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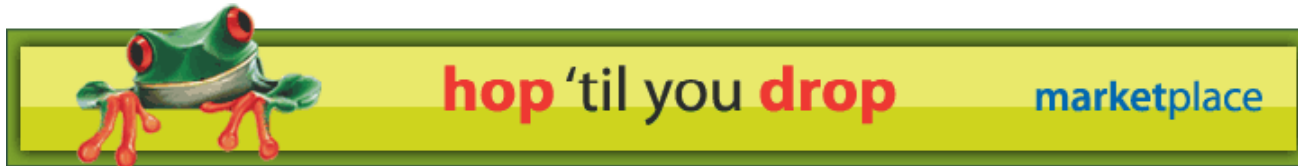
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## Same-sex couples celebrate right to marry

By JENNIFER SPRAGUE, Journal Register News Service  
10/10/2008

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MIDDLETOWN - When Lori Pelletier and her partner, Mary Beth Failla of Middletown, had a ceremony two years ago to celebrate their civil union, they struggled with how to announce themselves before friends and family. "I now pronounce you - what - civil unionized?" Pelletier asked, rhetorically. Despite their status under the law as partners for life, the two were not legally regarded as married.

"On health forms, you have to check 'single,'" Pelletier said. Beginning in about one month, same-sex couples in Connecticut will be able to check "married."

Connecticut's Supreme Court ruled 4-3 Friday gay couples have the right to marry. Massachusetts and California are the only other states where gay marriage is legal. Connecticut legalized civil unions in 2005, becoming the first state to enact such a law through legislative action rather than a court mandate.

"I'll gladly tear up my civil union certificate for a marriage certificate," Pelletier said Friday night at a rally at the State Capitol in Hartford celebrating the decision.

The lawsuit was brought forth in 2004 by the legal rights organization Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, or GLAD, after eight same-sex couples were denied marriage licenses. The plaintiff couples in Kerrigan and Mock et al v. Connecticut Department of Public Health contend only marriage will provide them with the protections and benefits they need to live securely as a family. Many also believe only marriage will convey the depth and commitment of their relationships to others.

"It's equal. I don't have to explain it to people," Pelletier said. Janis Astor del Valle, artistic director of the Green Street Art Center in Middletown, considers herself married to Amy Myers, although the state recognizes only their civil union. She said the Supreme Court's decision Friday is "a true affirmation of what we have known all along - that we should have the right to get married."

"In our hearts and minds, we were married," she said. "It's just unfortunate that the state didn't recognize it back then. I'm just absolutely enthralled that this decision has been handed down."

Myers and Astor del Valle had a wedding in June 2007, but are now planning to get an official Connecticut marriage license.

"I don't think we can afford another wedding, but we are definitely going to have another party," Astor said. "The marriage license is important to us."

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The language of the civil union law, Astor said, "was relegating us to a second-class citizenship."

"It denies couples financial, social and emotional benefits that married couples have," she said. "It's important that we have the same language for everybody. I think we deserve all the rights that are afforded to anyone else in this country. I felt the civil union never gave us that."

Anne Stanback, executive director of the Love Makes a Family Foundation, an advocacy organization working for equal marriage rights for same-sex couples, said Friday same-sex couples in Connecticut were welcomed "into one of society's most fundamental institutions."

"And today, Connecticut can proudly and appropriately claim its nickname, 'The Constitution State,'" she said.

Although the official release date of the court's decision will be Oct. 28, same-sex couples will not be able to wed until mid-November, said Ben Klein, GLAD attorney. The exact date has not been announced.

Klein also said it will be up to the legislature to decide how and if Connecticut's existing civil unions will be transferred to marriages.

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal told the Associated Press the decision rendered in Kerrigan and Mock et al v. Department of Public Health will not be appealed.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell issued a statement Friday saying she disagrees with the ruling, but will uphold it.

"I continue to believe that marriage is the union of a man and a woman," she said. "I also believe that the historic civil union law that I proudly signed in 2005 is equitable and just. I am also firmly convinced that attempts to reverse this decision - either legislatively or by amending the state Constitution - will not meet with success. I will therefore abide by the ruling."

As of spring 2008, 1,855 same-sex couples in Connecticut were in civil unions, or about 20 percent of the state's same-sex couples, according to the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, a research center dedicated to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues.

If Connecticut follows a similar pattern to Massachusetts, researchers at Williams Institute estimate approximately 3,000 same-sex couples will marry in the next year.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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