

PROVIDENCE JOURNAL (Rhode Island)

Impatient witness: Reflections on the long struggle for gay rights

02:52 PM EST on Monday, January 21, 2008



The late Julia Pell, right, her partner Julie Smith, center, and Smith's daughter Elise McCaffrey, in March 2000, testify before the R.I. House Judiciary Committee in favor of a bill to legalize gay marriages. The Providence Journal / CONNIE GROSCH

I thought from the outset:

Some day this will all seem quaint.

But it's too soon for that.

The struggle for gay rights — the current focus being marriage equality — still rages.

Colleague Mark Arsenault's package of stories in today's paper chronicles remarkable progress in the gay quest for acceptance in Rhode Island.

I wish the day of full acceptance would arrive more quickly.

I have written dozens of columns on this topic. I have met terrific people. I have seen the State House on one of its finest days ever — Gov. Lincoln Almond's signing the 1995 law barring discrimination against gays in housing, employment, accommodations and credit. But I also have seen the State House at its darkest, as the campaign for same-sex marriage stalls year after year, the victim of legislative power plays, opposition from key Democratic leaders, Republican Governor Carcieri and the Catholic Church.

And, of course, the State House is not the only venue where the quest for gay equality falters. It happens also a few blocks away at the Supreme Court, which ruled that the Family Court here lacks the jurisdiction to grant a divorce to two Rhode Island women who wed in Massachusetts.

And , of course, it's not just in Rhode Island. Many states have constitutional amendments that ban gay marriage. Several states allow civil unions, a nice gesture that nevertheless falls short of according all the protections and respect of marriage.

And Congress passed the infamous Defense of Marriage Act, which bars the federal government from recognizing gay weddings.

Military service? The armed forces maintain a hideous policy of don't ask/don't tell.

And don't get me started on the Boy Scouts of America.

It has been fascinating to watch and to contribute to the dialogue.

I do not have a dramatic personal story. I am not gay. I can't be sure I ever heard the term "homosexual" while I was growing up. Nor can I report that, once I became familiar with the cause, I opposed it and saw the light only after agonizing self-examination or sudden epiphany.

I identified with the struggle because it reminded me so much of the black civil rights crusade and of scenes of the South I saw during visits decades ago: the signs in the Miami Beach buses that ordered colored people to sit from the back; the white and colored gas station bathrooms in the Carolinas, the separate waiting rooms in the Fort Lauderdale bus station; the segregated restaurants in Atlanta, and need I mention Mississippi, which seemed like a foreign country altogether?

I identified with the gay rights movement because I am Jewish, and because, the way I was brought up, you treat people decently and if there's something amiss in the world you try to fix it.

But, in terms of the broad framing religious themes, I also was influenced by four years of exposure to Protestant hymns as a student at Phillips Academy, Andover.

Once to every man and nation

Comes the moment to decide,

In the strife of truth with falsehood

For the good or evil side...

I believe discrimination against gays is evil, and marriage equality is not rocket science. Society benefits from loving, stable relationships. A man and a woman should be able to wed; two men or two women, that's fine too. And if it's not for you, don't do it. I don't get hung up on ideological or theological details.

My appreciation for gay rights was deepened by listening to gay men and women over the years, and their parents and siblings, and politicians who had the courage or the insight to sign on with the cause — or, OK, perhaps saw votes in doing so — or who, it turned out, were themselves gay.

I have sought repeatedly to try to persuade citizens to speak out. Sometimes readers applaud, or suggest they would speak up if freer to do so, and it made me realize what a privilege it is to hold a job that actually pays me to express opinions.

Conscience is much easier to deal with when listening to it carries no penalty.

Some readers grouse — even abusively so — but all it does is reinforce my belief I am onto something and that more work remains to be done.

I don't let bigots take up residence in my brain cells. Prime space in my memory bank goes to people like Marc Paige, a gay activist who, at age 37, told me in 1995 that he hoped that year's anti-discrimination bill would make life easier for gay youngsters. "Kids today are still experiencing the isolation, the fear, that I had to go through. Being a teenager is hard enough. These are needless, senseless, tragic emotions that they have to deal with."

