

# Why Mom won't get married

“Don't you and Ann *want to get married?*” When same-sex couples in San Francisco began marrying last February, I immediately called Mom. She and Ann have been together 20 years. They fell in love in Ventura County, Calif.—the same county where a judge took my mother's children away from her, arguing that her “alternative lifestyle” made her unfit to parent.

That was the era of growing hysteria over a disease that was killing primarily gay males. The American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders a decade earlier, but the stigma attached to gay parents as “mentally ill” persisted.

How many children passed each other on highways across America every other Friday and Sunday evening during those dark years, permitted to see loving parents only two weekends a month?

These days most gay parents keep their children. National focus has shifted from whether gays and lesbian can raise well-adjusted kids to whether they can legally commit to a marital relationship.

For 20 years Mom and Ann have shared a bed, a house, their families, and their lives. I presumed—after San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom authorized marriage licenses for same-sex couples—they would share nuptials.

I was wrong.

“We're not getting married,” Mom said. Ann added, “Marriage is a religious institution. People shouldn't marry unless they belong to a church.”

“So I shouldn't be allowed to marry?” I sputtered in agnostic indignation.

“Correct.”

Well. My partner, Jonathan, and I were unofficially married at a PFLAG fund-raiser. He donned a white dress

and I wore a tuxedo. Most days that Polaroid is commitment enough. But what if we wish to marry legally? What would it feel like to arrive with Jonathan at the courthouse, only to be told, “You're not allowed to marry”? What would it feel like to get married, only to be told that the marriage license wasn't legal?



It would hurt, as deeply as it hurt a little girl to wave goodbye to her mother, knowing it would be 10 days before she could see her again.

“It's heartbreaking,” said Art Adams, who, with his partner, was the first to be denied marriage rights in San Francisco after the state supreme court ordered the marriages to stop and invalidated all 4,161 licenses given to same-sex couples.

The American Bar Association, like the APA before it, is ahead of

public opinion, opposing “any federal enactments” that would hinder “the authority of states to regulate marriage within their borders.” The ABA is also ahead of my mother, who didn't write letters to her representatives protesting the proposed anti-marriage amendment to our Constitution. My disabled brother now lives with her, and she remains closeted, terrified of losing a child again.

I wrote letters to local politicians for months. I like to think Oregon senator Ron Wyden and representative Peter DeFazio voted “nay” on the amendment partly because Melissa Hart from Eugene has two mommies.

Not that I don't still question the idea of marriage. Why would anyone want to get married? Isn't marriage an archaic ritual originally designed so a father could bestow possession of his daughter upon another man? Why would a feminist participate in such a patriarchal ceremony?

But the fact remains that I long to invite Jonathan's and my friends and family to celebrate our union. I want our country to recognize that union in matters of health care and child custody—basic protections generally denied to same-sex couples.

Yes, many employers offer domestic-partner benefits. Perhaps I should be content with those. But I yearn to know the sweetness of that first moment Jonathan addresses me as “wife.” The title carries tremendous weight. It reminds me of the word “mother”—a role my mother was denied.

As adults, my siblings and I have helped her reclaim that title. How I'd love to assist her in claiming the right to be a wife as well...just in case she changes her mind and says, “I do.” ■

Hart is the author of *Long Way Home* (Windstorm, 2000).

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