

In the Company of Strangers

Southern Hospitality, Vermont Style

By SUSAN McMILLAN

“I have wanted to marry Diana since the first year we were together,” says Jan, the words of a loving spouse who flew 2,000 miles to Vermont to do just that. It was January and 41 degrees below zero that night. This warm and charming couple from Texas came in from the bitter Vermont cold to declare to God and each other that they would love, honor, and cherish one another from this day forward. My partner and I were lucky enough to witness this extraordinary event.

And it was extraordinary. On a human level, it is amazing that in a sea of 6.4 billion lives, we are lucky enough to find the one with whom we are meant to travel through this lifetime. On a social level it is remarkable because these were two women a very long way from home. How is it in this land of the free that such an intimate, natural desire to wed the one you love can be made so political, requiring such effort?

Jan Kirby and Diana Welch met five years ago. Their meeting

was a rather unlikely occurrence in Houston. It's not all good old boys and scary white guys, Diana said, but a big city with an openly lesbian city councilwoman and a vocal gay community. However, according to Jan and Diana, who have lived there for twenty years, the gay community is still prejudiced. At most social gatherings they attend, Kirby, whose heritage is Czech and African American, is the only black person present. In this voluntarily segregated world, these women might never have crossed paths. But they did, across a crowded room, and it was magic.

After a couple of years, having settled into the home they bought together, with its tangerine trees, their sweet toothless dog, and four cats, they spoke of their desire for a holy union ceremony. As with many of us, there were emotional obstacles. Their devotion was unwavering, but how to declare that commitment to the world was troublesome. Diana revealed that her Catholicism got in the way. She was raised in the shadow of the First Vatican Council and its doctrine of papal infallibility. With this upbringing,

Welch was not comfortable in any church congregation. And, after years of witnessing the break-up of couples who had held commitment ceremonies, that path did not hold any meaning.

Desiring formal recognition of our commitment, Jan wanted to be *married*. She wanted to stand in front of others, to declare her love and dedication to their life together *just like everyone else in our society* is permitted to do. When these women, who longed simply for public and legal recognition of their relationship, learned of Vermont's Civil Union legislation it was just a matter of logistics.

This planning — with the inevitable visit to the Vermont Secretary of State website, choosing a town clerk, and finding a justice of the peace or clergy — was undertaken by more than 5,000 same-sex couples in the first three years after the Vermont legislature created civil unions. Nearly ninety percent of those unions involved individuals from out-of-state. Each year, couples travel from every single state and some foreign countries just to partake in this government sanctioned

recognition of their partnership. The hardship that was endured by Vermonters four years ago during the painful struggle over civil unions meant there was one safe place in this country for thousands of gay and lesbian couples to officially register their bond.

Jan and Diana's trip to Vermont came together quickly. They were headed to Baltimore for an 80th birthday party for Diana's mom, so why not fly north? Finding St. Paul's LGBT group on the Internet led them to Rev. Tanya Wallace, who agreed to perform their civil union. They secured the pre-nuptial counseling required by the Episcopal Church and soon found themselves in the chapel at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul on a cold Vermont night, surrounded by strangers.

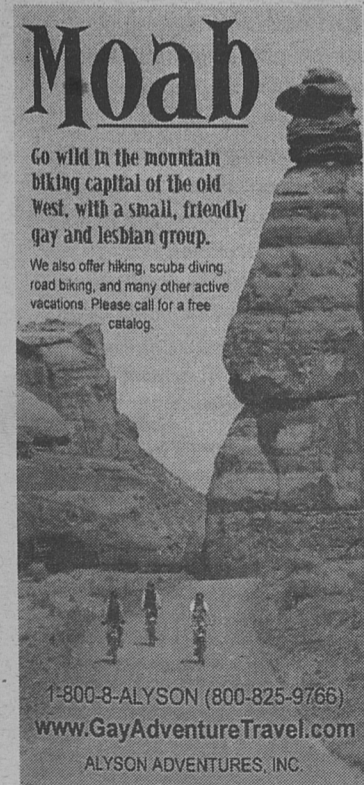
We were a diverse bunch: single and partnered, gay, lesbian, and trans, artists and scientists, old-time Vermonters and recent transplants. The twelve of us came together without pre-arrangement, bearing sparkling wine, potluck offerings, and even a wedding cake to witness a love affair made legal, if

only in Vermont. Weeks later, Welch told me in her soft southern drawl, “It was the best party we could have ever wanted, better than if we'd planned it for a year.”

Now that the party is over, I wondered if the brief ceremony had impacted their lives. As many newly-weds confess, Diana said she was surprised that she really felt married. It is settled and peaceful, and reminds her of something a straight friend told her years ago — that after she was married she felt that she could really get on with fulfilling her potential. Welch continued, “I feel like I have found home, and it is wherever Jan is. And Kirby offers a similar uncomplicated sentiment, ‘I'm just as committed, but I feel more secure now.’”

How extraordinary — to feel secure in our personal lives and lifelong partnerships, *to be married*. We have shown we will travel far to achieve it. Is it really so much to ask? ▼

Susan McMillan and her partner Becky Roberts were California residents when they were joined in civil union after a 17,000-mile road trip. They are now living in Charlotte.



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