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Civic, religious, civil rights leaders join to declare 'Marriage Matters'

Full-page newspaper ads feature diverse allies committed to the fight for dignity and equality for gay couples

NEW YORK, July 25 — In full-page newspaper advertisements appearing today coast to coast, more than 60 civic, religious, labor and civil rights leaders and organizations declare their commitment to working toward equality for gay and lesbian families. View the ad at <http://www.freedomtomarry.org/marriagematters>.

The ads, titled "Marriage Matters," are appearing in 50 publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Fresno Bee* (Calif.), the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (Iowa), the *Raleigh News & Observer* (N.C.), the *Capital Gazette* (Md.), the *Cook County Daily Herald* (Ill.) and *La Opinion* (Calif.). The ads feature photographs of five same-sex couples who have been together from five to 53 years and read, on behalf of the diverse signatories, "They're committed. So are we."

Two-thirds of the signatories are non-gay allies, including nine prominent labor leaders, heads of six leading civil rights organizations, 11 religious leaders and nine mayors, in addition to 14 national lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations.

"We want the nation to know that we are united in fighting to end discrimination against gay and lesbian families, including their exclusion from marriage, with all its protections, responsibilities and human significance," said Alice Huffman, president of the California Conference of the NAACP. "We're also underscoring that not only are we in this for the long haul, but that the gay community has real allies."

Said Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels: "Many of us remember a time when the marriages of interracial couples were not recognized in many states. Fortunately, that has changed. Now it is time that gay and lesbian couples have the same rights as all married couples; things such as refinancing a house or visiting a family member in the hospital. The right of gay and lesbian people to marry is fundamental to our equality and humanity."

The advertisements come at a moment of widening and deepening support for the legal recognition of same-sex relationships, including the freedom to marry. Polls in Massachusetts, the first state to end gay couples' exclusion from marriage, show a clear majority (59 percent) of residents now support marriage equality (Center for Public Opinion Research at Merrimack College Bay State Poll, March 2006). Nationally, a strong majority (56 percent) of all Americans supports legal protections for same-sex relationships, either through marriage or civil unions and domestic partnerships (ABC News/*Washington Post*, March 21–24, 2005). Support for marriage equality specifically has continued to rise, reaching majority level in some states, while the number of people who say they strongly oppose marriage equality has dropped from 42 percent in early 2004 to 28 percent this year (Pew Research Center, March 22, 2006).

“Public support for legal recognition of same-sex couples has steadily grown in spite of an enormous and well-funded campaign based on defamation and fear, including dozens of anti-gay state constitutional amendments battles,” said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. “Even our opponents understand it is not a question of whether we will win dignity and equality for our families, but when.”

The legal landscape, however, has been mixed. Three weeks ago, New York’s highest court issued an adverse ruling in a challenge brought by couples who had been denied marriage, shifting the debate to the state Legislature. Also, an anti-gay state constitutional amendment was upheld in Nebraska federal court, while courts in other states issued procedural rulings refusing to block votes on anti-gay measures.

Yet during the same period, there were also advances in state courts and state legislatures. Anti-gay amendments failed to advance in both the Massachusetts and Pennsylvania legislatures. The Arkansas Supreme Court unanimously overturned a ban on foster parenting by gay people, and the American Academy of Pediatrics again strongly reaffirmed the fitness of gay parents and made clear that ending the denial of the freedom to marry is in the best interests of children.

“As in every other struggle for social justice, there will be advances and setbacks along the way,” said Evan Wolfson, executive director of Freedom to Marry. “History is not defined by what happens over a few weeks or months — positive or negative — but by progress over many years — and on that score, we’ve made incredible progress toward fairness and a fulfillment of America's commitment to equality.”

“The marriage equality conversation is happening around millions of kitchen tables coast to coast, and is certainly not confined to large cities,” said Neil Giuliano, executive director of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. “We specifically wanted to reach people well beyond the big urban areas, because gay couples, their kids and their loved ones live there, too.”