

Local gay couples want right to wed their mates - Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX) - February 20, 2004

February 20, 2004 | Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX) | HOLLY HUFFMAN Eagle Staff Writer

Same-sex marriage rally A **same-sex marriage** rally is scheduled for noon Friday at the Brazos County Courthouse.

The 30-minute rally, themed "First comes love, then comes **marriage**," will serve as a celebration of the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling that endorsed **same-sex** marriages, organizers said.

During the event, two **same-sex** couples who requested **marriage** licenses locally will speak about their relationships and why **marriage** is important to them.

A sociologist will speak about **marriage** in society, and the executive director of the Lesbian Gay Rights Lobby will talk about the legal aspects of **marriage** in Texas.

John Scroggs and his significant other seem to have a perfect family — a loving relationship, a new house and the prospect of children once the adoption process is complete, he said.

But something is missing, the 33-year-old College Station resident said.

It's the same thing that eludes 21-year-old Blinn College student Lauren Carpenter and her beloved, who she now lives with after meeting in a chance encounter at a San Antonio grocery store nearly two years ago.

The lacking element: Neither couple can obtain a **marriage** license because Texas law prohibits **same-sex** marriages.

"We had a ceremony last May," Scroggs said, recalling the event held for him and his partner, Paul. "We've been together five years; we just bought a house together. The next step is, we're thinking about starting a family. We're taking all the steps that other people would be taking, except we're not legally recognized by the state of Texas."

Both couples journeyed to the Brazos County Courthouse last week to request **marriage** licenses, as similar demonstrations were taking place across the country. The clerks at the courthouse were apologetic, the four said, but politely and firmly denied their requests.

While neither couple is planning to sue the state, Scroggs acknowledged the maneuver could lay the groundwork for a lawsuit against Texas filed by other couples demanding equal rights.

Gay-rights activist Melanie Edwards said the push to request licenses began when the Lesbian Gay

Rights Lobby was trying to decide on a way to recognize “Freedom to Marry Week,” which is the week of Valentine’s Day.

The group decided to expand its demonstration to include a rally Friday at the Brazos County Courthouse, said Edwards, a graduate student at Texas A&M University. The purpose of the rally is to raise awareness of **marriage** issues.

Many people don’t know that none of the states recognizes **marriage** between gay people, Edwards said. And civil unions, which do not provide the same legal rights as **marriage**, are permitted only in a handful of states.

“ I think for the most part, people are very fair-minded,” said Edwards, a member of the civil rights activist group Gay and Gender Representation In Politics. “They might not be, ‘Rah-rah, gay **marriage**,’ but they think, ‘Equal rights is equal rights, and that’s not hurting me.’”

John and Paul

It was a computer virus that led Scroggs, a communications specialist at Texas A&M University, to Paul.

Everyone Scroggs asked about the problem suggested he seek help from a man named Paul, a computer whiz. He did and the two became friends, he said.

A couple of years passed. One day, while complaining about the lack of eligible men in town, a friend suggested he date Paul.

“You know you could do worse than falling in love with your best friend,” Scroggs recalled his friend telling him.

A year later, Scroggs said, he proposed to Paul. The two have been “married” for 10 months after participating in a commitment ceremony last May at Messina Hof Winery in Bryan, Scroggs said.

Paul asked that his last name not be used and declined to be interviewed for this story.

The two went to the courthouse last week to request a **marriage** license — a move Scroggs said he hopes will let state officials know they are serious about changing the law. The clerk was at first a bit confused, he said, but eventually apologetic.

Scroggs disagrees with those who say **same-sex marriage** could weaken the Christian institution of **marriage**. That isn’t a valid argument, he said, because atheists, agnostics, Muslims and Buddhists all are allowed to wed.

“**[Marriage]** is a civil program designed to give rights to two people that they wouldn’t normally have otherwise,” he said.

Because he and Paul aren’t officially married, they must file separate tax returns and face increased challenges when trying to adopt children, he said. They had to hire a lawyer to draw up

papers designating to each other medical power of attorney in case something happens to one of them.

“Legally, we need those guarantees — those same civil rights that everybody else has,” Scroggs said. “A civil union itself is not quite enough. To me, that smacks of separate but equal, and we know separate is not equal.”

He added: “We just want equal rights.”

Sabrina Jennings (left), 18, and Lauren Carpenter, 21, went to the Brazos County Courthouse last week in hopes of obtaining a **marriage** license. They were politely turned away, as a clerk told them it is against state law for **same-sex** couples to be issued **marriage** licenses. Carpenter and Jennings will celebrate their two-year anniversary on March 23.

Sabrina and Lauren

Carpenter and her mate, 18-year-old Sabrina Jennings, are preparing to celebrate their two-year anniversary on March 23.

The two met at a grocery store in San Antonio, their hometown. For both, it seemed to be love at first sight.

“I met her and it was just like all downhill from there — I just knew,” Carpenter said. “You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to know when you’re in love.”

After a sometimes-tumultuous courtship and three months spent apart as the two dealt with family problems, Carpenter and Jennings moved last summer to College Station and have lived together since August.

They have strong Christian beliefs, Jennings said, so **marriage** is important to them. In fact, she said, they have considered themselves married for the past year.

But that isn’t good enough, said Jennings, who also attends Blinn College.

“People are discriminating against people like us,” she said. “So many other people are just ignorant — it’s just not right.”

With a supportive friend in tow, the thin, soft-spoken women went to the courthouse last Friday to request a **marriage** certificate. Like Scroggs and Paul, they were denied.

The two said they don’t want to file a lawsuit against the state. Instead, Jennings said, they likely will continue to request a license and write their legislators, asking for change.

“We already have the commitment — that’s not what we’re looking for,” she said.

‘We’re a big part of this community’

No changes would be made if it was up to state legislators in the Bryan-College Station area. Neither Rep. Fred Brown, R-College Station, nor Sen. Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, support same-sex marriages.

"I am sensitive to it, but I certainly cannot and will not support it," Brown said this week. "I believe in the biblical sense for **marriage** — one husband and one wife."

Ogden also is opposed to the idea and seemed agitated by news that a rally for the issue was planned.

"Oh great," he replied sarcastically after learning of the event scheduled for Friday. "In Brazos County?"

The senator said he doesn't support gay **marriage** and noted it is contrary to state law.

"I think this is more of a publicity stunt than an issue in Texas," Ogden said. "Texas overwhelmingly supports the idea that **marriage** is between a man and a woman — that's what state law says."

But Edwards, a 28-year-old gay woman, disagrees. Not all Texans support the ban on **same-sex** marriages, which effectively creates a group of second-class Texans, she said.

"For me this is much more a civil rights issue," she said. "Civil unions are really nice. A commitment ceremony is nice. But legal **marriage** isn't really about that kind of commitment."

And, she said, because Brazos County is known for its conservatism, gay and lesbian residents sometimes feel they are all alone in the Bryan-College Station area. But they aren't, she said.

"They don't speak out and use their voice," she said. "[We need to come together] and say, 'Hey, wait a minute. I'm not the only person who feels that way. I am a part of this community — we're a big part of this community.'"

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