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northwest

Is Gay Marriage a Queer Idea?

Washington domestic partner legislation passes; marriage debate continues

by Sassafra Lowrey

The Washington House approved a domestic partnership bill April 10 that extends basic protections to gay and lesbian couples.

The bill previously passed the state Senate, and Democratic Gov. Christine Gregoire has pledged to sign it when it reaches her desk. It will "provide emergency protections to LGBT couples and addresses some of the most pressing issues that face couples during times of crisis in terms of automatic hospital visitation, medical decision rights and inheritance rights," explained Joshua Friedes, advocacy director of Equal Rights Washington.

This bill, according to Melissa Chernaik of Basic Rights Oregon, is different from proposed Oregon legislation "in that theirs is this very specific subset of rights, whereas ours is very inclusive in the rights and responsibilities." She adds that the Washington legislation "covers fewer than six to eight specific rights" and that the proposed Oregon legislation "provides all the rights, protections and responsibilities that are available through marriage."

Equal Rights Washington representatives expressed excitement about this victory for queer families and consider this domestic partner legislation as a stepping stone in their underlying fight to achieve marriage equality for the gay and lesbian community. "The domestic partner bill provides only a fraction of the benefits and protections associated with marriage equality, and we built it as a stopgap measure as we continue to struggle for marriage equality," said Friedes. The organization was quick to point out that there are some key legal differences between the rights associated with marriage versus those of a domestic partnership.

"Marriage is not only a gateway to over 1,400 legal rights and protections. It also represents full social equality for gays and lesbians under the law. Anything less than marriage is less than equal," Friedes said.

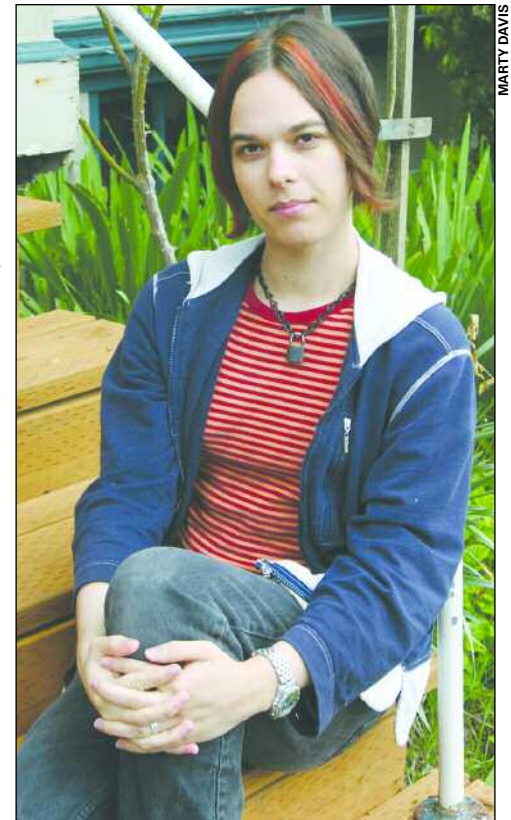
Gay marriage is a divisive issue in the region, as demonstrated with Oregon's Measure 36, the same-sex marriage ban passed in 2004.

A growing number of queer activists question the desire for marriage and suggest that there might be better and queerer options for protecting families led by same-sex couples.

Amanda Halford, a queer activist and Portland resident, discussed her desire for what she called equality, and feeling at odds with many gay rights organizations. "Fighting for gay marriage, in my opinion, is selfish because it's not necessarily what the entire community is wanting," she explained.

Tobi Hill-Meyer, a self-identified genderqueer trans dyke and sexual minority activist, discussed the concerns she has about marriage as an institution. "We really need to take a look at how marriage operates in our society...how those kinds of structures that enforce marriage [enforce] a specific type of relationship as a type of moral code [and] punish people that don't belong to [them]."

Like other queer activists who have concerns about the desire for legalizing gay marriage, Hill-



MARTY DAVIS

As some continue to work toward marriage equality, activist Tobi Hill-Meyer has institutional concerns.


Meyer also spoke about what she considers the ways in which marriage legitimizes some queer relationships at the expense of others. "If you have a relationship that conservatives don't want you to have, they are still not going to recognize it...[which] perpetuates the same discrimination upon us that they seek to have ended upon them."

Queer activists uncomfortable with the fight for marriage discussed how their ability to participate in community causes have been compromised by what they feel is a pressure to participate in marriage activism. "[It] can really segregate people in the gay community," explained Halford.

Hill-Meyer added, "I get pulled into this false choice where its kind of like, that's the work that is going on, and if I want to help out with queer work, then I'll have to be doing that." She also spoke of doing the marriage activism for her lesbian mothers who wish to have the right to marry.

Friedes acknowledged that there is a dissent among queer activists about the energy placed on the issue of marriage equality and dismissed the idea that it's about assimilation.

"The idea that we are seeking marriage in order to assimilate is quite a silly notion," he said. "We are stamped with a badge that says we may not marry. In America, the freedom to marry is the hallmark of full citizenship."

Hill-Meyer contended, "Giving people the opportunity to define their own relationships and have those definitions recognized legally would be the ultimate protection." 

SASSAFRAS LOWREY is a Portland freelance writer.