

Marriage. It's a word being thrown around a lot lately, raising voices and tempers and spawning political machinations across the country.

A Pew Research Center for the People and the Press poll last October found that Republicans oppose gay marriage five to one, while a close majority of Democrats support gay unions but not marriage. "It's so ironic," remarked Vicki Vara, owner of Backstreet. "What's the difference? Is it the 'marriage' word they have a problem with?"

Well, let's consider the word. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, *marry* means, in a nautical sense, "to join (two ropes) end to end by interweaving their strands," an aptly poetic depiction of its broader connotation "to unite in a close, usually permanent way." Merriam-Webster Online defines *marriage* as "(1) the state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law; (2) the state of being united to a person of the same sex in a relationship like that of a traditional marriage."

Relegated to the fringe of legally recognized unions, many lesbians and gays condemn the antiquated patriarchal ideology of marriage per se, citing the empowered belief that a certificate alone does not demonstrate the honest commitment of love discovered and cherished by two people – of any gender. But for others, marriage is more than that: it is an issue of equality, human dignity, and the right to choose. Queer or straight, it comes down to making a life together with the one you love.

Melissa & Vicki

"We wanted to tell people we are married, regardless of laws," said Vara, who tied the knot with her wife Melissa Picardi on Sept. 9, 2000 – the anniversary of the day they met – in an intimate ceremony performed by a minister in Hawaii. Together cloaked in a rainbow cloth, they exchanged vows with the blessing of friends and family. After five years of marriage and the wisdom of experience under their belts, they say the key to their longevity and happiness is honesty, trust and interdependence.



"Our bond is about love, not legislature," said Vara. "For us, the fight against banning same-sex marriage is more about equality and human rights than who you're legally allowed to love. If you're lucky enough to find that person, don't think about what the legislation says you can do, do what's real for you. We wish we could keep love separate from law, but unfortunately many people in this country can't see that." Instilled with strong Catholic traditions, the sanctity and ceremony of marriage is innately meaningful to Picardi. "Since I was a little girl I had a vision in my head about having a traditional wedding," she recalled. "If you have a dream about getting married, go for it ... whether you both wear white dresses or black tuxedos."

We DO

Anne & Cynthia

In Alabama, Cynthia Harris, who is African-American, and Anne Watford, who is white, deal with the challenges of being an interracial couple as well as the ramifications of not being able to legally marry. Fortunately, Harris, a social worker and part-time massage therapist, and Watford, the office manager for a non-profit mental health facility in Birmingham, work in a field which is generally more diverse and accepting of differences. "We are able to be out in our everyday life, and my family has come a long way in seven years," said Watford. Anne has a 25-year old daughter and two grandchildren.

Contemplating a future commitment ceremony, Cynthia and Anne hope someday for a legally binding marriage. "I would like to get married; however, only if it allows me the same partner benefits as a heterosexual couple," said

Watford. "If that isn't in the picture, I don't see the point. We have taken the necessary legal steps to protect ourselves financially in the event something happens to either of us, regardless of whether the legislature recognizes our relationship."

"For me, marriage is not about the formality of marriage, it's more about our relationships being respected, recognized, and receiving

the same rights," added Harris. "I was against the use of the word 'marriage' because it was just another word opponents could use to argue their position, as if gays and lesbians were trying to take something from them."

"To have a good relationship, be it homosexual or heterosexual, you have to be in a good place and willing to work hard to make that relationship work," Watford admitted. "I don't have to have a legal or recognized relationship with Cynthia to be as committed to her as I can possibly be." Harris agrees that their partnership is not based on papers. "It's about whether the persons involved are ready for the challenges that come with being in a relationship."

Iris & Teri

Iris Hale and Teri Stewart, the owners of Donna Van Gogh's in Candler Park, met in the late '70s and by 1980 were living together. In their decades as a couple, the closest thing to a public declaration of their relationship has been filing notarized domestic partnership paperwork to obtain health insurance for Teri from the organization that Iris worked for. "What we've seen is a mostly 'Western' way of marriage that we're not so crazy about. Because of its checkered past," Hale chuckled, "we're not interested in it."

That doesn't mean that they haven't protected themselves as partners to the best of their ability. "We have done what we can within the twisted framework of the law as it exists now," said Stewart, and expressed their wishes to their families, too. However, if marriage were an option, it is something they would consider for the legal benefits and protections – the same reason, Stewart asserts, that many heterosexuals marry. "Although I am a little jealous," she laughed, "of the couples who get toasters and towel sets and all the things we never got."

