

CELEBRATION

Marriage ruling drums up excitement ahead of Flagstaff Pride



Kathryn Jim, president of Northern Arizona Pride Association, speaks about how far LGBTQ rights have come Friday evening outside The Inn at 410 in Flagstaff during the Marriage Equality Gathering to celebrate the U.S. Supreme Court's historic marriage ruling and kick off Pride in the Pines. Jim was joined by the two Flagstaff couples who were part of the lawsuit that led to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Arizona and their lawyer, Ryan Stevens, far left.

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There was excitement in the Flagstaff air after the U.S. Supreme Court declared Friday that same-sex couples have a right to marry in all 50 states.

The decision came as Flagstaff got ready to host the annual Pride in the Pines festival today at Thorpe Park,

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preceded by a Marriage Equality Gathering Friday evening at the Inn at 410. It is the only Pride festival in the state this weekend.

"Pride's going to be crazy," said Kathryn Jim, Northern Arizona Pride Association president. "It's been amazing. I had friends call me this morning immediately. Seeing states moving forward in marriage equality was amazing, but actually seeing now all 50 states...this is history. I'm just overwhelmed."

There was a mixture of hushed tears and laughter in Jim's voice.

"We're equal," she said.

There was a party-like atmosphere at the Marriage Equality Gathering Friday evening at the Inn at 410. Flagstaff Vice Mayor Celia Barotz and City Councilmembers Eva Putzova and Coral Evans attended the event to show their support. Putzova got a laugh from the crowd when she joked that now LGBTQ people can get married "four or five times just like the rest of us."

Before the event, she talked about the long struggle for marriage equality.

"I don't think much will change here, but there is now no question about the constitutionality of the law we already have here," Putzova said. "The uncertainty goes away. A lot of people have been wanting this for decades. It wasn't something that just happened overnight, and I think it is wonderful."

Barotz saw the same-sex marriage ruling as a call to action for the 2016 elections. She said the ruling and Flagstaff's 2013 civil rights ordinance were just the beginning

"Now, we've got marriage equality nationwide and we've got some protections in Flagstaff for the LGBT community -- not as many as I would like, but it certainly was a start," she said.

The Supreme Court ruling came as a relief to the two Flagstaff couples who joined the class-action lawsuit that led to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Arizona in October 2014.

"Everybody has really been fighting so hard and so long for marriage equality and now we've realized it," said Natalie Metz, who joined the Arizona lawsuit with her wife, Meagan. "It's overwhelming and mind-blowing that in one decision everything changes for so many people. Meagan and I feel so incredibly lucky to get to be a part of this history."

Meagan Metz said she was excited to think about all the couples who can now plan their weddings in the 13 states where same-sex marriage was illegal less than 48 hours ago.

"Every day, I think about the day that Natalie and I got married," she said. "It was the greatest day of my life and when I think about that, I can get through every difficult thing that I have to go through. I think about it and then there's a little bit of sadness that follows it because I feel like everyone should have this."

The Metzses' fellow plaintiffs, Renee and Robin Reece, own the local photography business R2 Studio. They plan to celebrate the ruling by shooting a same-sex couple's wedding today.

"It's perfect timing!" said Renee Reece.

Reece woke up early to follow the U.S. Supreme Court announcement live on SCOTUSblog. As soon as she read the words "It's 5-4," she knew it had passed. She rushed upstairs to wake up her wife. Then, she told the rest of the family.

"My kids woke up, they came up the stairs and I told them what was going on, like, 'This is something your grandkids are going to read in history books,'" Reece said. "It doesn't mean as much to them because they've grown up with us, but the concept behind the whole ruling is so powerful for us and our kids."

Flagstaff attorney Ryan Stevens was on the statewide legal team that challenged Arizona's same-sex marriage ban in 2014. He said the 5-4 vote handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court Friday was closer than he anticipated, but he was "thrilled" with the result.

"Today is a historic day for civil rights and equality," Stevens said. "Back in October, marriage equality became the law of Arizona, subject to an appeal. That appeal is now over. The Supreme Court has ruled in favor of marriage equality. The decision is permanent."

Jim said the legal spotlight can now turn from marriage equality to protection in the workplace under the proposed Employment Non-Discrimination Act.

"I can still be fired from my job, and that's one that needs to be started on now," she added.

Discrimination in housing and adoption also have yet to be addressed. Reece, for instance, is still in the process of trying to legally adopt her son, Austin. Stevens said Friday's Supreme Court decision could help clear the way for adoption because the basis for much of the opposition was that same-sex marriage was bad for children.

He added that it will also clear the way to end other types of discrimination against LGBTQ people.

"There is no unique aspect to employment or housing discrimination that isn't covered in Justice (Anthony) Kennedy's opinion," Stevens said.

At Friday's celebration, Evans reminded the crowd of the battles that still lie ahead.

"Tonight, we get to celebrate," Evans said. "We get to party. We get to kiss. We get to hug. We get to love. But we need to make sure we wake up tomorrow ready to go for the next round because it's not over until everybody gets the opportunity to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Pride performer and songwriter Brian Benham of Flagstaff heard of the Supreme Court's decision while at work.

"I'm feeling really great," he said. "It's been a long time coming."

Benham said social media has opened avenues for communities nationwide to share their sentiments.

"Seeing support from people you maybe wouldn't have expected was really cool and reassuring. Everything is so positive, it makes me feel good. It's huge. It opens up doors for everything," he said.

Benham said the ruling also sends the message to people struggling with their gender identity to simply be themselves.

"Today is a huge marker to let people know that that's OK — older people, younger people," Benham said. "To see your country accept you in a huge way like this is massive and it's beautiful. It gives people a way to grow up that a lot of others didn't get."

Stevens shared that sentiment.



"While there are still inequalities in the law that must be addressed, I hope that our Arizona plaintiffs take a moment today and reflect on this historic civil rights victory," he said. "They only ever asked to be treated equally. And now they will be."

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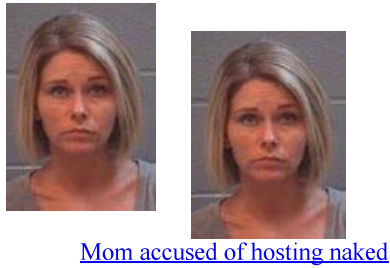
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