

Women's Lobby Joins Freedom to Marry Coalition

The Maine Women's Lobby will join the Maine Freedom to Marry Coalition in advancing a bill to extend civil marriage rights to same-sex couples. Undoubtedly, the debate will be a heated one. Because of the controversy, I'm often asked: Why marriage? Why now? The simple answer is that the Maine Women's Lobby has a mandate to oppose discrimination – in all its forms. It is our belief that every couple deserves the dignity and respect that marriage brings – as well as all the legal rights and obligations that come with it. But, because the State denies these benefits and responsibilities, same-sex couples are at risk. Thousands of same-sex couples throughout Maine who have been in committed relationships for years have weathered life-threatening illnesses, are raising children, etc. Despite these commitments, they lack basic health, life, and property protections provided to heterosexual couples.

When my husband and I married eight years ago, we did so to make visible our commitment to each other and to invite our community of friends and family to join with us in honoring that commitment. We were hardly cognizant of the intricate web of benefits and protections that our marriage certificate imparted. Only after years of living together and supporting friends and couples in their partnerships did the life-altering privileges of marriage become visible to me. The fact is that marriage provides more than 1,138 federal benefits, protections, rights and responsibilities to heterosexual couples and their children. These include Social Security survivor and spousal benefits, the ability to file a joint tax return, immigration rights, and coverage under the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act. Denial of these protections translates into real-life, heart-breaking situations that include not taking time away from work when a partner is ill to someone else making crucial medical decisions in emergencies. The list goes on.

Most importantly, marriage protections extend deeply to children. Lesbian and gay parents must weave together an expensive quilt of legal action in order to mimic the parental rights and responsibilities afforded by marriage. Yet in the eyes of the State, a lesbian or gay parent who is raising his or her child is considered a legal stranger. When all couples are allowed to marry, all children will be protected by our existing family court system.

Friends and allies also ask, why not civil unions? My answer is simple: civil unions are inadequate. By definition, civil unions cannot capture the extent of federal protections provided by marriage, nor do they impart the same level of dignity, respect, and loving commitment that marriage confers. But, most fundamentally for me is this: *In our democracy, we do not create separate institutions for different groups of citizens. Separate is not equal.*

As an organization dedicated to creating equality for Maine women and girls, we work for a woman's right to choose when and whether to bear children and to exercise full control over her personal reproductive and sexual life. We believe that women should be supported in their fundamental life decisions, including choices of whom they love and whether and whom they marry. Prohibiting marriage of same-sex couples denies them the protections guaranteed to heterosexual couples and violates our belief in equal rights and equal opportunity.

I hope League members will join with me and with the Maine Women's Lobby team on this journey to promote—and defend—the freedom to marry in Maine.

- Sarah Standiford, Executive Director
Maine Women's Lobby

LWVME Loses Former President Sally Bryant

Sally W. Bryant passed away on Nov. 1, 2008, after a long battle with ALS. Sally was an energetic advocate for the League of Women Voters in Maine, and was past state and local League president, an outstanding example of leadership and commitment, and a friend and mentor to many League members. She retired to Maine in 1988 and spent many years living in Brunswick. She was active in the local League of Women Voters as well as the Congregational Church of Brunswick. She moved to Kennebunk to be closer to family in 2002. She was born in St. Paul, Minn., on Oct. 18, 1930. She lived in New England almost all of her life, and loved the mountains of New Hampshire and the ocean and lakes of Maine and Massachusetts. She was very active in the Appalachian Mountain Club; she hiked and kayaked, camped and traveled. She was a breast cancer survivor since 2004. Sally was a passionate advocate for the environment, getting-out-the-vote, women's rights, and universal healthcare. She cast her vote early this year and was very hopeful for big change in the future. She made no bones about her stand on things and clearly shared her opinion, but always with a smile. She will be missed by all who knew her. Her full obituary is available through the Portland Press Herald website at pressherald.maine.today.com.