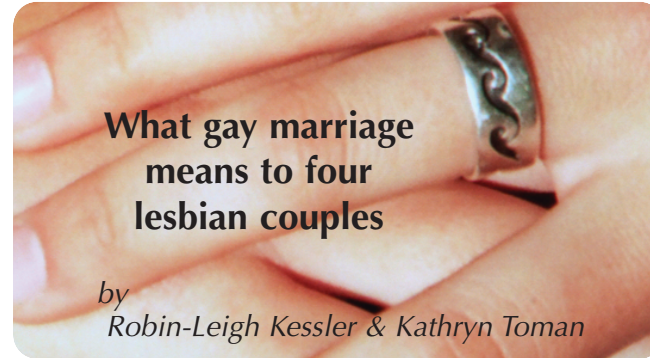




photo by
G.K. Baker

They have been adamant about claiming their civil rights, participating in the first gay pride marches both in Atlanta and in Washington, D.C. Twenty years ago, when Teri was being treated for cancer, they “threw down” at St. Joseph’s Hospital and were the first lesbian couple allowed to have the partner stay overnight and sleep in the room and to make decisions about who could visit. “When you have been together as long as we have, you really do go through everything. If you can still look at each other and say, ‘I love you more than anything in the world’ – and you *should* say it every single day – that’s all that matters,” said Stewart.

Despite the lack of a formal ceremony, Iris and Teri are the most stable and enduring couple in either of their families, outlasting all of their straight siblings and rivaling only Iris’s mother at 25 years with the same person. “There’s sort a perverse benefit to not being able to be married: There’s no doubt when you wake up in the morning that you’re there because you want to be there,” Hale said. “There’s no messy divorce, no kids, nothing stopping you from getting out.” Stewart calls it a “purity” about the relationship. “I don’t care about the material aspects. It’s a bonding of two souls. Everything else is frosting on the cake.”

Lynn & Liz

Liz Crane and Lynn Wexler met each other almost two years ago and dated several months before getting serious that winter. Last December, they purchased a house together, renting out their separate homes, and are now in the midst of plans for a wedding in Asheville, N.C., on Oct. 9. A ceremony blending traditions of their Presbyterian and Jewish backgrounds as well as elements from pagan, Native American, and other cultures will take place during a weekend of celebrating.

Why is a wedding so important? “That’s a good question,” Wexler said. “Well, I want to stand up in front of my friends and my family and say ‘This is the woman I want to spend my life with – through the good times and the bad, through it all. I love her.’ When you find the person you want to be with, this is what you do.”

“Marriage is a personal decision, not to be taken lightly, since it involves the future of yourself, your partner and relationships with family and friends,” said Crane. “It combines more than households: It includes body, mind and spirit, while maintaining a healthy sense of self. Regardless of your sexual orientation, a committed relationship involves both parties being aware of themselves and their needs.”

Liz and Lynn are also taking steps to legally establish their relationship, such as deeding the house jointly



and both changing their names to the hyphenated Crane-Wexler. If they lived in a state that recognized same-sex marriages or civil unions, like Massachusetts, Liz, a forester with the USDA Forest Service based in Atlanta, could use her federal health insurance to cover Lynn, who is self-employed – but not in Georgia.

It’s about the L word

All the women interviewed agree that defeating bans on same-sex marriage is crucial to the gay community – whether or not marriage is right for any individual or couple personally. “There must be a clear separation of church and state,” said Wexler. “Civil marriage must be equal and available to all.” Hale concurs. “Let’s make this very clear. I’m not asking any church or religious sect to do anything they don’t want to do.” Lesbian and gay couples should have the right to marry, if that expression of commitment is right for them, just as mixed-gender couples can choose to marry or not. “I expect all political parties to support equal rights for all citizens, including same-sex marriage,” Harris said. “It’s important that we stay abreast of issues critical to the gay community to educate ourselves, our peers, family and colleagues.”

It is clear that gay marriages will continue to occur, regardless of what happens at the voting booths or in the Capitol. “Many people – both straight and gay – practiced sodomy in Georgia while that was technically illegal,” Crane observed. “I believe that, over time, respect for the diversity of the people who comprise this country will win out over all the hatred and prejudice.” In the end, beyond the halls of Congress and behind closed doors, it is love – not legislation – that keeps us together.

Robin Leigh Kessler is a musician, writer and actor who believes that art wins!

Kathryn Toman is a freelance writer who has worked on community and college publications and with corporate communications.

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