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With marriage on its mind, gay community shows its pride

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With marriage on its mind, gay community shows its pride

By DANIEL STURM

Canada has served as a safe haven for Americans on more than one occasion. During the 19th century, African-Americans fled north on the Underground Railroad to escape slavery, and during the Vietnam War, young men fled there to escape the draft.

More recently, Ingham County Commissioner Chris Swope traveled to Canada to enjoy another civil right denied back home: the right to marry.

The Province of Ontario passed a law allowing same-sex marriage last year, and since then gay and lesbian couples have been flocking across the border. Once they're over the bridge to Windsor, Swope and his partner, Brad Rakowski, enjoy the legal status and social recognition of a normal married couple. Back in Michigan, a state and federal lobby aiming to permanently deny same-sex marriages rages on.

This year's June 12 Michigan Pride festival in Lansing will spotlight debates surrounding the issues.

Festival spokeswoman Sarah Mieras said she estimates that more than 15,000 supporters of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rights will join the largest annual event, held on the steps of the Capitol. Roughly one month following the first legal U.S. gay marriage in Massachusetts, more than 300 gay and lesbian couples are expected to exchange vows during a symbolic commitment ceremony.

Mieras said the two-day festival will most likely draw more participants than last year because many are planning to also protest an anti-gay marriage petition drive, launched by an organization called "Citizens to Protect Marriage."

The anti-gay marriage campaign's chairwoman, Marlene Elwell, said that her organization's 83 Michigan county positions have recently been filled, and they plan to start circulating petitions soon. "We have to take this issue out of the hands of the courts and politicians, and put it in the hands of the people," Elwell said.

The Farmington Hills resident, a longtime anti-abortion activist, said she feels confident that they'll be able to gather the 317,757 signatures required to put the proposal on the Nov. 2 ballot. In the Greater Lansing area, they plan to gather 18,000 signatures in Ingham County, 8,000 in Eaton County and 5,000 in Clinton County. So far, she says the

group has gathered 2,418 signatures in Ingham County, 1,380 in Eaton and 1,529 in Eaton.

An organizer with experience, Elwell worked for the 1988 Republican presidential campaign of Christian Coalition President Pat Robertson, and also on the presidential campaign of Bob Dole.

The state constitutional amendment they support would limit marriages in Michigan to heterosexual couples and also ban civil unions for same-sex couples. A similar anti-gay marriage resolution, proposed by state Sen. Alan Cropsey, R-DeWitt, failed to receive enough votes in the Michigan House in March.

When asked why she feels a legal ban is necessary, when state prohibitions and a federal ban on same-sex marriage already exist, Elwell said: "Massachusetts had a law as well. But the judges struck the law down. To avoid this from happening in Michigan, we need to reinforce that law by making it part of the Michigan constitution."

In addition to running this campaign, Elwell heads the FreedomISP Foundation, an organization that educates parents about Internet pornography. When asked whether she saw the two campaigns as interrelated, Elwell simply replied that she has always supported "family values," and refused to comment further. Gay marriage was an issue "I've never been involved in," she said. "I'm the last person you want to interview regarding any expertise in this area."

In 1992, Elwell and the Iowa Christian Coalition successfully campaigned against a ballot initiative that would have made the Equal Rights Amendment a state law. Elwell is also working on anti-abortion issues in Michigan for Catholics in the Public Square.

If the group gathers the required signatures by July 6, the referendum will be placed on the November ballot. Michigan residents would then be asked to vote on whether to change the state Constitution to include a clause that will effectively ban same-sex marriage and prevent local governments and public institutions from providing same-sex domestic partner benefits. Such benefits are offered to employees by the governments of Ann Arbor, Detroit and Kalamazoo and by state universities such as MSU.

The policy director of the Triangle Foundation in Detroit, Sean Kosofsky, said that Elwell had moved into Michigan all the way from Iowa in order to run a hateful and vicious campaign that catered to homophobic sentiment.

The Triangle Foundation is cooperating with the newly formed Coalition for a Fair Michigan to counteract the anti-gay marriage initiative. The group of 25 pro-gay organizations has launched its own campaign, "Decline to Sign," which supports fairness and equity for all residents of the state of Michigan.

Mieras said that campaigns against the right for same-sex couples to marry should be seen as part of a scapegoat mechanism. "It is much easier for right-winged opponents to blame gay people for the destruction of the American family, than it is for them to fix the problem."

Mieras, who has been in a relationship with another woman for seven years, said she worries that if the anti-same-sex marriage campaign continues, more people will buy into it. "I believe this can accelerate violence against gay and lesbian people."

The Grand Rapids native and freelance writer argues that anti-gay laws are outdated because involvement in a gay or lesbian relationship has meanwhile become normal and socially acceptable. "What's not normal is that so many of my gay or lesbian friends can't adopt their children [that are already part of their family]," Mieras said.

Mieras said that by establishing a state plan with an attorney for roughly \$1,000, same-sex partners can replicate about 300 of more than 1,000 legal benefits married people enjoy. But most of these deal with catastrophic situations, she said.

"They don't include getting my partner's Social Security when she dies. They don't include getting her pension, they don't include inheritance rights or tax-breaks."

Mieras said she and her partner have filed the necessary legal paperwork to allow them to make medical decisions for one another or sign payroll checks in an emergency. "This is something that happens naturally when you get married."

Penny Gardner, an executive assistant for Michigan Equality, a statewide gay rights organization based in Lansing, has lived with her partner, Marilyn Bowen, for seven years. She said it is an abomination that she must go through such a process to make sure that her partner benefits from her retirement and assets. "That's what I am fighting for □ for us to be able to have the legal benefits other marriages have."

Swope, executive director of Michigan Equality, elected in 2000 as the first openly gay member of the Ingham County Board of Commissioners, said that people in the gay community are missing out on a lot. Swope said he and his partner got married in a beautiful Windsor park across from their hotel. "It was a very rewarding experience," he said.

Ever since same-sex marriage became legal in Ontario, Colleen Leclerc, a Canadian marriage officiant, says she receives requests from Michigan on an almost weekly basis. The French teacher from Windsor, who performed the wedding ceremony for Swope and his partner on May 24 (Canada's Queen Victoria Holiday), said the marriage process is exactly identical, to the extent that some gay couples have asked for a more unique ceremony. The marriage license uses the same terminology for same sex and heterosexual couples. If two men apply for a marriage license, they must choose who will be the bridegroom, and who will be the bride.

Leclerc, who is a member of the Humanist Association of Canada, said: "It doesn't matter to me what religion or what sexual orientation people are. If they love each other enough to get married I'm going to help them."

When asked if she believes the Canadian gay marriage legislation could spill over to Michigan, Leclerc replied: "I would hope so. But usually it's the Americans who try to tell us what we should do. We're just a small country."

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