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SOUTH COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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Law formalizes long union

By Liz Boardman/Independent Staff Writer

NARRAGANSETT — On Saturday, W. Lynn McKinney and Ronald Margolin of Narragansett met with a wedding planner.

The men have considered themselves married since 1979, but now, with the passage of the civil union law, they can legally tie the knot in

Rhode Island.

“We wouldn’t go through with it except for a couple of things,” Margolin said. “First, we’ve always liked a good party. And we want to make

a statement. Not everyone who is eligible will enter into a civil union, but we wanted to thank Governor Chafee and the state for making it

possible. We also want it to be educational for our younger friends. They need people to tell them it was not so many years ago – 30 years

ago – and as a society, we’ve come a long way, baby.”

The couple met in the late 1970s, at a meeting of the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association, where a mutual friend introduced

them. At that time, both were working at the University of Rhode Island, though they had never crossed paths. Today, McKinney is URI’s

Dean of Health and Human Services; Margolin is vice president for international advancement at Brown University.

“I was way farther ‘out’ than Ron,” McKinney said.

“I was not ‘out,’ ” Margolin said. “I thought I was a late blooming heterosexual. Lynn had two children, he had been married – I wasn’t sure

I wouldn’t have that experience.”

Once they began dating, McKinney was “ready to move in and marry,” Margolin said. “I wasn’t.”

Eighteen months later, they were living and working in Indiana, and decided it was time to make a public statement of their commitment to

their friends and family. They called it a “commitment ceremony” – a moniker that has since caught on among same-sex couples who live

in areas where same-sex marriage or civil union is not legal.

Despite his initial reluctance, Margolin took care of all the planning for the ceremony. While their closest friends and family knew they were

an item, and the couple did not actively hide it, it was still a very different world in 1979, Margolin said.

The printer raised an eyebrow over the wording of the invitation – a commitment ceremony? McKinney’s androgynous name didn’t make it

obvious there were two grooms, and Margolin didn’t offer that information. The baker who made their wedding cake already sold them

bran muffins on a regular basis.

“He doubted we were having a wedding with a bride,” Margolin said. “But business was business.”

But still – even though their closest friends and family knew why they were invited to McKinney’s back yard in Kingston on Aug. 26, 1979,

“we treated it like a cocktail party,” McKinney said.

Drinks were poured generously before they nervously called for the ceremony to begin.

“We had a friend act as a justice of the peace,” Margolin said. “He was not one, he was a professor.”

The late Thomas Pezzullo, then a professor at URI, later a vice president there, performed the ceremony.

“There were no laws protecting any of us,” McKinney said.

“At that time, Lynn could have been deprived custody of his children for this,” Margolin said.

Since that time, they have purchased and held title to real estate together, held joint bank accounts, and spent thousands of dollars on

legal fees to create powers of attorney and other legal documents that allow them to make decisions together, in sickness and in health.

“Except for the legal issue with the state and [federal government], we have behaved as a married couple,” McKinney said.

Not that everybody always got the picture. Because McKinney had been married and had children, some people believed Margolin was

only doing the poor, helpless man a favor by allowing him to move in and regroup after his divorce. One of Margolin’s bosses would tell his

secretarial staff what a catch McKinney was, and tell them they ought to ask Margolin for an introduction.

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Others did get the picture, and made a point of trying to embarrass them. The couple recalls the wife of a co-worker who waited until a

quiet moment at one of their parties to say, “Let me get this straight – you have just the one bedroom?”

One of their biggest supporters was McKinney’s mother – though McKinney can’t tell the story without tearing up.

“His mom said to me, ‘You make my son very happy, and that is all that matters to me,’” Margolin said, his voice wavering as his eyes

teared up, too.

In 1983, as AIDS hit New York and Provincetown, and was destined to hit Providence, McKinney and Margolin established and hosted a

gay men’s networking group, to help men meet other men outside of bars.

The group met for 15 years. At first, they had bylaws, and formal meetings, with minutes. “Most guys said we couldn’t use their last name

in the minutes,” McKinney said. “If anyone got a hold of them, they could lose their jobs.”

Then the world discovered Rock Hudson had AIDS, and gay life came out of the closet.

