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NEWS
Tacoma, WA - July 31, 2007

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'Just registered' - Couples put it in writing

SEAN COCKERHAM; The News Tribune
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Laura Valdez of Tacoma has bad memories of going to college in north Texas as a lesbian. She remembers guys in pickups throwing beer bottles, spitting, and yelling at her.

Valdez said those memories make it all the more sweet that Washington state on Monday began registering same-sex partners and giving them some rights of married people.

"It feels like watching man walk on the moon to me," said Valdez, who plans to register by mail with her partner, Austen Freeda.

More than 80 people were lined up to register at the state corporations office in Olympia when the doors opened at 8 a.m. The crowd cheered whenever a couple emerged from the office, waving their domestic partnership wallet identification cards. A car was festooned with balloons and a large sign reading "Just Registered" on the back. A Seattle couple that arrived about 4 a.m. was the first to register.

Valorie Hamilton of Tacoma, about halfway back in the line with her partner and two children from a previous relationship, said her family thought it was important to come to Olympia and register the first day.

"We wanted to make sure the line was the biggest possible and to absolutely show that this a big step forward," Hamilton said.

Gays, lesbians and unmarried senior couples who sign up for the registry have the right to visit a partner in the hospital, inherit property when there's no will, sue for wrongful death and make decisions for a partner on matters such as emergency health care, funeral arrangements and disposition of remains.

"They've given us the sickness-and-death" parts, said Hamilton's partner, Kesha Popin.

Popin said she wants the other rights given to married couples, as well. Those include community property, tax benefits and the right not to testify against a spouse in court.

Those standing in line Monday made it clear they saw the domestic partnership law as a first step toward legalized marriage.

Amanda Swarr of Tacoma wore a bridal veil and wedding top – and leather pants. "When we get the rest of our rights we'll wear the rest of the dress," her sign read.

Swarr and her partner, T Steele, said they could already get rights offered under the new domestic partnership law through power of attorney and other paperwork. Steele said the law is sort of a sham. But she and Swarr came to register anyway, out of respect for the people who worked hard to get it through the Legislature last spring.

Steele said she didn't think the ultimate goal of legalizing same-sex marriage was too far away.

"I think we have a real good chance in this state," Steele said. "This state is not homophobic."

In 1998, the Legislature passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as union of one man and one woman. The state Supreme Court upheld the act on a 5-4 vote last year.

Bills to legalize same-sex marriage have gone nowhere in the Legislature.

Gay state legislators have pledged to keep trying. But Bothell Pastor Joseph Fuiten said the public won't support same-sex marriage. Fuiten, who leads the political group Positive Christian Agenda, said the new law undermines marriage.

"It's the wisdom of God versus the wisdom of the Legislature," he said.

There were no protesters Monday as same-sex couples registered in Olympia.

"What would be the point of that? We're not juveniles who think we can accomplish anything by waving a sign," Fuiten said.

Fuiten said Gov. Chris Gregoire and state legislators who supported domestic partnerships would be targeted in the 2008 election. That is the key to change, Fuiten said.

Valdez and her partner, Freeda, said they couldn't guess how long it would take for same-sex marriage to be legal in Washington. But they said tolerance was one of the reasons they moved to Tacoma six months ago.



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LUI KIT WONG/The News Tribune LUI KIT WONG/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Amanda Swarr, left, and T Steele of Tacoma registered as domestic partners Monday in Olympia, along with others taking advantage of a new state law.



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PHOTOS BY LUI KIT WONG/THE NEWS TRIBUNE
Lynn Grotzky, left, and Lisa Brodoff of Olympia were among more than 300 who registered as partners Monday in the capital.



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"Our parting words from Tennessee were, 'You can't get married yet in Washington, but you sure as hell are going to be able to get married in Washington before you can in Tennessee,'" Freedra said.

By day's end, 154 couples had registered as domestic partners, according to the Secretary of State's Office. The names are public, so it's not advised for all same-sex partners. Justin Sedell, an attorney who briefed Tacoma gays and lesbians about the law at a forum last week, said those in the military should be cautious.

And foreign nationals in the United States on temporary visas could risk being deported. Registering as a domestic partner could show an intent to remain in the country forever, a violation of a temporary visa.

But Sedell said the new law does give important rights to couples who can register. Many people can't afford a lawyer to draw up power-of-attorney papers, he said. Or they might not have documents handy after an accident.

Sedell also said he expects the list of rights granted to Washington state domestic partners to grow. California started with a similar list, he said, and domestic partners in that state now enjoy all state marriage benefits, except the right to get married.

"This first baby step is actually pretty big," Sedell said of the new Washington state law.

HOW TO REGISTER

Eligible couples can register as domestic partners in person or by mail.

They must pay a \$50 fee and present a "Declaration of Domestic Partnership" form signed in the presence of a notary public. The form is available online at www.secstate.wa.gov.

Partners receive a "Certificate of State Registered Domestic Partnership" and a wallet card.

To register in person, go to the Corporations Division of the Office of the Secretary of State, 801 Capitol Way South, Olympia.

Or the forms can be printed and mailed to: Office of the Secretary of State, Corporations Division, P.O. Box 40234, Olympia, WA 98504.

Online registration will be offered in the future.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Share a residence.
- Be at least 18 years old.
- Be unmarried and not already in a state-registered domestic partnership.
- Be capable of consenting to the partnership.
- Not be related any closer than second cousins.
- Be members of the same sex, or one of the persons must be at least 62 years of age.

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