



The Front Page

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Serving the Carolinas For Over 25 Years!

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A Gay & Lesbian Year in Review

By Bob Roehr
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This was the year of marriage rights—again. And the subject is likely to cop top honors for several more years to come before the final chapter is written. But in some senses they may all seem a tad anticlimactic when compared with 2004.

The stage had been set by the Massachusetts supreme court with the dramatic decision in November 2003 that "The Massachusetts Constitution affirms the dignity and equality of all individuals. It forbids the creation of second-class citizens... the Commonwealth [of Massachusetts] has failed to identify any constitutionally adequate reason for denying civil marriage to same-sex couples."

However, the court gave the legislature six months in which to take action before its order took effect. Legislators asked the court if they might create civil unions instead. Early in 2003, the court said no; "Without the right to choose who to marry, same-sex couples are not only denied full protection of the laws, but are 'excluded from the full range of human experience.'"

Social conservatives preached gloom and doom, demanding that the legislators send a constitutional amendment to the people to let them decide the issue. The politicians obliged, setting a date for a constitutional session. Pro-gay forces mustered their own social and political capital for the fight.

The first session deadlocked over competing versions of an amendment and adjourned after three days of debate in early February.

That drama was upstaged on February 12 with the peal of wedding bells from San Francisco. Shortly before noon, lesbian icons Del Martin, 83, and Phyllis Lyon, 79, became the first same sex couple granted a marriage license in city hall. Their celebratory photo was splashed across the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle and papers in many other cities.

Newly elected mayor Gavin Newsom, movie star handsome and heterosexual, had hatched a plan to use California's gender-neutral marriage laws and an interpretation from the city's lawyers that refusing to issue marriage licenses to same sex couple was unconstitutional under the state charter.

And the floodgates opened. Gay and lesbian couples, many with kids in tow,



A May 20 AIDS Protest outside of the Republican National Committee in DC

Photo by Bob Roehr

rushed to city hall to get married. Hundreds stood in line in the rain over the weekend to get their licenses. Many of them had been together for decades.

Other local officials in various corners of the country dared to join the fray for marriage equality: Sandoval County, New Mexico, New Paltz, New York, and Portland, Oregon were among the most prominent.

"Something is happening out there. Instead of begging for the basic right to marry, gay couples are now demanding it," wrote gay conservative Andrew Sullivan on his blog. "This will alter the debate...and when the religious right try to strip us of those marriages, and force us back into second-class status, then we will see something else: resistance."

The country was shocked. And then, as the joyous scenes were replayed again and again in the media, the shock abated and many Americans began to understand that gay and lesbian couples really weren't all that different. All they wanted was the same thing as everyone else, to marry their partner and take on the full load of benefits and responsibilities that marriage entails.

The flurry of marriages didn't last long. Political pressure and lawsuits filed by social conservatives brought injunctions from the courts against further marriages in one jurisdiction and then another. And the door to marriage slammed shut. The tedious legal wrangling continues to play out in a handful of states and will continue to do so for a

year or more. Many of the same sex marriages performed during that brief period remain in legal limbo.

The Massachusetts legislature met again as a constitutional convention at the end of March. It wasted little time in adopting a compromise amendment that would define marriage as only between a man and a woman. The amendment also would create civil unions for same sex couples, turning back attempts by conservatives to divide the two issues on the ballot.

Civil unions, a notion that only a few years earlier had seemed so radical when first proposed in Vermont, had now become the compromise position in the battle for gay equality.

The final vote on the Massachusetts amendment was 105-92, barely more than the 101 votes needed for passage. It requires a second vote of the legislature meeting as a convention before it can be sent to the voters in November 2006 for their say.

But that did not stop the order of the court from going into effect; on May 17 hundreds of gay and lesbian couples began to march down the aisles to pledge their troth each to the other.

National Marriage Politics

The Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA), to prohibit gays from marrying, had languished in Congress. It got a huge boost when President George W. Bush held a February 24 White House

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2004 in Review People

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"Who was Jim McGreevey?" is likely to be a trivia question some years down the road. But for several weeks at the end of the summer, the nation was stunned and titillated by stories of the then Governor of New Jersey.

The tale began with a hastily called televised news conference on August 12 where McGreevey announced, "I am a gay American." The twice married, father of two was surrounded by his family.

The shocker was meant to draw attention away from another part of his statement, "circumstances surrounding the affair and its likely impact upon my family and my ability to govern," which would cause him to resign as Governor.

First in dribs, then torrents, the soap opera-ish details of an adulterous affair with Golan Cipel spewed forth. The Gov had met his boy toy on a trade mission to Israel and soon had him back in

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