“In polite company, you didn’t talk about those things,” Margolin said. “People believed you could pick gay men out – it was the limp-wrested decorator with a lisp.”

“They didn’t think it could be a soldier,” McKinney said.

The sea change in culture in the last 30 years is the part the couple wants to pass on to the younger generation.

“To go from that, to feeling really comfortable knowing we are going to be in the newspaper, is astonishing to me,” McKinney said.

Margolin likened it to the life of Brown University President Ruth Simmons, a black woman who grew up in the segregated South, going to

separate schools, riding on the back of a bus, and not allowed to drink from the same water fountains as the white people.

“There are still people who would be more comfortable if it was still that way,” Margolin said.

“They would take rights away. We know of a

college student now whose parents told him, ‘If you decide you are going to stay with this gay identity thing, we would rather you just kill

yourself.’ “

So now, they have planning to do. They hired a wedding planner, but have not set a date – the venues they are interested in were already

booked for fall.

Pezzullo, no doubt, would have found a way to do the honors legally – ordination from an Internet ministry perhaps – but he died in 1992.

So McKinney has spent time online, researching who could perform the ceremony.

The list includes ordained clergy (the law does not require churches who forbid same-sex coupling to perform these ceremonies),

magistrates, clerks of courts, workers compensation court administrators, wardens of the town of New Shoreham, and judges from the

Supreme Court to the Johnston Police Court to Bankruptcy Court, among others.

“We can have a bankruptcy judge!” Margolin said, with delight.

“My favorite is the bankruptcy judge,” McKinney agreed.

So far, they seem to be a minority in Rhode Island. After same-sex marriage or civil unions were legalized in other states, there was a rush

for licenses. Not so here. In South Kingstown and Narragansett, no same-sex couples have applied for a civil union license.

That is because of what the law excludes, said Ray Sullivan, campaign director for Marriage Equality Rhode Island.

“Marriage provides families with more than 1,400 protections, rights and responsibilities, many economic and employment based,” Sullivan

said. “Civil unions and domestic partnerships fall short in providing the same dignity, clarity and range of tangible protections.”

The civil union law, as written, has some consequences that may make life together more difficult, Sullivan said.

That is because a last-minute amendment – added by Rep. Arthur J. Corvese (D-Dist. 55) of North Providence – allows religious-based

organizations, like hospitals and schools, the choice of whether to recognize civil unions.

“Hospitals like St. Joseph’s, a school like Providence College, day cares and assisted living facilities can proactively discriminate against a

gay couple in a committed relationship even though the civil union would have legal status under the law,” Sullivan said.

So if McKinney and Margolin – or any other couple who had been joined in civil union – were in the Armory section of Providence, and

were in a car accident, and one of them was injured, and the rescue took them to the closest hospital – St. Joseph’s – someone could ask,

“Who are you?”

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“Because of the Corvese amendment, that hospital is not required to talk to [the non-injured partner],” Sullivan said. “He wouldn’t be able

to tell people what he observed, all the medical background, all the things that are relevant to someone in immediate need of critical care.”

“These are tangible things, and it is not a question of if, but when, these discriminations will take place,” Sullivan said. “I think that is why

there is so little interest – people are engaged in the fight for equality, and I think the majority of couples will choose to wait for marriage in

Rhode Island.”

Civil unions do have one benefit over running off to Massachusetts to be married, as many same-sex couples in Rhode Island have done.

Couples who are joined in civil union can be divorced, and the cases will be heard in Family Court. So far, the state judicial system has

said it cannot hear divorce cases for same-sex couples married in other states and now living in Rhode Island, because there is no law

that gives judges the power to do so.

McKinney and Margolin recognize the shortcomings, but have decided to go forward.

“I always believed all marriages should be civil unions, and those who want to can seek a religious blessing,” Margolin said.

When Prince Albert II of Monaco recently married, Margolin pointed out, the media made much of the couple’s two wedding ceremonies.

But that is how it is usually done in Europe, he said. There is a civil ceremony of marriage, and – if the couple is religious – a separate

ceremony in a house of worship.

“A civil union ought to be enough,” McKinney said. “People ought to have marriage – which I would leave to the churches – if they choose.

But there are a few legal benefits that will flow now.”

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