I loved it when his mother, Eileen Gray, told me what a jolt it was to learn her son was gay, but declared, "I love him with all my heart and soul. I don't think there's anything wrong with him. I don't think he's 'sick.' I have become educated and wiser, hopefully, to understand that a certain percentage of the population, from the beginning of time, is born gay. What's the big deal?"

I remember the late Julia Pell saying what a toll it took, fighting for gay-rights legislation, "trying to explain that we're people, that we're just people."

On marriage, I thought Kate Monteiro, another well-known figure in gay-lesbian circles, made a good point in saying, "The reality of it is that same-sex couples have been married in their hearts, have taken care of each other and been responsible to and for each other and acted as married couples forever. The only difference is whether or not the state deigns to acknowledge it."

Legislators need reminding that gay people are everywhere, including the legislature.

Providence Mayor David Cicilline, who came out while still a House member, testified later, "Gay men and lesbians are your teachers, your doctors, your lawyers, your neighbors, your elected officials, with the same values, hopes and dreams as everyone

else. We value commitment, loving and caring relationships, and stability the same as members of the heterosexual community.”

Within days, House Majority Leader Gordon Fox came out and made the same point. And Frank Ferri, who helped spearhead the marriage equality movement, recently won a special election and now is in the House.

U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy has been an outspoken ally of the gay community. And, as Journal writer Arsenault points out, so was former Mayor Buddy Cianci.

And I admired Cianci for it, even as I regularly denounced him on other fronts. Indeed, I did a 2002 column headlined, “On gay parade, Cianci is right, Cicilline is wrong.”

Cianci said the city could and should require a crew of firefighters to ride a fire truck in the annual Gay Pride Parade. The crew, with support from the ACLU, said participation should be optional; a fire captain complained that spectators in 2001 assumed the firefighters were gay. The openly gay Cicilline, a civil libertarian, sided with the firefighters.

Cianci was so astonished to see the column siding with him over Cicilline that he thought someone had given him a special hoax copy of the paper.

But in the end, it’s not a mayor who impresses me, or a governor, or a bishop. It’s listening to individuals like Dana DelBonis, who spoke at a 2005 Marriage Equality rally at the State House. She said she was from Jamestown and had two daughters; one was married, the other a lesbian with a partner. “Treat my daughters equally,” she implored the General Assembly, “because that’s what they deserve.”

At the State House the next year it was a pleasure to meet a Catholic family from Warwick: Ed and Ann Bonetti, and their 19-year-old daughter, Lauren; their 20-year-old gay son, Greg, was away in school in New York.

Ed — who since has joined The Journal and is assistant director of operations-home delivery — told me that, in regard to marriage, his daughter “has opportunities in front of her without asking,” but, as for the son, “we have to fight for those rights.” Lauren said she felt “guilty” and “frustrated” and couldn’t understand why the Catholic Church was so influential. Now Ann, her mother, said, “Being gay is not a choice. I don’t know how anyone can condemn someone when this is the way God made them. So if God made someone this way — being gay — how can someone turn around and say they’re substandard?”

The Rev. Bernard Healey, diocesan lobbyist, told me, “We’re not treating anybody substandard.” But he added, “We want to defend an institution that we think needs to exist as it has always been defined for centuries by every major religion, by every major culture.”

That same day, Lauren Nocera, partner of Marriage Equality leader Jenn Steinfeld, told a committee it's "degrading" to have to testify every year. "It feels like begging." She said, "We have been open, we have been honest, we have been courageous. Now it's your turn."

I hate to see Rhode Islanders have to beg for equality. Gay folks in Massachusetts do not have to beg to be able to wed. Is Rhode Island a less generous state?

And what of the politicians?

I remember seeing a cartoon once in which a pollster asked what was the bigger problem, ignorance or apathy, and the person answered, "I don't know and I don't care."

I do not question the sincerity of top politicians who cling to traditional views toward marriage. And I do not ask them to like gay marriage or to promote it. But I do wish they'd take a little time to try to know more about it and care more about how they come across.

I wish these politicians would try to understand why gay people think they should be able to marry, and to realize that life would go on in Rhode Island if it were to come here, just as life goes on in Massachusetts.

And some day it WILL come here and some day folks will look back incredulously and ask, "Huh, you mean there was a time when two loving people of the same sex couldn't get married? What was THAT all about?"

M. Charles Bakst is The Journal's political columnist.