

The New York Times

October 25, 2013

Gay Couples, Choosing to Say 'I Don't'

By **CARA BUCKLEY**

When the Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act in June, Brian Blatz, 47, marched into the kitchen of Fiddleheads, the restaurant in Jamesburg, N.J., that he owns with Dan Davis, 58.

“DOMA is dead,” Mr. Blatz said, before the pair turned their attention to opening the restaurant for lunch. And last month, when a judge in [New Jersey ruled](#) that same-sex marriage should be legalized, their reaction was similarly muted.

“I said ‘wow’ and he said ‘yea,’ ” Mr. Blatz said. “And then we went right back to work.”

It’s not that Mr. Blatz and Mr. Davis are not in love. They have been together for 18 years and swapped rings in a ceremony in their backyard nine years ago. But the couple sees little point in marrying.

“We are in all senses married, and it isn’t going to change anything in terms of how we feel about each other,” Mr. Blatz said.

They are not unique. Now that same-sex couples in 14 states have all the rights and responsibilities of straight married couples, gay couples are rushing to the altar, right? Not exactly. Plenty of gay couples do not want to marry, and their reasons are as complex — and personal — as any decision to wed.

For some, marriage is an outdated institution, one that forces same-sex couples into the mainstream. For others, marriage imposes financial burdens and legal entanglements. Still others see marriage not as a fairy tale but as a potentially painful chapter that ends in divorce. And then there are those for whom marriage goes against their beliefs, religious or otherwise.

“It’s a very, very archaic model,” said Sean Fader, 34, an artist in New York who is single and asked to be identified as queer. “It’s this oppressive Christian model that says ‘Pick a person that’s going to be everything to you, they have to be perfect, then get a house, and have kids, and then you’ll be happy and whole.’ ”

“There are many heterosexuals who feel the same way,” he added. After all, not all heterosexual couples choose to marry. But same-sex couples do seem more inclined to be marriage holdouts. According to a [Pew Research](#) poll released in June, 60 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adults are married or said they wanted to marry, compared with 76 percent of the general public.

Some of the opposition among gay men and lesbians is rooted in a feminist critique of marriage, which sees it not as a freedom to be gained but as an institution that has historically oppressed women.

That feminist strain held firm in the earlier years of the gay rights movement. The late [Paula L. Ettelbrick](#), a leading lesbian and gay rights figure, was among the vocal opponents of same-sex marriage, and held a more expansive view of relationships and family.

“I do not want to be known as ‘Mrs. Attached-to-Somebody-Else,’ ” Ms. Ettelbrick wrote in a 1989 issue of the now-defunct *Out/Look* magazine. “Nor do I want to give the state the power to regulate my primary relationship.”

But that was before same-sex marriage became a reality, first when individual states extended some rights to same-sex couples, and then in June, when the Supreme Court gutted the Defense of Marriage Act and gave same-sex couples the same federal rights and responsibilities as any other married couple. Up to that point, many gay couples had refused marriage, believing it was a watered-down version.

The playwright and AIDS activist Larry Kramer, for example, had once dismissed state laws permitting same-sex unions as “feel-good marriages” because they conferred few benefits. But he changed his mind after the Supreme Court decision, and [married David Webster](#) in July.

But some gay couples still see marriage as inherently unfair and out of date. Stephanie Schroeder, 50, and her girlfriend, Lisa Haas, 49, who live together in Bushwick, Brooklyn, said they believed marriage privileges couples and stigmatizes singles.

“I don’t want to deny anybody the right to marriage,” Ms. Schroeder said. “But I don’t really want it to exist.”

And Jack Halberstam, 51, a transgender professor at the University of Southern California, said he viewed marriage as a patriarchal institution that should not be a prerequisite for obtaining health care and deeming children “legitimate.”

“The couple form is failing,” he said.

After coming out, Mr. Halberstam said he was “frankly relieved” he would not have to get married and enter into a conventional family. This holds true even though he lives with his partner of five and a half years, a fellow sociology professor in Los Angeles.

“I don’t feel the pressure” to marry, he added.

The absence of that pressure is also shared by older same-sex couples who grew up in more homophobic times and embraced their role as social outliers. Catharine Stimpson, 77, a former dean at New York University, said one delight of being a lesbian was sometimes feeling like a quasi-outlaw. Though she has been with her partner, Elizabeth Wood, for 38 years, getting married, she said, would betray her “edgy nonconformist streak.”

“Having the choice doesn’t meant you have to do it,” she added.

