, startled, thinking: "Isn't it obvious? Two women in white lace with flowers?" But the guard is used to pagan May festivals on the state house lawn so he needs further explanation. "It's a civil union" Heidi and Laurie answered in unison. The expectant faces below us nodded and smiled — all in a day's work for them now.

In the governor's office — the ceremonial one, not the daily business one — we encountered a small group of tourists but, emboldened by our successful passage from downstairs, we paid them no mind. The governor's portrait filled half the doorway and Heidi and Laurie posed there with his image. They later sent the photo to him and received a courteous letter in reply. After this adventure, I waved my metaphorical handkerchief to send them on their honeymoon way.

Even though civil union is not legal elsewhere, the Vermont license is a powerful draw for out-of-staters. Couples who have been together for years come on their anniversaries, like the two women from Virginia who held corporate jobs, had been together 12 years and had already held a commitment ceremony. They'd promised each other that when it was legal they would tie the knot again. So there they stood

before me, one in a silk dress and the other in a gabardine suit, with bouquet and corsage, repeating the time-tested words to stay together in sickness and health, for better or for worse. Words that had been the legal province of straight people were now available for them in Vermont.

Apart from the legal recognition, there is the ceremony itself with its awesome power to affirm and transform relationships. The moment in which two people turn to each other and see deeply into each other's souls has the capacity, in each honestly naked instance, to melt hearts and forge loyalties.

What strikes me most about the civil unions I have done is not the uniqueness of them but their quiet normality. Couples talk of sharing homes and raising children or visiting grandchildren, of caring for each other through good times and bad times, of providing for retirement or illness, of claiming the legal advantages that are offered in other states like health insurance or inheritance, of forging a life-long partnership. Couples want civil unions, want weddings and marriage, because they love one another and want that bond recognized. In short, they want to be married for the universal reasons every couple shares.

As far as I can see, the biggest impact on our state is economic. Always a wedding destination where people come for a romantic ceremony, we have added another incentive for couples to stay in inns, have celebratory meals, hire photographers, caterers, musicians, wedding planners and officiants. As time goes by and the newness of our law wears off, the number of out-of-state civil unions will probably plateau. Other states will legalize same-sex marriage and we can hope for the day when our entire country will follow suit. In the meantime, I look forward to more civil unions — small or large, indoors or out — with their wonderful attendant stories of people's lives and loves. ▼

Olivia Gay, JP, lives in Calais. Her web address is www.ogayweddings.com



"When I met Heidi and Laurie at the inn, they were flushed with excitement in matching white lace dresses with coronets of flowers resting on their hair, all prepared for a real wedding. I got to be bridesmaid, minister, congregation, reception line and photographer all rolled into one!"
Justice of the Peace Olivia Gay

I Do Hereby Recognize, Certify and Celebrate

By KEITH GOSLANT, JP

Truly by the authority vested in me by the State of Vermont, I do hereby recognize, certify and celebrate this Civil Union that only your love could have created." These are words that as a Justice of the Peace I never thought I would be able to say. These are words that the couples standing in front of me thought they'd never be able to hear.

I became a Justice of the Peace at the suggestion of an old family friend. She had been a Justice for many years and during that time had been called by lesbians and gay men asking if she'd perform a commitment ceremony for them. She did not accept these invitations, due to her personal and strong religious beliefs, but did feel that there should be someone who could officiate at these ceremonies. So, I ran for and was elected one of Plainfield's six Justices of the Peace. This was before the Baker Decision was given by the Vermont Supreme Court and the Legislature's passage of the Civil Union law; little did I know what would be in store.

During the first weekend that Civil Unions were legal in Vermont I performed six ceremonies. Each was absolutely different in content and language from the others, but all shared one strong element, the gratitude of lesbian and gay couples who suddenly were able to have full legal recognition of their relationships, their commitment to each other. Most of the ceremonies resulted from a first e-mail request: "My partner and I will be coming to Vermont to have a Civil Union ceremony. Would you be available to perform our ceremony?"

One of the first truly memorable ceremonies came as the result of such an e-mail. It was from a lesbian couple who had seen my name mentioned in Deb Price's column.

They wondered if I would perform their ceremony and would I be willing to include statements of faith. I drafted a ceremony that included the commitment from Ruth to Naomi as she refused to leave her alone in a foreign land, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God."

Just before they were scheduled to travel to Vermont, they sent me another e-mail outlining their itinerary and told me they were traveling from Bangladesh. They were Americans who had spent the last 15 years living and working there. Ruth and Naomi had unique significance for them as they had already made this commitment to each other many years ago, a commitment they are still sharing and which now has additional meaning as they consider creating a home here.

I am always delighted to hear the stories of how couples first met: gay square dancing, taking the risk and answering a personals ad, introductions by friends, members of the same RV club, starting a new job, a survivors' group via hospice or looking up from the bar and there he/she was. Some couples have created elaborate ceremonies with family and friends. Some have wanted something very simple and private.

One request was from a couple who wanted no ceremony at all, but asked me merely to sign their license. However, when I arrived to "merely sign the license", for an hour and a half they shared with me their life's journey: How they had met while caring for a former partner who was dying from AIDS. How they had stayed together. And, later as their friends one by one also died, how they decided to look for a home in New England, to quietly grow old together. How they found a cabin tucked away in the woods of Vermont, the subsequent winters' challenges with snow and an inquisitive bear. They didn't want a ceremony, but what more eloquent statement could they make than the retelling of their life together?

And I share some of the experiences of other Justices: the couples who have been together for years who cry because no one has told them before that their relationship mattered; and those too young to remember Stonewall who are filled with enthusiasm and hope. But all of this is new. We are creating new rituals, ceremonies and ways of celebrating our commitment to each other. We don't have to rely on what some else has done. We are creating new memories that will be shared with those who follow us. Not hidden out of sight, but in full view of history.

I end this with the quote that over the past 2 years has become my personal ritual for blessing a Civil Union ceremony: "May the spirit of love be ever-present in your lives, so that this union, this true marriage of mind, body and spirit you celebrate today, will be worthy of continued celebration tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow." ▼

Keith Goslant is the 'official state male queer' and a JP in Plainfield.