

Ain't Satisfied

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to our response ... It'll have to be kicked up to the Supreme Judicial Court."

As *OITM* was going to press, a preliminary ruling was issued by Superior Court Judge Carol S. Ball, denying a request for "immediate relief" – in essence asking that the State be barred from enforcing the 1913 law until the lawsuit is resolved on the merits of the case. The couples and the town clerks plan to appeal the ruling. "Whoever lost was going to appeal it. I'm sorry [this judge] didn't get it," Sandi said. "but we're more concerned about the constitutional issues anyway."

Meanwhile the lawsuit continues.

Why Marriage After CU?

Some of the reasons the Cote-Whitacres pursued marriage – even after their civil union got them access to marriage rights and responsibilities in Vermont – were practical. "We're concerned about social security," said Sandi. "Bobbi is a state employee, and there's no question of our status as a couple [with civil union]. But I work for a federal agency, so with marriage, we'll see."

Bobbi's mother had a stroke earlier this year, and she lives with them. Their home-care aide stayed with her while they went to Provincetown. Bobbi is on parental care leave from her state job. Both women are 57 years old, within striking distance of retirement. Because the federal government does not recognize same-sex relationships – whether marriage or civil union – their social security income will likely be much less than it would be for a heterosexual married couple.

"When we went down to Massachusetts for the [hearing], we had to take our civil union certificate for Vermont, our marriage license for Massachusetts, and our power-of-attorney documents

because we went through New Hampshire," Bobbi noted with a wry smile.

"On a purely emotional level, it's the equality, like *Brown v. Board of Education*. Equality means give us a choice," Sandi responds. "Civil union makes us prisoners of Vermont, just like the governor of Massachusetts wants to make marriage for gays exclusive to his state. Rights are only absolutely guaranteed if you fight for it."

"Some of it is our age," Bobbi admitted. "When you grow up and find the person you love, you get married."

The lawsuit is an investment, Sandi adds, "putting our lives, our personal feelings out there in public to agree or disagree with. And after the [civil union] public hearings where [gay and lesbian] people bled all over the place [telling our stories] – that's enough of a price to pay."

"If anything, it made me more determined, despite the toll that it takes," Bobbi rejoined. "We can't stop now. This [discrimination] is wrong. We can fix it."

"If not us, who? If not now, when? We have an obligation to be out in front because our story has an impact. When you've been together 37 years it gets the attention that's needed. We have a compelling story to lend to the struggle," Sandi explained.

Back in the Day

Sandi Cote and Bobbi Whitacre met in the Women's Army Corps in 1967 ("No, it was 1966," corrected Bobbi). "She 'inprocessed' me at Fort McClellan, Alabama. I was headed to Maryland for intel training. Bobbi pulled some strings to get my orders changed," recalled Sandi.

"And she eventually forgave me," rejoined Bobbi with some satisfaction. "It was the Sixties. We had to hide everything. There was a bar called Tito's in Birmingham where we'd go." The

women managed to ride out their enlistments to receive honorable discharges in 1970, though Sandi was in and out of the reserves until 1988. Sandi had intended to make a career in the military – and left when it came to a choice between her career and her love.

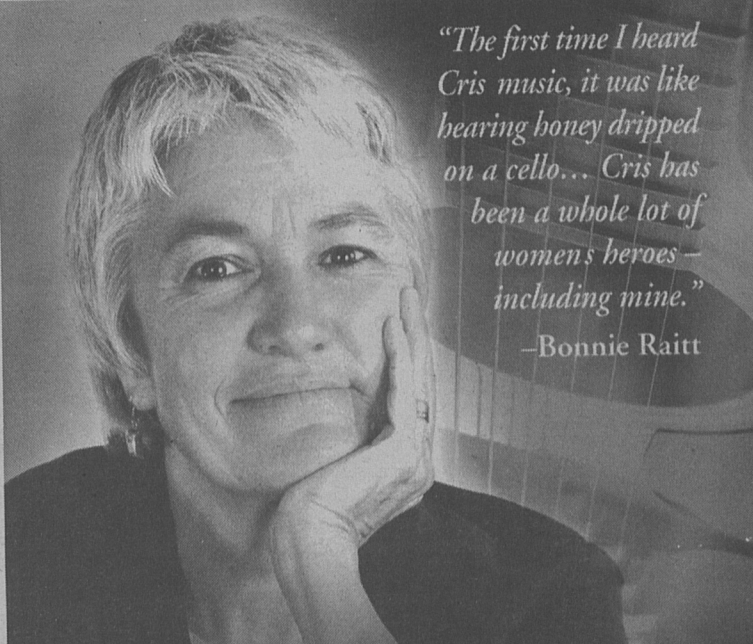
"That was the first time we had to choose between a career and our relationship," Sandi pointed out. "There were several others. In 1975, I graduated from college and wanted to become a cop. Every decent-sized police force required a new officer to take a polygraph." Bobbi: "And the first question on the test was 'Are you a homosexual.'"

Sandi recalls that ironically, both of them at one time held security clearances to work for the federal government. "We weren't supposed to be able to do that." Bobbi: "We did a lot of things we weren't supposed to. We were always bucking the system."

Who Took These Rights Away?

"I'm actually a naturalized citizen," said Sandi Cote-Whitacre. "And I feel like I'm not quite a full-fledged citizen until I have these rights [to marry]. The mountains are still up there, the sky is up there and we've had civil unions for four years. My neighbors' marriages worked or didn't work, and it had nothing to do with me."

"I was born here," Bobbi pointed out. "I was born with these rights. What I want to know is who took them away?" ▼



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Send cover letter and resume by Friday, 9.10.2004 to the contact below.

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