



# Gay Couples Find Marriage Is a Mixed Bag

By PAM BELLUCK  
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BOSTON — Four years after Massachusetts became the first state to allow gay couples to marry, there have been blissful unions, painful divorces and everything in between.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

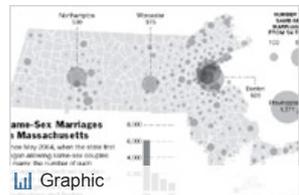
"There are no role models for gay marriage," said Jacob Venter of Boston, right, with his husband of four years, Billy Boney.

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Married in Massachusetts



Same-Sex Marriages in Massachusetts



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Some same-sex couples say being married has made a big difference, and some say it has made no difference at all. There are devoted couples who have decided marriage is not for them, couples whose lawyers or accountants advised them against marrying, and couples in which one partner wants to marry but the other does not.

But as same-sex marriage begins in California, Massachusetts's experience may offer hints of what is to come. For example, after an initial euphoric rush to the altar, the number of gay weddings here fell sharply and has declined each year since. Of the more than 10,500 same-sex couples married here since May 17, 2004, 6,121 wed in the first six months. There were 2,060 weddings in 2005; 1,442 in 2006; and 867 in the first eight months of 2007, the most recent data show.

Gay men and lesbians say the early wave of weddings reflected "pent-up demand" from longstanding couples. The subsequent numbers indicate that "marriage isn't for everybody," said Mary L. Bonauto, a lawyer who argued the case that led to same-sex marriage being legalized here. And, Ms. Bonauto said, "there's only so many gay people in Massachusetts."

The Census Bureau recorded 23,655 same-sex households in Massachusetts in 2006.

Nearly two-thirds of the weddings have been lesbian marriages, including one between two women named Melissa McCarthy. And while nearly half of straight people marrying are under 30, more same-sex married couples of both sexes are older — nearly a third are in their 40s.

Lawyers say same-sex couples are more likely to draw up prenuptial agreements than straight couples are.

For some, the marriage learning curve is steep.

"It's been a mixed bag," said Jacob Venter, a 44-year-old child psychiatrist who married Billy Boney, a 36-year-old hairdresser, a month after it became legal to do so. They have disagreements over money, the in-laws and whether to adopt children or have their own.

"Nothing turns out the way you imagine," Mr. Venter said. "There are no role models for gay marriage."

Unlike California, Massachusetts has a residency requirement for

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times  
Heather, left, and Adrienne Walker with their four children in Natick, Mass., say others have more respect for the seriousness of their relationship since they married.



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Eric Erbeling and his husband deal with the obstacles of a long-distance marriage.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times  
Rick Bettencourt, left, married and split up in 2005. He now lives with Chris Weaver.

marriage. Some couples have moved here to marry, including Lisa Forest and Ann Marie Willer, who came from Texas.

"Without having that legal recognition, we felt very vulnerable," Ms. Forest said. "We wanted the psychological security of knowing that we're protected if one of us were to become sick, that we would be able to transfer our assets, at least on the state level, without incurring taxes, that we'll be able to stay together if we're old and not able to care for ourselves."

For many, the biggest advantages are less quantifiable.

"I feel totally different inside my skin," said Linda Bailey-Davies, 62, who married her longtime partner, Gloria Bailey-Davies, 67. With marriage, she said, "I felt legitimate in the world."

Heather and Adrienne Walker believe people better understand the seriousness of their relationship, recognition that is especially valuable to them as mothers of four children in suburban Natick.

"Before marriage was legal, if I called Adrienne my wife, people would say 'Your what?'" Heather Walker said. "But if you say partner, they're thinking business partner. The knowledge that we are legally married, that they can't play a semantics game, is very freeing. There's none of that, 'but we really need to talk to the actual parents.'"

Still, some couples find few significant advantages. Many employers offered health insurance to domestic partners. State taxes can be higher for some couples, and the lack of federal recognition of gay marriage makes lucrative benefits — Social Security, federal tax breaks — off limits.

"I can't say that anything has changed for us personally," said David Eppley, who married Chad Garner in 2004. What has changed for gay couples is that marriage is part of the dating landscape, adding tension or romance, pressure or excitement.

"It makes me completely think differently about the relationship," said Lance Collins, 38, a colorist at a Boston hair salon. He envisions his perfect wedding (grooms in jeans and T-shirts), but his partner does not want to marry. "I know he cares about me quite a bit," Mr. Collins said. "I just think he doesn't want to."

Mr. Collins believes his partner is his ideal match because he "gets as excited about seeing me as I get about seeing him," because "sometimes he'll do my laundry and fold it the way I like it," and because "he makes my coffee really well — one Equal with just a tablespoon of fat-free half-and-half."

But their marriage chasm worries him. "Maybe I should move out and maybe that will make him appreciate me," Mr. Collins said. "I've gone so far as looking for an apartment."

While many couples want conventional marriages, some are drawing on a creative definition of family forged while living "outside mainstream society," said Joyce Kauffman, a family lawyer and gay activist. "They've incorporated whatever's outside the box into their marriage."

Eric Erbeling and his husband, Michael Peck, both 44, see each other only every other weekend because Mr. Peck works in Pittsburgh. So, Mr. Erbeling said, "Our rule is you can play around because, you know, you have to be practical."

