

# **Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

## **MARRIAGE OF GAY MEN IN CANADA ROILS OIL CITY**

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By Paula Reed Ward

OIL CITY, Pa. -- When Joe Wilson and Dean Hamer got married April 10 in Canada, it was something to celebrate. They were proud they had made a lifelong commitment to each other.

The two men wanted to share their news with the world.

After running a wedding announcement in The New York Times and receiving warm responses from people all over the country, Wilson wanted it to run in his hometown as well. He grew up in Oil City, also known as "The Valley that Changed the World," for its role in the modern oil industry. The Derrick and The News-Herald, the daily newspapers there, ran it without hesitation.

"It couldn't have been a smoother process, much to my surprise," Wilson said. "They just said, 'Of course, we'll publish this.'"

In the five weeks since, more than three dozen letters have poured into the newspapers' offices, split evenly between those supporting the couple and those against gay marriage. The debate in the newspaper and in the community has revealed how a small town faces issues typically found in big cities.

At Terri's Coffee Spot on Thursday, a popular gathering place on Front Street decorated with retro silver and red tables and chairs under fluorescent lighting, the debate continued.

"I think this whole gay marriage thing is a joke," said Jim Middleton, a retired phone company employee who visits Terri's daily. "There's nothing about homosexuality that's natural."

Middleton, who flirts with every woman he sees, can't understand why a man would want to be with another man. "To me, in this whole world, there's nothing better than a woman." But Barb Dougherty, sitting quietly at the counter, listening and sipping coffee, couldn't let Middleton go on. "To those two guys, they were celebrating something they did that was wonderful," she said.

After five minutes of bickering, Middleton told Dougherty: "You're wasting your argument on me. It's not going to work."

"For God's sake, there's no talking to this guy," Dougherty said in frustration.

The same debate rages on in the newspapers.

"Just as drinking, stealing, lying and committing fornication are wrong (may I use the word sin?) so homosexuality is wrong," Joanne Williams, of Cranberry, wrote to the Derrick. "Christians are to love people and to treat all people with kindness and respect no matter what choices they make, but that does not mean that they condone or agree with the wrong behavior."

But others wrote in support.

"It still surprises me to this day that people can get so worked up over who another person chooses to love," Scott Zelinsky wrote. "We are still talking about love after all. Two people who have pledged their commitment to each other is hardly a reason to be moved to a shaking

anger, as one reader wrote."

Glen Mohnkern, the managing editor of the papers, was surprised not by the number of responses but by the even split. In this city of 11,500, where young people often leave for good jobs, political and moral beliefs run toward the conservative.

But for Mohnkern and the publisher of the family-owned company, there was no question that the wedding announcement should run. "The marriage was legal, and the newspaper doesn't condone a policy of discrimination," he said.

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette ran its first announcement of a gay couple's commitment ceremony three years ago. Even before that, there were never restrictions on such an ad in the Celebrations section. Wedding announcements in the Post-Gazette are paid advertisements, just as in The Derrick & The News-Herald.

The day the Wilson/Hamer announcement ran, the Oil City papers got about 15 phone calls. A dozen people canceled their subscriptions.

And all the almost-daily letters have run, except those that are unsigned. Many invoke the same arguments: The Bible says homosexuality is wrong; or, no one has the right to judge another.

"We think it's been a good debate," Mohnkern said. "We think our readers are interested."

The 26,000-circulation newspaper has never spoken editorially about the decision to run the announcement or its position on gay marriage. But that hasn't stopped some people from concluding that the newspaper condoned homosexuality by running the announcement. Mark and Diana Micklos, of Ashland, Clarion County, canceled their subscription. "It puzzles us as to why the powers-that-be at the newspaper have chosen to give credence to something that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania neither sanctions nor recognizes," they wrote. Mark Micklos, a pastor with an Evangelical Christian congregation, said stronger convictions than that drove his decision. "I believe God's words in the Bible that say it's wrong," he said. "I'm not opposed to gay people per se. It's the behavior."

By running the announcement, which was two or three times longer than a typical one, he continued, it appeared the newspaper was approving gay marriage. "It's almost like they catered to these two men," Micklos said. "I'm not going to get the newspaper again. I'm letting them know I'm not happy with them."

But Wilson, 40, said he and Hamer, 52, weren't treated differently from any another couple by the newspaper. He simply filled out a form online and submitted it.

One of the reasons Wilson, who hasn't lived in Oil City since 1982, wanted an announcement in his hometown paper was to try to reach out to gay youths to show them they aren't alone and shouldn't be afraid.

"This was my way of saying there are people just like you who have good lives," Wilson said from his office in Washington, D.C. "There is a way to have a happy, healthy life." After graduating from Venango Christian High School, Wilson went on to the University of Pittsburgh and later the Peace Corps. He met Hamer in 1996 while working at an event sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. They've been together for five years.

Wilson, who has spent much of his life dealing with issues of social justice, works for the Public Welfare Foundation in Washington. "I worry about people who can't defend themselves, and young people who need to learn and be guided," he said.

Wilson said he knew he was gay at age 4 or 5 but never told anyone until he was a freshman in

college. Throughout junior and senior high school, he heard a lot of negative comments about homosexuality, including the words, "fags and lezzies." He didn't pursue girls, and schoolmates on his basketball team would say, "What, are you a faggot?"

"It's terrifying," he said. "They were easy and hurtful words to throw around, and they have a deep and lasting impact."

Jessa Jones, 22, an Oil City native who works at Terri's, said she was taught tolerance early on by her parents. She believes her opinion on homosexuality differs from people such as Middleton's partly because they come from different generations.

Arguing with the older man, she said: "They pay the same bills, live the same lives, and you're going to tell me they don't have the same rights as us?"

Ryan Hutchinson, Dougherty's son, stopped in the coffee shop around closing time Thursday. A recent graduate of Yale University with a master's degree, he did an internship in San Francisco and has spent time in other metropolitan areas.

"Change comes later to a place like this than larger cities," Hutchinson, 23, said. "It's going to take longer in small towns."

Jones would agree. She expects homosexual relationships will eventually be accepted everywhere in the United States, just as biracial relationships are now. "Times changed," she said. "They're changing now, and they're going to keep changing."