

Michigan Makes History With First Marriages

State Is Number 18 In March To Equality

BY SUSAN HOROWITZ

As soon as U.S. District Judge Bernard Friedman declared the ban on same sex marriage in Michigan unconstitutional at 4:50 p.m. Friday and it was clear no stay was attached to his sweeping decision, Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette immediately requested an emergency stay. The stay would come, but not before 4 counties in the state married 315 same sex couples Saturday morning.

The case centered on Hazel Park couple April DeBoer and Jayne Rowse who originally sued to be able to jointly adopt their children. The case was later amended to include the right to marry

and Judge Friedman ruled unconditionally in their favor. Attorney General Bill Schuette is appealing the case, and a stay would have prevented any marriages from taking place until after an appeal.

DeBoer and Rowse were not among the couples to marry Saturday. Instead they are waiting until after the appeals process is complete and their marriage - and adoptions - can go unchallenged. "We will do it when we know it is for real," DeBoer said at a press conference held Friday at Affirmations Community Center in Ferndale.

In Judge Friedman's ruling he wrote of the couple, "No court proceeding could ever fully convey the personal

sacrifice of these two plaintiffs who seek to ensure that the state may no longer impair the rights of their children and the thousands of others now being raised by same-sex couples. It is the Court's fervent hope that these children will grow up to understand the integrity and closeness of their own family and its concord with other families in their community and in their daily lives. Today's decision is a step in that direction."

Knowing that a stay was inevitable, County Clerks in Oakland, Ingham, Washtenaw and Muskegon Counties rushed to give residents the chance to marry. They opened for special hours and waived waiting periods. The honor of being first in the state to wed went to Glenna DeJong and Marsha Caspar of Lansing, who were married by Ingham County Clerk Barb Byrum just after 8 a.m.

In Washtenaw County the first couple to marry was Beth Patton and Jonnie Terry. "A big thank you to the two of you, who became our poster children yesterday as the first same-sex couple to be married in Washtenaw. Congratulations! With their high profile wedding, Jonnie fears repercussions at her employment, as it is still legal to fire someone for being gay in Michigan," said Sandi Smith, president of Jim Toy Community Center in a letter to the community Sunday.

In Oakland County 142 couples took their vows. Statewide the total is 315.

Oakland County Clerk Lisa Brown, who was a defendant in the case because of her position as county clerk, was on hand to personally officiate



Top: Jennifer Brown, Jennifer Carney and Baby Benjamin Brown. First kiss after marrying. BTL Photo Andrew Potter.

Middle: Rev. Kimi Reigle, left, from Northwestern Unitarian Church in Southfield assisted County Clerk Lisa Brown and Assistant Clerk Lavora Barnes in officiating at the large en masse wedding ceremonies in the courthouse auditorium. Barnes daughter Morgan helped as well. BTL Photo Andrew Potter.

Bottom: Metropolitan Community Church ministers Rev. Deb Dysert and Rev. Roland Stringfellow performed about 30 marriages in the halls of the courthouse. BTL Photo Crystal Proxmire

Above: Paul Mattson and Roland Smith prepare to marry at the Oakland County Courthouse. BTL Photo Andrew Potter



► Couples Marry

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weddings. Upon hearing about the decision Friday night she said, "It's a relief that my office is no longer forced to discriminate against same-sex couples. During the course of the trial I've heard from many residents who want to be first in line to get a marriage license. I couldn't be happier to say that their wait is finally over. It's taken too long to get to this point, but we are finally here."

Frank Colasonti Jr. and James Ryder of Birmingham waited in line starting at 6 a.m. to be first in Oakland County. Prior to that moment, they waited 26 years to call themselves "husband and husband." The couple met while attending Metropolitan Community Church then located in Birmingham. They got married Saturday "to ensure our protection for each other as we grow older," Colasonti said. To celebrate they planned on going out to lunch and maybe picking out wedding rings.

Brown performed several ceremonies, but soon realized there were so many couples, they would need to be done en masse. Through the day she led rounds of ceremonies, 25 couples at a time, in the County Commission Auditorium.

"It's just an honor to share in somebody's very special moment like this," Brown said. "It's just a great feeling to see two people who love each other so much be able to have a right that other people have enjoyed for years."

Kat and Jennifer LaTosch met in college. Kat recalled always wanting to meet Jennifer because "she was the cool girl who walked across campus like she knew what she was doing." Over 20 years later they are raising two kids.

Being able to declare their love is not the only reason that Jim Schaffer and Jason McIntosh of Pleasant Ridge came out to exchange vows. "We're in the process of adopting Norah," Schaffer said, "This will make it easier."

Ferndale Mayor Dave Coulter officiated at two weddings at Affirmations Community Center. People had to secure a license at the Oakland County courthouse in Pontiac and then do the roundtrip to Ferndale and back to ensure their marriages were recorded with the office of Vital Records.

"Even though I thought the court testimony was obvious and the decision would be favorable, hearing the verdict was still shocking to me. I have

wondered if I would ever see this day, and when it finally happened there was a powerful sense of relief and excitement. I was in the car, and I wanted to start blowing my horn like we had just won the World Series or something," said Coulter.

The moment Coulter heard about the ruling he went into "work mode."

"I stayed up late contacting our city clerk and the staff at Affirmations and we all began to make plans. I knew I had just lost my day off, and I couldn't have been happier."

"During the first ceremony with Ken (Siever) and Zaid (Ismail), I had to stop a couple times and compose myself. It was such a touching and emotional moment to be a part of and I wanted it to be special for them," said Coulter.

In Washtenaw County longtime community leaders Keith Orr and Martin Contreras were number five in line to marry.

"Shortly after our wedding on Saturday, Martin and I had to run back to the \aut\ BAR to make and serve brunch. At one of my first tables I mentioned that the chef was my husband of one hour and ten minutes. First, what a feeling to call Martin 'my husband!' Second, everyone in that part of the dining room cheered," said Orr. "Its great to be married (even if Snyder and Schuette have not yet figured out that we are legally married). I am so appreciative of all of the people that made this happen...April DeBoer and Jayne Rowse and their legal team, my county clerk and all the court employees who made our wedding possible, Gail Geisenhainer for being an amazing minister. These people made our happiness possible. They also opened a door which will make it possible for others to share in marriage equality in the very near future."

A temporary stay ordered by the U.S. 6th Circuit Court of Appeals was issued late Saturday afternoon and will remain in effect until Wednesday, the earliest possible time for same sex couples to resume getting married depending on the court's findings.

Coulter reacted to the stay, "Honestly, I'm not as upset about that as I thought I would be because the joy I felt is so much more powerful an emotion for me than that, and also because I know this is nothing more than a delay tactic that cannot ultimately change the destiny of equality. Give Schuette his temporary stay, but history is now being written and it won't reflect kindly on the actions of our attorney general."

Crystal A. Proxmire editor of Oakland115.com contributed to this story.



Top left: Frank Colasonti, Jr. and Jim Ryder were the first couples to marry in Oakland County. BTL Photo Andrew Potter

Top right: Keith Orr and Martin Contreras were married at the Washtenaw clerk's office, then had to rush over to / aut/Bar to serve brunch a large celebratory crowd. Photo courtesy of Daniel Freidus

Middle right: Ingham County Clerk Barb Byrum performed 57 marriages at the historic courthouse in Mason.

Bottom right: The Washtenaw clerk's office was filled to capacity with couples hoping to marry. Photo courtesy of Daniel Freidus.

Above: Southfield City Councilman Ken Siever and Zaid Ismail were married by Ferndale Mayor Dave Coulter at Affirmations. Photo courtesy of Michael Lary.