Mr. Erbeling, a decorative painter in Boston, said: "I think men view sex very differently than women. Men are pigs, they know that each other are pigs, so they can operate accordingly. It doesn't mean anything."

Still, Mr. Erbeling said, most married gay couples he knows are "for the most part monogamous, but for maybe a casual three-way."

Some same-sex spouses have split up, including Julie and Hillary Goodridge, the lead plaintiffs in the case that paved the way for same-sex marriage in the state.

"Lesbian and gay couples get divorced for the same reasons that heterosexual couples do," Ms.

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Kauffman said. “Honestly the only thing that is different is that some people rushed to get married without thinking it through just because they could. It was an incredibly heady historical moment, and some people probably made the decision hastily.”

Rick Bettencourt, 41, married his partner of 12 years in July 2005, but by September they had broken up, and his partner is now married to another man, he said.

“I knew there was an issue with us prior to the marriage,” Mr. Bettencourt said, “but we thought maybe this is the thing that will help us stay together. Stupid, obviously. It was almost like I needed the marriage in order to consummate the relationship in order to break it up.”

Amy Bullock married in 2004 after her partner of nine years said “we’ve got to quick do it because maybe they’ll reverse” the law, Ms. Bullock recalled. They had a child and were considering having another. But five months after the wedding, “she decides she is straight,” Ms. Bullock said.

“Maybe being married triggered those feelings,” she said. “I didn’t see it coming.”

Chris Burgess, pregnant when she wed her partner in June 2004, severed the marriage in 2006 when past problems resurfaced, she said. Divorce was more complicated than “in most of our relationships, where you say, ‘O.K., you get these CDs,’” Ms. Burgess said. Her partner needed to adopt their son before divorcing to retain parental rights.

Now, Ms. Burgess lives with another woman and they wear rings and want children, but she says she will not marry unless federal recognition makes it economically irresistible.

“I’m kind of fine with the ‘[Brad Pitt-Angelina Jolie](#), all right we’re committed, we don’t need to get married,’” she said.

Ms. Bullock, who is dating another woman, is buying a duplex with her former wife so both can see their son daily. She is wary of remarrying in general, though she says marriage may have made separation more equitable.

Mr. Bettencourt and his current partner, Chris Weaver, just bought a house, but he played down a ring he gave Mr. Weaver for Valentine’s Day, telling him, he says, “I don’t want you to get concerned that I’m pushing marriage or anything.”

Some couples, including longtime partners and those with children, have rejected marriage for economic, philosophical or cultural reasons.

“I just don’t really see the point in it,” said Michelle Smith, 51, of Truro, who has two children with Terri Humes, 51, her partner of 27 years. “I don’t need that paper for any type of validation. I know what her and I have.”

Ms. Kauffman considers marriage a “patriarchal institution” that “politically, kind of makes me queasy.”

To Clint Wolbert, 28, marriage is too “assimilative.” Being gay is like belonging to an “exclusive club,” Mr. Wolbert said. “I just worry that the drive to marry will end up kind of chipping away at the culture.”

Some couples are advised not to marry for financial reasons or if they want to adopt children from foreign countries, most of which would not place children with a same-sex married couple.

Bill Brandon, a doctor who will soon marry Tedd Elison, waited several years because Mr. Elison’s job as a disc jockey seemed too unstable until he also began running a hair salon. “I wasn’t going to go through this unless he was — I don’t want to say having a real job, but more of a profession,” Dr. Brandon said.

Same-sex married couples report widespread acceptance in Massachusetts, but not necessarily out of state. At a Disney World hotel, “I got the third degree — who is Heather, is she your sister?” Adrienne Walker said.

An Atlanta pharmacy argued when Mr. Boney, filling a prescription, said that as a husband, he was covered by Mr. Venter’s insurance.

The Bailey-Davieses are so nervous about being separated if one gets sick that they rejected spending the winter in Florida. “I don’t feel safe,” Linda said. “I’d rather freeze my butt off and be with my honey.”

Jodi Sperber, who moved with her wife, Pippa Shulman, to New Hampshire, said a handyman there “could not bring himself to talk about Pippa as anything other than my associate.” But over all, Ms. Sperber said, their religion probably draws “stranger questions: ‘Why don’t you have a Christmas tree? Is it the Jewish thing?’”

Many couples said marriage had made relatives more comfortable with their relationships. Mr. Boney,

who is black, was surprised that his “very conservative, very Bible Belt” family in North Carolina welcomed Mr. Venter, a white South African, so warmly. And when his nieces and nephews say “Uncle Jacob,” he said, it “almost brings a tear to my eye; and honey, it takes a lot to bring a tear to my eye.”

Mr. Boney and Mr. Venter remain committed to marriage despite their conflicts.

“It’s a hard commitment to make,” Mr. Venter said. But they try to settle their disagreements. “I’m more willing to figure it out,” he said. “In the past I might have just ended the relationship.”

*Katie Zezima contributed reporting.*

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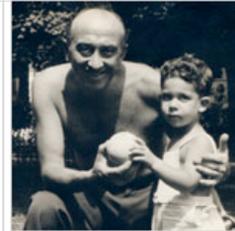
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