



civil union special

Proud Parents

Inside a Civil Union from the perspective of two sets of parents



Ken & Hulda Bridgeman

Let Every Child Be Supported A Parent's Perspective on a Daughter's Civil Union

BY HULDA BRIDGEMAN

Our daughter and her partner were joined in civil union on June 1, with a ceremony and reception which expressed all that I think a wedding should be. I'm still feeling a rosy glow, and I love to show pictures of the event to any

friend or acquaintance who expresses even a remote interest in them. At the same time I'm aware that many partners and their parents find it difficult to stand in this happy place.

Euan has asked me how my husband Ken and I got to this point of affirmation; how we heard about the possibility of a civil union between our daughter, Stina, and her

partner, Elizabeth; and whether the actual event differed from the dreams we had for Stina as she was growing up.

It's been a journey. Ken and I both grew up in families and churches which affirm the worth of every human being (although the denominations are still struggling with what that means in terms of openly gay clergy, and of union ceremonies), and we work in an arts field where we have a number of openly gay colleagues. I've long associated the word "gay" with creative, intelligent, outside the box — qualities which I value. So we already supported gay rights when our daughter came out to us at Christmas, 1999.

Still, supporting a controversial cause in principle — and finding out that it impacts your family directly — are two very different things.

Stina came to us at a quiet time, armed with a book of basic information and pages from the PFLAG website. Over the next several days she answered questions patiently; got us another book from the local bookstore; introduced us to the lives and successful work of Melissa Etheridge, Ellen DeGeneres and columnist Deb Price; filled us in on issues, and let us see that she felt safe and well. Later she began sending us occasional TV videotapes, emailing news items of interest from *The Advocate*, and even brought home some gay movies.

For the first 24 hours I felt vulnerable and like someone had died, but I found the conversations with Stina some of the best we'd ever

had. I joined PFLAG (and Ken kept me going even when it felt uncomfortable), and the Human Rights Campaign. Stina and I discovered a mutual fondness for the music of k.d. lang, and she's contributed several lang CD's to my collection. I occasionally check out gay websites and publications, to get a sense for the culture and the issues.

Elizabeth and Stina became friends seven years ago in graduate school, and together went through prelims, dissertations, sharing an apartment and coming out. They adopted each other's old friends, and made mutual new ones. Elizabeth visited our home both with Stina and by herself, and she became our friend apart from our daughter. We like her sense of humor, her down-to-earth manner, and her caring. She and I share interests in good cooking and quilts, and she has animatedly toured my garden and listened to tales of local history.

Although it was a shock, we weren't totally surprised when Stina came out to us, and even less surprised when she told us a year later that she and Elizabeth were dating. When she said last summer, during her weekly phone call, that she had something to tell us, I said, "You're getting married!" She laughed and said, "Yes."

The civil union was satisfying to me because it expressed love, respect, tradition, individuality, and hospitality. It was dignified and simple. It was thoughtfully planned by Elizabeth and Stina, who accomplished parts of it with their own hands, having fun in the process. It

included a church ceremony, live music and fresh spring flowers. It took place in a community of friends.

This is the sort of wedding I would always have wished for Stina. None of these things has anything to do with the gender of her partner.

I'm showing my pictures to friends who support gay rights, and especially to acquaintances who haven't thought too much about it one way or the other. I want them to be swept up in my enthusiasm, to see the civil union as a normal event in which two loving and responsible individuals who are also friends have established a new family unit, and that this strengthens our whole society.

My favorite wedding picture is the one of the extended families, all dressed up and smiling, under the trees beside a pond. Except for the fact that there are two brides, it looks like any wedding picture. That's the message I see. On the other hand, there ARE two brides. Differences make life interesting.

And I'm very grateful that there is a place where this union could be celebrated, with legal rights, where Stina and Elizabeth could have had such a nice ceremony and party, in the company of their family and friends. Every couple deserves this kind of support. ▼

Hulda Bridgeman is a fabric and clothing designer who lives with her husband Ken in Spokane, WA.



Nancy & Carl Hane

Parents of a 'Bride': Moving Along the Road to Acceptance

BY NANCY & CARL HANE

On June 1st our family along with friends from Houston, Seattle, DC and here in Norman, Oklahoma celebrated the

Civil Union of our daughter Elizabeth Hane and her partner Stina Bridgeman. It was a glorious day and a beautiful event.

When Elizabeth came out to us 4 years ago, we both went through a period of sadness. We

mourned those moments in life we thought we would never have, including a wedding where her father would walk her down the aisle. Those of you who work with *Out in The Mountains* know Elizabeth and know how thorough she is; well, she was just as thorough in her coming out. Everything had been prepared for us including a visit with our minister (Methodist and very supportive). PFLAG meets at our church and he offered to go to our first meeting with us. While we didn't go for a few months, we haven't missed since unless we were out of town, and we are now presidents of the chapter. Her support and patience helped us move right along and we are now able to see what we have gained and not what we thought we might not have.

Another factor that probably helped us move along the road to acceptance and peace of mind was our attitude toward gay-lesbian issues before we learned that our daughter was a lesbian. Like most heterosexual couples we did not talk much about the fact that part of the population is homosexual, either with each other or with our children. We did try to convey to our children that

any kind of discrimination is wrong, including discrimination toward homosexuals.

In retrospect, the one thing that probably forced us to think about it more seriously (and this occurred several years before Elizabeth came out) was a survey within our church that was instigated by a committee looking into homosexuality in relation to our congregation. After filling out the survey both of us agreed that we thought we were pretty "accepting" people. We only wish that we had conveyed the reality of this accepting attitude to our children more strongly, which would have helped ease any anxiety that Elizabeth had about coming out to us.

We think they told us of the civil union late last fall. At first we were surprised since they plan to live in New York, but they explained the advantage for benefits, and it seemed a wonderful idea to us. There have been a few things that seemed difficult. It seemed hard for some people here in Norman to ask about the ceremony, and since this is our first family "wedding" we had no reference as to how excited other people get over such events. One of the true joys was the response from dear family and

friends near and far who came to the ceremony and those who sent wonderful gifts. There were even gay and lesbian friends here who helped Nancy select just the right "Mother's" dress.

The ceremony was so very special to us and made even more special because both sets of parents were included. Each parent couple was asked to affirm their love, support, and acceptance of Elizabeth and Stina as a couple. We also lit the candles that Elizabeth and Stina used to light their own joint candle together. We can honestly say that we couldn't have been more moved or more proud of our daughter than we were during the ceremony. Another high moment occurred near the end of the ceremony when those attending the union applauded the couple. The applause was thunderous and lasting, a testament to the support those in attendance pledged to the newly united couple. Stina is a joy to us and we love her parents as well. And yes, both fathers walked with their daughters down the aisle while the mothers watched and beamed with pride. ▼

Nancy and Carl Hane live in Norman, Oklahoma.