

Same-sex-wedding planning fraught with hurt, complications

Megan Finnerty, The Republic | azcentral.com 8:03 a.m. MST April 13, 2014



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The headlines, Twitter updates and scrolling TV news tickers could give the impression that gay couples across America are buying his-and-his cake toppers and registering for hers-and-hers hand-towel sets.

Since the [U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act](http://www.azcentral.com/news/politics/free/20130626gay-marriage-supreme-court-decision.html)

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/politics/free/20130626gay-marriage-supreme-court-decision.html> last June, developments on the legalization of gay marriage have seemed near-constant.

Now that same-sex marriage is recognized by the federal government, and is legal in California, where wedding destinations like Palm Springs and San Diego are a few hours away, the question of whether to take a day off work to get married looms large for gay Arizona couples in a way it didn't 10 months ago.

And now that two cases challenging [Arizona's 2008 ban](http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/2014/03/13/arizona-same-sex-marriage-lawsuit/6378435/) on same-sex weddings have been filed since January, gay couples are debating whether to wait for this state to legalize their unions.

These new options and benefits mean that gay Arizonans face a particularly complex mix of choices and emotional repercussions.

Phoenix's Aliya Leigh said she and her fiancée talk weekly about getting married in California to qualify for federal benefits.

"But I shouldn't have to do that. I'm a United States citizen. I'm such a citizen that my people were here before it was the United States," said Leigh, 37, who is Native American and Black. "Why should I spend extra money or extra time going out of my way to secure some of the benefits and protections that we would get if we were married as a (opposite-sex) couple?"

Since the Supreme Court ruled in *United States v. Windsor* that denying federal benefits to legally married same-sex couples is unconstitutional, eight states have legalized same-sex weddings, bringing that number of states to 17. In five other states, judges have ruled bans on same-sex weddings unconstitutional, although those states have not legalized such unions.

In February, Kentucky started recognizing same-sex weddings performed elsewhere, but such weddings are not legal there.

About 114,000 same-sex couples nationwide have been legally married between 2004, when Massachusetts became the first state to recognize such marriages, and the end of 2012, according to the Williams Institute, a think tank at the UCLA School of Law. That's about 0.18 percent of the 60.3 million married couples in America currently, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Today, 54 percent of Americans support same-sex marriage, according to a poll released in March by the [Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project](http://www.pewforum.org/) (<http://www.pewforum.org/>). That's up from only 35 percent in 2001.

But for gay couples living in the 33 states like Arizona, where same-sex marriages are not recognized as legal, life has only grown more fraught.

Crying on couch

Millennials have favored marriage equality more than other generations, with acceptance among those aged roughly 18 to 33 rising from 51 percent in 2001 to 68 percent today, according to the March Pew Center poll.

Gay Millennials in Arizona, raised in a culture that emphasized acceptance and equality, appear fixated on, and sometimes frozen by, the injustice of their relationships' second-class status here.

Jessi and Brittany Auslander, who combined their last names into a new one in 2011 when they were joined in a civil union in California, spent a recent Saturday packing up their one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment to move into a three-bedroom, two-bath house in Phoenix.

After five years together, Jessi, 24, and Brittany, 23, needed more space because Brittany's sister would soon be giving birth in jail, and the couple planned to care for the child.

Surrounded by the kind of clutter unique to rooms in mid-move, Jessi paused as she wrapped a hand-painted wine glass.

"I was bridesmaid in my cousin's wedding, and she customized these for everyone," Jessi said. "She did mine with equality symbols. It was really nice of her.

"But, it's like, she met her husband way later than we did, but she could still get married way easier." said Jessi.

Brittany said she and Jessi have talked about getting married for "five out of five years."

But that conversation got more specific when she found out her sister was pregnant. The Auslanders talked in circles about getting married in California or waiting on Arizona, thinking it would be best to be married as parents.

And even though Brittany's sister has given birth, and the Division of Child Safety and Family Services have granted the Auslanders temporary custody, they're still worried.

The Auslanders want to adopt the baby. Arizona doesn't prohibit gays from adopting, but agencies consider many factors, including physical, financial and emotional stability.

As a multimedia assistant, Jessi has a full-time job with benefits. But Brittany is an entry-level administrative assistant and fears she won't appear to have the resources necessary to care for the baby unless they are considered as a dual-income couple.

"A marriage would help us in so many ways," said Jessi. "I say go to California and get married, but I have a lot of family here and they would want to be there.

"They said they'd kill me if we just did that. They were a little offended that we were considering it. It's stressful because we're at a non-moving point. We don't want to do it without (family), but that's our only choice to make it legal and to get protections."

In the next breath, Jessi talked about the expense of a destination wedding, how hard it would be for her to take a weekday off to get married in California, and how no out-of-state wedding would feel celebratory if done out of necessity.

"It's not something we can control, and it's not all about what we want like it is for other people's weddings," Jessi said.

"We're trying to get married, adopt a baby, live our life," Jessi said, stopping suddenly.

She regrouped, "It's hurtful for people to decide for me that my relationship is not important."

Tears slid down Jessi's face and she went quiet.

"It feels like it's stuck now," Brittany said, sitting next to Jessi on the couch and starting to cry, too. "It's so overwhelming, the paperwork, the laws, and we don't know what to do.

"It's upsetting, and you don't want to think about it, so you just put it off.

"And we don't want this stress to affect the baby, and then you worry about that," Brittany said.

Engaged but torn

Phoenix couple Aliya Leigh, a business analyst, and Sandra Watanabe, a professional poker player, have been planning their wedding since Leigh proposed in 2011.

