



Family matters

The state Supreme Court's decision on gay marriage brings the law into sync with reality for many Pasadena parents and children

By [Joe Piasecki](#) 06/05/2008

People like Jim Buss and Craig Simmons are no strangers to being told they're different, and that being different somehow makes them less human.

In May 2005, the Pasadena couple and their then 5-year-old twin sons, Justin and Maverick, were denied a family membership with the posh Gerrish Swim and Tennis Club, where the boys had frequently attended birthday parties for classmates.

School functions, minivans and soccer practices aside, the Buss-Simmons family was not a family in the eyes of the club, where the definition of the word started with "married couple" — specifically, "husband and wife."

A few months after their story ran in the Pasadena Weekly, a California Supreme Court decision that upheld a lesbian couple's rights to family membership benefits at a San Diego Country Club prompted Gerrish to change that policy, but it was too late for the Buss-Simmons clan, who by then had decided to take their money elsewhere.

Last month's state Supreme Court decision to lift the ban on same-sex marriage promises to go light years further in erasing concepts like different, separate and lesser from the way we think about family.

Buss, a former commercial airline pilot turned public relations executive, and Simmons, a labor and employment attorney, will be among the first in line on June 17 when marriage licenses are made available to same-sex couples. The longtime registered domestic partners plan to get married as early as this summer — although they may wait for their 18th anniversary in October — at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, where their sons were baptized.

"We're secure in ourselves and know our relationship is as strong as marriage. The reason we want to get married is mostly for our kids, and it feels great to be able to do this for them," said Buss.

Also planning to wed in October at All Saints are Richard Llewellyn and Chris Caldwell, who have been together 28 years and were joined as domestic partners 13 years ago in a ceremony at the church. Like Buss and Simmons, they have two biological children through a surrogate, 17-year-old twins Robbie and Rosie.

Llewellyn, who serves as chief of staff for LA City Council President Eric Garcetti, has also served two terms on the church's vestry, or board of directors. Raised Catholic, he and his partner were attracted to All Saints for its inclusiveness to gays and lesbians.

"We went to San Francisco when they had that brief few days of weddings, but our wedding was invalidated by the

courts [which ruled Mayor Gavin Newsome had exceeded his authority by issuing those marriage licenses], so we're doing it again," said Llewellyn, who is already hiring caterers.

Although the couple has embraced the court's decision with optimism, there is a nagging, lingering fear that this milestone could also be delayed or reversed. And it's there for good reason — attorneys with the ACLU and several gay rights organizations are battling a petition to hold off implementation of the court's ruling until the issue can be decided by ballot initiative.

California Secretary of State Debra Bowen announced Tuesday that such an initiative had enough signatures to qualify for the Nov. 4 ballot.

ACLU attorney Clare Pastore, part of the legal team that argued for lifting the ban on gay marriage, remains optimistic a stay will not occur. "What [a stay] is saying is let's deny all same-sex couples that right because the voters might take it away. It's a long chain of speculation," she said.

The request for a stay was brought by a coalition that supported Proposition 22, the 2000 ballot initiative which prevented California from recognizing same-sex marriages. Backers include groups such as Focus on the Family, Traditional Values Coalition and anti-pornography and pro-life crusaders Concerned Women for America — organizations Llewellyn believes do not reflect mainstream attitudes in Pasadena and Los Angeles.

"There is uncertainty about this moment in time, but I think the tide of history is certainly moving towards full acceptance," said Llewellyn, who referred to polls showing a growing acceptance of gay marriage among California voters. "As people live with the idea [of same-sex couples], they start realizing the institution of marriage can live with this reality as well."

Part of the mission

All Saints' announcement last week that it would perform same-sex marriages should have come as no surprise to anyone. The church had entered a legal brief supporting gay marriage to the Supreme Court prior to its ruling, and has performed same-sex unions for 15 years.

The only question now is how many marriages they will perform.

The Wedding Report, an Arizona-based firm that tracks consumer trends, has projected that more than 33,000 same-sex weddings will occur in California over the next year, enough for a \$1 billion boost in revenue to wedding-related businesses.

"We've been getting calls from all around the country by people who want to get married in California," said the Rev. Susan Russell of All Saints, also president of the Episcopal gay and lesbian advocacy organization Integrity USA. "We're privileged to have had our voice there in the beginning and are looking forward to living the opportunity to make marriage equality a reality."

