

Marriage strengthens bond of same-sex couples, too

By Paul Beaudet and David Wertheimer

In July, British Columbia began providing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. In August, we decided to travel from our home in Washington state to the village of Sooke on Vancouver Island in Canada to get married in celebration of our 10th anniversary as a couple.

It was a decision made after careful consideration. We knew that until the ongoing national debate finally is resolved and marriage equality is secured in the United States, our same-sex marriage would encounter a mix of support and discrimination, of respect and uncertainty.

Some friends — gay and straight — also questioned why we would choose to participate in an institution that has a checkered history of oppression and discrimination. We had a simple response: Marriage has changed. Women no longer are treated as chattel. Mixed-race unions no longer are forbidden. Finally, governments are beginning to realize that there is no rational basis to discriminate against same-gender couples.

Once we decided to move forward, we felt the thrill that attends most weddings. We wondered how being legally married would feel, given that we have lived together for more than a decade.

Many friends had the same question. Since the ceremony, the most frequent inquiry from gay and straight friends alike has been: "So, does it feel any different?" Prior to the event, we anticipated the answer would be a resounding "No!" But we were mistaken.

Power of ceremony

Standing before the Sooke marriage commissioner as she pronounced us legally wed under the authority of British Columbia was an experience of surprising power. The familiar words that define legal marriage gave unexpected gravity to the ceremony. Finally, we were officially recognized as individuals in a unique relationship. Canada was saying it supported us in our responsibilities, our aspirations to security and protection, our love.

The impact of Canada's formal recognition has been bigger than either of us anticipated; even the little ways feel big. As we returned from Sooke and passed through U.S. Customs, an agent questioned us about the nature of our business in Canada. When we told him that we'd gotten married, he broke into a smile and said, "Hey, congratulations, guys!" with surprising sincerity.

As we headed toward our San Juan Islands home, the ferry suddenly made a full circle in the middle of the

channel that separates us from the mainland, then continued on its usual way. We were both confused. Moments later, the ferry crew knocked at our window, announcing: "It's an island tradition to give every newlywed couple a 360. Congratulations!"

Symbolic gesture

When you live on a small island, there are few secrets. That the crew chose to recognize our marriage even though the government they work for has not is a remarkable affirmation of our lives as part of a small American community. Despite our years together on the island, the recognition of us as a couple first came that night.

Prior to our wedding, we often were faced with the conundrum of what to call each other when first introducing our partner. We'd used the stock set of acceptable euphemisms, such as "lover" or "partner." This list never included the word "husband," except perhaps in irony or jest. It seemed inappropriate, inaccurate, even a bit forced.

Now, it fits quite naturally. Because that's what we are to each other: husbands. Not simply because we decided to appropriate the most familiar word that exists to describe our relationship, but because Canada has affirmed our relationship.

We both knew, when we celebrated our commitment back in 1993, that we were in it for the long haul. Neither of us took our exchange of vows lightly, even without the sanction of the state. Call us old-fashioned, perhaps, but something changes when the state stands behind you in the bond you have chosen to establish with another person. We were strong as a couple before we got married. But now that bond is even stronger.

Being married does, indeed, feel different.

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http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-01-12-gay-marriage_x.htm