"We went to the Japanese festival and we were looking at kimonos, because we'd both like to get married in kimonos. And when we go to the mall, we keep our eyes out and say, 'Oh, that would look good for the wedding,' or '*that* would look good for the wedding,' like normal couple stuff."

But that's when Leigh is feeling good. Other times, she talks in a rush, detailing how the conversation around her marriage makes her feel terrible.

Leigh was raised Jehovah's Witness, and hasn't spoken to some family members for seven years. Her father, she says, characterizes her as "needing to get her priorities straight and needing to come back to her senses."

Most gay couples, 84 percent of men and 73 percent of lesbians, pay for their weddings themselves, according to a [Gay Wedding Institute](http://gayweddinginstitute.com/) (<http://gayweddinginstitute.com/>) survey. Now Leigh is saving for hers. But she grew up going to lavish weddings and looked forward to her own.

"It makes you feel like you're subhuman when you have to go through all this extra stuff. My parents would pay for everything if I were straight, and I'd have a big wedding like everyone else," Leigh said.

"I do not want to just go to the justice of the peace. ... I need to get my head around that, though. I know that maybe we should just do that."

Arizona is showing signs of increased acceptance of gay marriage, notwithstanding the [Legislature's passage of Senate Bill 1062](http://www.azcentral.com/news/politics/articles/20140221sb-1062-law-professor-discusses-constitutional-aspects.html) (<http://www.azcentral.com/news/politics/articles/20140221sb-1062-law-professor-discusses-constitutional-aspects.html>), which would have allowed the use of religious beliefs as a defense against being sued for refusing service to gays or others. [Governor Jan Brewer vetoed the bill](http://www.azcentral.com/news/politics/articles/20140226arizona-jan-brewer-1062-statement.html) (<http://www.azcentral.com/news/politics/articles/20140226arizona-jan-brewer-1062-statement.html>).

Last year, *Pride Guide* publisher Michael McFall hosted a same-sex wedding expo with 57 vendors and 400 attendees at the DoubleTree Hilton in Tempe. Now, he's planning an August expo with more than 100 vendors and 800 attendees at the JW Marriott Desert Ridge Resort and Spa in Phoenix.

The Desert Botanical Garden advertises its eight venues to the "wedding couple" instead of to the "bride and groom." Fabulous Foods Fine Catering and Events recently hired a new coordinator to woo same-sex couples. And Scottsdale's Tuscan-style venue Sassi has recently hosted a handful of

same-sex ceremonies, up from none.

But nationally, a quarter of gay couples will experience discrimination during the process, according to the institute survey.

The average wedding can involve up to 43 professionals, so a couple could have to out themselves dozens of times.

"Every time they call a photographer or a venue, they have to say, 'We're two men,' or 'We're two women,' and the couples have to take the temperature of those vendors, because otherwise they just assume they're a heterosexual couple," said Bernadette Coveney Smith, president of the Gay Marriage Institute and founder of same-sex wedding-planning company 14 Stories.

Even at gay-wedding expos, vendor sensitivity is not guaranteed. Coveney Smith said she's heard vendors say, "We support your lifestyle," and seen photographers fail to include photos of same-sex couples in portfolios.

Those are the small things.

Once, a limousine driver spent a day rolling his eyes and making the sign of the cross as he drove a gay couple on their wedding day. Another couple received a note from their printer explaining that the cost of their invitations had been donated to an ex-gay ministry.

"Just because you place an ad for \$50 a year in some guide, it doesn't mean you're really part of the community," Coveney Smith said.

Attorney Kathie Gummere has carved a niche focusing on the legal needs of same-sex couples, both legally married and not. She creates wills and powers of attorney, among other documents, to guarantee gay Arizona couples some of the rights and protections married couples get by default.

Gummere said the process can be so upsetting that she brings her dog into her office to comfort clients.

Any moment, any association can trigger memories of injustices and cruelties.

"They have experiences of when it really hurt to be gay, and creating these documents can bring it out in people," Gummere said. "It's an extremely emotional time and an extremely emotional subject."

Married couples can draft boilerplate versions of key documents online in half a day, paying a few hundred dollars.

Same-sex couples need more customization, ranging from \$2,000 to \$4,000, depending on marital status, parental status and finances. It can take six to 10 hours to complete, answering questions Gummere knowingly describes as obnoxious, including: "How did you get this child?"

Compelled to wed

Gay Baby Boomers and Gen Xers tend to temper their frustrations about inequality with optimism at the speed of civil-rights progress.

"That sense of progress is much more profound for older gays," said Paul Taylor, a researcher with the Washington, D.C.-based Pew Center.

Both groups came of age before representations of gay life were common in popular culture. Today, 55 percent of all Gen Xers and 48 percent of all Baby Boomers approve of same-sex marriage, according to the March Pew Center poll.

When Deanna, 51, and Stacy Dunnuck, 52, started their life together in 2001, they never thought they'd have a legal marriage.

But when DOMA was struck down last year, the Dunnucks felt they had to get married in California in February, on the 14th anniversary of their first date.

"When the law changed, it was like my life mattered," said Dunnuck, an insurance saleswoman. "I became a complete person. I felt like my life is as important as anybody else's."

Stacy, also an insurance saleswoman, said they would have preferred to marry in Arizona, where more friends and family could have afforded to attend. Forty-five traveled to California.

"But we never thought we would've been able to get married in our lifetime, so when we had the chance, we made that sacrifice," said Stacy.

"It was very important for our civil rights to be recognized by the federal government," Stacy said. "It was more than just a practical or financial decision. It really takes a toll on you, year after year, feeling like your relationship is not as meaningful as those of your friends and family.

"We're so glad we did it," Stacy said. "It brought us to a place of closeness that we'd never felt before."

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