

Star Advertiser

Minister and partner to wed in isles' first gay marriages

The governor will speak at Unitarian pastor Jonipher Kwong's wedding

By Pat Gee POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Dec 01, 2013

Flanked by 140 friends from a broad range of faiths and Gov. Neil Abercrombie, the Rev. Jonipher Kuponon Kwong, a minister and gay rights activist, will wed fiance Chris Nelson moments after the clock strikes midnight tonight, when marriage equality becomes legal in Hawaii.

Kwong, pastor of the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu, said he and his partner of 15 years decided to celebrate the passage of the law on Nov. 12 by getting married. They proposed to each other as they sat together through hours of testimony during the marathon third reading of the marriage equality bill Nov. 8 at the Legislature.

When the House finally passed the bill 30-19 that night, "we were so thrilled, tears started streaming down our faces," Kwong said. "We knew we would finally fulfill our dreams of getting married to each other."

That Hawaii was the 15th state in the nation to approve such a law, coinciding with the fact that the couple had been committed to each other for 15 years, prompted them to view it as an opportune moment in history to marry, he added. They had planned an elaborate wedding with friends and relatives next year in Southern California, where Nelson resides, but decided to move the date up because "it would be a nice way to cap off years of hard work and a way to celebrate on the second of December," he said.

Kwong worked for the passage of Hawaii's civil unions law in 2012 and was an organizer against California's Proposition 8 in 2008, which prohibited same-sex marriage, though it was later ruled unconstitutional.

"A lesbian couple from my congregation, who have been together for over 20 years, told me that after they got legally married in Massachusetts, it felt different," Kwong said. "I didn't think being married would change anything for me and Chris, but now I realize what they meant. It will feel different to be treated as first-class citizens and having your relationship validated in such a public way. This is what it means to be equal."

Abercrombie will speak briefly before the ceremony at First Unitarian, along with Rep. Kaniela Ing of Maui, who spoke movingly in favor of same-sex marriage during debate, Kwong said.

Rabbi Peter Schaktman, a close friend of the couple, will perform the ceremony.

"I thought that would make a great statement, that this really transcends any particular faith background, and that there's broad support" for marriage equality, Kwong said.

Schaktman, a member of the Reform or liberal Jewish movement, said, "I'm so honored to have been invited to be a part of this historic occasion in which, as a religious leader, I can facilitate this sacred moment between two loving people who also happen to be dear friends of mine."

Kwong said none of his Roman Catholic friends, besides Maryknoll Sister Joan Chatfield, accepted his invitation to attend. But priests Jack Isbell and Nick Eyre, leaders of Sts. Francis & Clare Ecumenical Catholic Church, a much smaller and more liberal Catholic denomination not under Rome, said they will be there.

Todd Takahashi and Edna Yano of the Shinto Konkokyo churches of Honolulu and Wahiawa, respectively, will perform a traditional sake blessing ceremony.

Nelson, who works as a stevedore in California, plans to move to Hawaii once the selling of his fantasy novel is completed. Over 15 years, they have managed to live together in Hawaii or California for only a few years at a time. Kwong said his parents, and Nelson's mother and best friend, will be flying in from California to attend.