Even as most gay men and lesbians have come to support the right to marry, if not always for themselves, the progressive-minded among them grumble that the fight for marriage has come at the expense of pressing issues like AIDS prevention and the safety of gay youths.

John D’Emilio, 65, a gay-studies pioneer and professor of gender and women’s studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, argues that same-sex marriage is elitist, and was championed by more-affluent gay men and lesbians who wanted cultural approval and the bourgeoisie rewards of marriage.

“After people with good health insurance could have treatment for H.I.V., the community sort of abandoned AIDS as a priority,” he said.

Mr. D’Emilio follows his own philosophy. Although he has been with his partner, Jim Oleson, 75, a retired caseworker and community educator, for 32 years, there are no plans to marry. Mr. Oleson was married to a woman and has no desire to wed again, while Mr. D’Emilio said he sees no need.

“We love each other and have lived together for 30 years,” he said. “Why do we need to get married?”

Indeed, many older gay men and lesbians came of age with the belief that their relationships bested heterosexual couplings.

“For people in the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s, there was a feeling that L.G.B.T. people can do better than

marriage, that relationships can be more egalitarian” when built around untraditional families, said Mary Bernstein, a professor at the University of Connecticut and an author of “The Marrying Kind?” which examines the marriage debate in the gay rights movement.

Or as the filmmaker [John Waters](#) once said: “I always thought the privilege of being gay is that we don’t have to get married or go in the Army.”

Longtime same-sex couples also have practical reasons for not marrying, Ms. Bernstein said, as their households and finances are already intertwined.

She cites herself as an example. Although Ms. Bernstein, 50, and her partner of 15 years, Nancy Naples, 61, are raising twin 9-year-old daughters, they see little tangible benefit in marrying. They already share legal rights as co-parents, the full support of neighbors and peers and an unwavering commitment to each other.

“Some people feel the need for external validation,” Ms. Bernstein said. “For us, I don’t think we could be more committed.”

The prospect of paying higher taxes may also take the luster out of marriage. Couples comprised of a higher income earner and a lower earner often have to pay thousands of dollars more in joint taxes (the so-called marriage penalty), according to Jennifer Davidson, an accountant and financial adviser in Dunstable, Mass., who advises same-sex couples.

“Nobody I know makes that decision purely because of taxes,” Ms. Davidson said. “But a secondary factor may be tax consequences.”

Conversely, other same-sex couples want to determine first if there are tax benefits before deciding to marry. That includes Mr. Blatz and Mr. Davis of New Jersey, who said they may yet marry, especially after Gov. Chris Christie announced that he would not appeal the court ruling that paved the way for same-sex couples to marry in the state.

Not only are some gay couples rejecting marriage, they are also choosing to live apart. Erin McKeown, 36, a singer and songwriter, lives in a cottage in a rural hill town in Massachusetts; her girlfriend of three and a half years, Rachel Rybaczuk, 36, lives 17 miles away in a one-bedroom apartment. They relish the time they spend together, but they also like having their own spaces.

For Ms. McKeown, an integral part of identifying as queer was creating an alternative family, rather than following the well-worn path of pairing off, cohabiting and having children. But as

more of her friends do just that, she feels that alternative group dwindling.

Ms. Rybaczuk, for her part, said she was worried that relationships like theirs, deeply committed but not traditional, would be further marginalized, even from other gay people.

People think “that because we don’t want to get married that we’re less invested in each other and less committed,” she said. “And that’s not true.”

And then there are those who see themselves as part of a post-marriage generation: gays in their 20s who grew up with “Will and Grace,” and the full support of parents and friends. For them, same-sex marriage may be a defining civil rights issue of the day, but it’s also about the freedom not to marry.

This is especially true for the children of divorce, who may not see marriage as the key to happiness. John Carroll, 23, who is single and lives in the East Village, said that the amount of time and resources his parents spent on divorcing was “obscene.” The last thing he wants to do is go through the same torturous process, he said.

“Any time you mix emotions into that, it’s just a risky venture, emotionally and financially,” he said. Instead, he thinks marriages should be like cellphone contracts, “renewable every two years with an option to upgrade.”

The sentiment that marriage is not the end-all is shared by other millennials, even those whose parents remain together.

“It’s a very disillusioned generation,” said Eric Routen, 24, a student at New York Medical College who is single and lives in Westchester County, N.Y. Unlike his parents, who have been together for some 30 years, he said that couples today have fewer social pressures to stay together.

“No one expects marriage to last,” he said.

