

United!

Four Hawaii same-sex couples enter civil unions just past midnight as a new state law takes effect



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Monica Montgomery had spent so many of the 33 years she and Donna Gedge had been together waiting to be officially recognized as a couple that the final 53 minutes felt like a cruel joke.

Montgomery and Gedge joined three other same-sex couples — Saralyn Batt and Isajah Morales, Gary Bradley and Paul Perry, and Bonnie Limatoc-DePonte and Lydia Pontin — as the first in Hawaii to be joined in civil union under a new state law that took effect at midnight Sunday morning.

Hawaii is the seventh state to allow same-sex couples to enter civil unions.

The joint ceremony, arranged by the CU in Hawaii 2012 Committee, a coalition of representatives from more than a half-dozen lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender advocacy groups, was held at a private residence in Aina Haina.

The evening began with a recognition program highlighting the contributions of activists, politicians and others who contributed to the decades-long cause of securing official recognition of same-sex couples.

Former state House vice-speaker Jackie Young and state Sen. Les Ihara recalled the tortuous history of the movement and the political machinations that resulted in the new law.

"I've been pinching myself all night because I can't believe this is real," Young told the assembled family, friends and well-wishers.

Then, after a string of fire crackers rang in the new year at midnight, the couples made their way to a bank of laptops, through which they processed their online applications for civil union licensure.

That process took quite a bit longer than expected for Montgomery and Gedge.

"It's exhausting," said a weary but undaunted Montgomery as the second of three attempts was lost to the cyber-ether.

When the license was finally processed nearly an hour later, a room full of equally eager audience members erupted in applause.

The ceremony, illuminated by torches and television camera lights, was jointly officiated by Rev. Kyle Lovett, Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kwong and Rev. Pam Vessels.

Lovett, the pastor at Church of the Crossroads, hailed the ceremony as "an historic moment" and urged the couples and their loved ones to take a breath and appreciate the significance of the evening.

"I am delighted to be a part of this," Lovett said. "I'm excited not just for the LGBT community, but for the entire community. Hawaii wins with this evening."

The officiants concluded the ceremony by reciting, in unison, "By the power vested in us by the state of Hawaii, we now pronounce you legally joined as partners in life."

"It's very gratifying," said Montgomery, 61, a retired state worker. "And it's gratifying to know that so many people in our community support us."

Limatoc-DuPonte, 57, said the evening was the culmination of a lifetime of hope.

"I've waited all my life to be able to get married," she said. "I just knew that one day it was going to happen. Accepting people for what they are is a way of life in Hawaii. It's who we are, so I knew this would be possible one day. I'm ecstatic that other couples will see us and know that they can have the same thing — and they won't have to wait as long."

Hawaii has been at the forefront of debate over same-sex unions since 1993, when the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that the state's prohibition against same-sex marriage was discriminatory in the Baehr v. Lewin/Baehr v. Miike case.

In 1998, Hawaii voters approved the first "defense of marriage" state constitutional amendment, allowing the state Legislature to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman; the amendment did not preclude same-sex couples from entering into civil unions.

Then-Gov. Linda Lingle vetoed a 2010 bill that would have allowed for civil unions, calling the measure "essentially marriage by another name." Rebuffing what she characterized as last-minute maneuvering by the state House, Lingle argued that the issue should be put up for popular vote.

However, emboldened by the change of administration and the success of pro-civil union lawmakers in the 2010 state elections, advocates prevailed in getting Senate Bill 232 on the legislative fast track to approval.

Abercrombie signed the bill into law in February, saying "the legalization of civil unions in Hawaii represents in my mind equal rights for all people."

Abercrombie and Lt. Gov. Brian Schatz sent a message to the couples congratulating them on their unions.

"This new law gives (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) couples, as well as straight couples, the same rights, benefits, protections and responsibilities as those in traditional marriage and it allows them to protect their families in a civil manner," said organizer Tambry Young, a member of Citizens for Equal Rights. "These four couples are here because they want these rights and they want to show their commitment to each other."

Young, who married partner Suzanne King in Massachusetts in 2010, also benefits from the new law, which automatically recognizes their union.

Batt said she was confident the state would eventually allow her to be joined to the one she loved. Still, the realization of that wish left her speechless.

"There's no way to say exactly how this feels," said Batt, 32, an employee with the Hawaii Medical Service Association. "Words can't express what this means to me."

Bradley, who met his husband three and a half years ago when Perry, then with the Australian navy, was in Hawaii for RIMPAC exercises, said he didn't mind the fact that his big night was freighted with such political weight.

"It's about time," he said. "We're one step closer — not just us but Hawaii, the United States and the whole world — to total equality."

"All we want is to be treated equally," he said. "We don't want special privileges or rights, we just want to be treated the same as straight couples. First it was reciprocal beneficiaries. Now it's civil unions. The next step will be full marriage equality."