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How gays' attitudes toward marriage evolved

Wyatt Buchanan, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Jewelle Gomez and her partner, Diane Sabin, were plaintiffs in the case that granted same-sex couples the right to marry and, along with other couples, cheered the California Supreme Court's decision on the steps of the courthouse last month.

But in the moments after the decision was announced, Gomez still wondered - did she really want to marry?

That is a question many people who have long been part of the modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement are asking after the court's ruling. For much of the movement's four-decade history, marriage was viewed by many activists as an institution to be dismantled, not pursued.

That began changing as the AIDS epidemic showed the importance of legally recognized relationships and as mainstream gay rights organizations fought ballot measures to ban same-sex marriage. Still, it was not until the prospect of marriage became reality that many said they wholeheartedly embraced it.

Rethinking views on vows

Gomez, 59, admits it seems odd that she would invest time and energy in pursuing marriage rights when she and her partner were not sure whether they actually wanted the status themselves.

"I say look back at the civil rights movement - people did not risk their lives at Woolworth's because the food was good," said Gomez, who added that her hesitation comes from her close involvement with the feminist movement and its social and economic critiques of marriage.

The couple have decided to go ahead and are planning a Halloween wedding.

"My sense became more that it doesn't mean we don't want to change society if we get married and it doesn't mean we don't want to highlight economic disparities ... but if you bang on a door, it is a different feeling than when the door opens and you walk through. It's physically different and emotionally different," she said.

The first lawsuit by same-sex couples seeking marriage rights was filed by two men in Minnesota who were denied a marriage license in 1970; their arguments were rejected by that state's Supreme Court. Similar cases were unsuccessful in Washington state and Kentucky over the next few years, and no national organizations existed to back the efforts.

Meanwhile, in many gay communities, a radical new culture with its own model of relationships formed and blossomed through the late 1970s and into the 1980s.

In 1980, when Jeff Sheehy came out in Austin, Texas, the first man he pursued a relationship with presented him with that new philosophy.

"He said promiscuity was a political act, a rejection of bourgeois and heterosexual templates that we've been forced into in our culture, and it was incumbent on ourselves to create a new culture that was polyamorous," said Sheehy, 51, a longtime gay rights advocate who is planning to marry

his partner in August. "At the time, I wasn't a crazy wild guy, but that made a lot more sense to me than thinking about being married."

The emergence of AIDS challenged that point of view. Without a legal partnership, families of people who died from the disease could bar a surviving partner from the funeral and seize all of the deceased's belongings.

"It changes your value system. It changes how you interact with the world," said Sheehy, who is HIV-positive. He began "having more traditional feelings that are associated with heterosexual culture" and saw the importance of fully recognized same-sex relationships.

He and others pushed for, and won, a city equal-benefits ordinance for gay and lesbian couples in San Francisco. That ordinance, passed in November 1996, was the first in the nation to require employers who have contracts with the city to provide benefits to domestic partners.

That was in the late 1990s, and the national gay rights organizations were just beginning to discuss marriage as an issue, said Sue Hyde, who coordinates the Creating Change conference for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The conference is the major annual gathering for gay and lesbian activists.

Hyde was married in Cambridge, Mass., in 2004 and said she and her wife have the second marriage license that was issued in the United States to a same-sex couple. She started her activism in the women's movement and harbored deep concerns about the institution of marriage. Like other feminist thinkers of the day, she saw marriage as an institution that subjugated women and children under men in a legal relationship.

Like others, she said her thinking changed as the prospect of marriage for gays and lesbians became a reality and people and organizations opposed to same-sex marriage began a major movement.

"The whole political whiplash made us realize that our political adversaries understand that when same-sex couples can be married, the gender gig is up in marriage," said Hyde, 56. "It's over because two women or two men together do not have to abide by or live with the traditional gender roles that have governed marriage."

Roberta Sklar, who has been active in the gay and lesbian rights movement for 25 years and married her wife in Vancouver, British Columbia, had strong feelings early on about "wanting to dismantle the institution of marriage."

"I see a lot of people who have come through that period, especially women, and have come out on the other side," Sklar said.

Leaders of the gay and lesbian rights movement now are firmly behind marriage as a central goal. National organizations are focusing time and money on the campaign against an amendment to the California Constitution to ban same-sex marriage. Voters will decide that issue in November.

Not all gays on board

But outspoken critics of marriage remain in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, who edited the anthology "That's Revolting! Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation," said: "Marriage is depressing, period."

Sycamore said all of the benefits of marriage touted by activists - like hospital visitation rights, access to a significant other's health benefits, and citizenship status - should be pursued in a context of universal human rights, not marriage rights.

"I'm all for choosing the conventional nuclear family model if you are also creating space for people to create other relationship options," said Sycamore, who acknowledges she wants to "get rid of marriage."

She said she realizes that many radical gay and lesbian activists have moved away from her viewpoint, though, and said she was disheartened to see some of those activists line up to be married in 2004.

"San Francisco is a place where, for generations, queer people who want to live outside the margins come and create a wide margin of identities and politics. I think that's shrinking," Sycamore said.