But don't get the idea that just anyone can get married at All Saints, said Russell and church spokesman Keith Holeman. Because the church requires couples who plan to wed to go through a faith-based preparation ceremony, marriages there have typically involved existing church members. So even if there are more people who want to get married than churches available to marry them, couples from out of state (New York Gov. David Paterson has already announced that the state will recognize same-sex weddings performed in California) would need some sort of spiritual preparation — perhaps a shorter, more intensive process — before they could marry at All Saints, they said. Meanwhile, other area churches also have histories of inclusion for gay and lesbian parishioners. Altadena Community Church has been "open and affirming" since 1987, said Pastor Joe McGowan, who joined the church, a branch of the United Church of Christ, in 1998 after being defrocked by a Presbyterian church for being gay. In 2005, the United Church of Christ became the first Christian denomination to support gay marriage.

Since McGowan's arrival, the size of his congregation has nearly doubled, and now about 40 percent of his 90-member flock is gay or lesbian, he said.

"Several couples have approached me about whether when they get their licenses on June 17 they can have some kind

of ceremony at the church, and absolutely. That's part of the ministry and part of what we do. We see 'open and affirming' as a piece of our large peace and justice work," including feeding the hungry and opposing the Iraq War, said McGowan.

Former Pasadena-area Libertarian Party congressional candidate Jim Keller and his longtime partner Chris Boltz are already married in the eyes of Altadena Community Church, where they entered into domestic partnership during a ceremony last year. "We just need to make it legal now," said Keller of his marriage commitment to Boltz.

The couple hopes to get married by June 24 to preserve their anniversary, said Keller, "but we're also nervous. We want to do it before any injunctions hit or a constitutional amendment hits the ballot in November. I'm optimistic California would not pass an amendment at this time, but I'd rather not have the fight."

Focused on the family

The Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church of Pasadena on Orange Grove Boulevard has also been supportive of gay and lesbian churchgoers — many of whom are also members of Rainbow Families, a support group founded last year by parishioners and life partners Teri Hopper and Alyssa Bellew.

The couple, who met 28 years ago in a high school algebra class, have been domestic partners for several years and are raising a 8-year-old daughter together. They're planning to get married at Neighborhood Church on June 22 — "We want to make it legal as soon as possible," said Hopper, a high school teacher.

Meanwhile, their mission with Rainbow Families has been to support 40-some member families like their own, first by creating a supportive social environment and then applying that unity to community activism and education.

"The idea is not just to counter prejudice that families might face in the community," said Bellew, who spoke of members (many of them from communities east of or adjacent to Pasadena) hiding their sexuality from neighbors and family members or dealing with bullying of their kids at school.

"It's also really important for kids to see other families like theirs," she continued. Even without problems in school, "If theirs is the only family like that, it's hard for them to feel normal. This is a place where there's no [need for] explaining to other kids who ask: 'Do you really have two moms?'" said Bellew.

The group recently met with a number of Pasadena Unified School District officials, including Board of Education member Bob Harrison, to discuss sensitivity to the rights and needs of gay and lesbian students or children of same-sex couples, including legal protections from bullying. Hopper praised the district for being willing to stay on top of the issue, making sure teachers and parents are equipped to deal with hateful behavior.

For families like hers, "It's getting more and more welcoming [in the San Gabriel Valley]," she said. "One or two negative incidents are overridden by the 80 good ones, and families are more willing to be open and honest. Our daughter has been trained from day one to talk about her family and be proud of her family," said Hopper.

The 'splatter' effect

Perhaps part of why Pasadena has been so generally supportive of gay and lesbian relationships is its own makeup.

"Toss a watermelon in Old Pasadena and you're going to splatter somebody who can get married now," joked Keller a few days after the Supreme Court's marriage ruling.

But the support that many same sex couples have received through neighbors and religious institutions has everything to do with people here who aren't gay.

Their lives mostly dominated by school- and youth-related activities with their two sons and other children's parents, Buss and Simmons don't really have a lot of interaction with organized gay and lesbian groups. All the same, support has been overwhelming.

"Most of the support for our family has come from straight families," said Simmons. "People have asked us a lot of questions, trying to understand how our family came together and had children through a surrogate mother. But

people seem genuinely interested and supportive ... and that makes Pasadena a great place to live.”

Television writer Bill Walker and corporate financial manager Kelly Ziegler, All Saints Church parishioners who met at the church and had a commitment ceremony (they call it a family blessing) there in 2001, plan to get married as quickly as possible.

“We’ve gone before God. It’s just the state we’ve been waiting on,” said Walker, who is planning another small ceremony at the couple’s home. “All the neighbor ladies want to throw it for us,” he explained.

Being able to marry is especially important to the couple because they have a 7-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son through surrogates.

“We both came from close families and really wanted a family,” said Walker. “Our friends say we’re the most old-fashioned couple they know. We feel ridiculously happy for this decision. We feel like we got it all.”

Intern Kristy Lucero contributed to this story.

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