



Angry Thousands in Sheridan Square; Campaign to win marriage rights in Albany intensifies

Friday, 7 July 2006

On the very evening of the day New York's high court ruled them second-class citizens, thousands of angry LGBT people and supporters rallied in Sheridan Square to listen to denouncements of the Court of Appeals majority and remonstrations to demand the right to marry for same-sex couples from the Legislature in Albany.

John Wessell, one of the plaintiffs with his partner Billy O'Connor, told the crowd that he was thinking of the "I love NY" state slogan after reading the decision. "I still love it," he said, "but it is with a question mark. I'm not leaving for Massachusetts or Spain or Canada. I am going to work to change this state."

James Esseks of the ACLU LGBT Rights Project said the judges turned stereotypes of gay people on their heads by writing that "straight people need marriage to stay together and gays don't" and "that straight people have fleeting relationships and don't care about kids" and therefore needed marriage to somehow deal with their ability to "spontaneously procreate." He was particularly indignant that these arguments were advanced "by the mayor and attorney general," calling them "silly lies."

Alan Van Capelle, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, which organized the rally and six others around the state, said, "There is not one thing that has been given to us for free. We've had to work for every single right we've won," citing an 11-year campaign for a hate crimes bill and the 31 years it took to pass a gay rights bill in Albany. "I promise you it will not take another 31 years to win equal marriage."

While earlier in the day Van Capelle said the Pride Agenda had yet to decide on whether to withhold support from candidates who do not support equal marriage rights for gay people, at this rally he proclaimed, "It is time to tell them if you don't stand with us in 2007, we're not going to stand with you in 2008."

Christine Quinn, a Chelsea Democrat and the out lesbian speaker of the City Council, fiercely asserted, "We have shown them that we are more committed and dedicated to what is morally correct than they can or ever will be." She told the crowd, "we will win this right very, very soon." Offstage she was not predicting a date, but she said, "we need to come up with a realistic timeframe," which will depend in part on the November elections and how well the Democrats do in chipping away at the Republican majority in the state Senate.

Out gay Senator Tom Duane, also a Chelsea Democrat, was perhaps the angriest speaker of all. "I guess the best legal minds in our community cannot go up against a bunch of Neanderthals," referring to the court majority.

To elected officials, especially Bloomberg and Spitzer who opposed gay marriage in court while saying they support it in law, Duane said, "You say you support us? Goddamnit, you better use every ounce of your political capital to get us marriage rights." To the crowd Duane said, "I expect to see every goddamned one of you in Albany next year." Far fewer—about 600—were in the state capital for the LGBT lobby day in May.

At present, 22 assemblymembers, out of 151, and nine senators, out of 62, have publicly committed themselves to equal marriage rights, according to the Pride Agenda. Assemblyman Andy Hevesi, a Queens Democrat, said that if a vote were taken in his chamber, “it would be close.”

Earlier in the day, Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said, “It is time for the Democrats in the Assembly to use their 66-seat majority to pass a marriage equality bill.”

State Comptroller Alan Hevesi said his decision to grant pension rights to the spouses of gay people married elsewhere was not affected by the court decision. “It was based on federal treaties and comity,” he said. “We have to respect the legal standing of people from other countries.”

Congressman Anthony Weiner, a Brooklyn Democrat, said, “This must be the way people felt when the Dred Scott decision came down.” West Side Democratic Congressman Jerry Nadler, said, “We must not vote to confirm any judge who does not support same-sex marriage,” a question that doesn’t seem to have been raised by anyone in the 12 years Republican Governor George Pataki has been packing the courts with right-wing judges.

In the crowd was Richard Dietz, who with his partner Ron Madson, successfully sued the city for domestic partner benefits for all municipal employees in 1993. He said, “We had a date to go to Cartier to buy rings today,” in anticipation of a favorable ruling. They went to the store, but could not bring themselves to buy the rings.

Jesus Lebron, a founder of Marriage Equality, reflected the anger of many who have lost patience with “elected officials like Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer who oppose the federal amendment against marriage and don’t support our right to marry. We expect more.”

“This is the time to engage support from the state Legislature,” said Sebastian Maguire of Queens, active with the Metropolitan Community Church/NY, “before the November election.”