

## GAS PRICES

|            | Current | Year ago |
|------------|---------|----------|
| Louisville | \$2.26  | \$2.12   |
| Orlando    | \$2.33  | \$2.19   |

Source: AAA of Kentucky

## IT COSTS HOW MUCH?

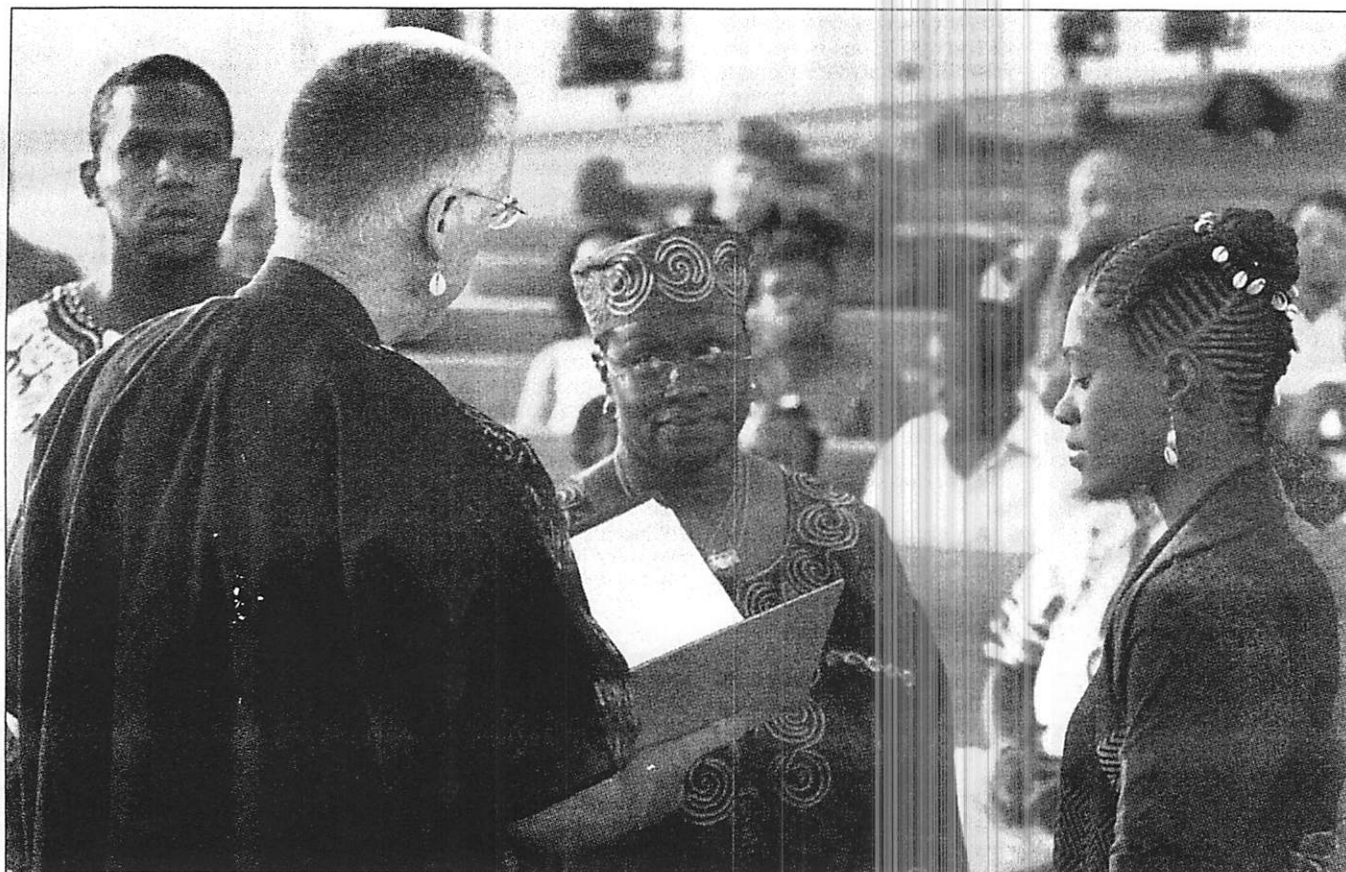
| Malt beverages, 16 oz.: |              |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| 1996: \$0.83            | 2005: \$1.09 |
| 2001: \$0.97            | 2006: \$1.12 |

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

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Lisa Billings/Associated Press

Madeline Jones and Vynelle White prepared to take their vows during their African-themed same-sex wedding in August in Richmond, Va.

# Homosexual weddings spawn an industry

From the basics to "His and His" towel sets

By Dionne Walker  
Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — He's no celebrity, but when Phillip McKee III tied the knot in September, he did it with all the pomp and circumstance of an A-lister: custom-designed gold rings, a \$2,000 kilt and a caviar-and-crepe reception at a posh hotel.

McKee, 34, sank \$60,000 into his Scottish-themed nuptials, worth it he says for the chance to stand before a minister and be pronounced husband — and husband.

Even as lawmakers across the nation debate legislation banning same-sex marriage, couples are uniting in weddings both miniature and massive, fueling a growing industry peddling everything from pink triangle invitations to same-sex cake toppers.

Vendors say attention to the marriage issue has encouraged more gay couples to recognize their relationships, though in most states, including Kentucky and Indiana, the ceremonies are purely sentimental.

"For the longest time, there

Va., wedding consultant who planned McKee's marriage to Nopadon Woods. Now "the market is growing as the headlines remain out there."

Unlike the multibillion-dollar traditional wedding industry, experts say the gay wedding business is harder to track. Some estimates place its value at up to \$1 billion.

In 2005, gays spent \$7.2 million with vendors found at the Rainbow Wedding Network Web site, according to data collected by the site, which publishes a magazine and holds wedding expos. That's up from \$2.1 million in 2002, according to Cindy Sproul, co-owner of the North Carolina firm.

Marriage-minded gays and lesbians are purchasing basics such as flowers and limousine service. But vendors say couples also are spending on items with a same-sex twist: rainbow bejeweled rings, double-bride thank you cards and "His and His" towel sets.

"We almost completely parallel what heterosexual couples are doing," Sproul said. "The only difference is there may be two grooms or two brides."

Sproul estimated gay couples spend about \$20,000 on ceremonies in states offering some form of recognition, such as Massachusetts and Vermont. But couples elsewhere also are investing.

## ON THE WEB

► **Rainbow Wedding Network:**  
[www.rainbowweddingnetwork.com](http://www.rainbowweddingnetwork.com)

holds draws about 500, mostly black gays and lesbians.

Vynelle White and Madeline Jones of Richmond spent \$4,000 — a month's worth of their combined income — on their August ceremony, a homespun affair with handmade invitations.

"It may sound really stupid to say, but why not," said White, who visited gay wedding Web sites before choosing an African-themed wedding. "We're showing this is how much we love each other, whether it's legal or not."

Emerging in gay communities largely in the past decade, same-sex marriages — and weddings — recently have been drawn into the national spotlight by attempts to make the unions illegal.

Massachusetts is the only state allowing gay marriage, since the state Supreme Court ruled in 2003 the state constitution guaranteed that right. According to the Registry of Vital Records and Statistics, 8,764 same-sex couples have married in Massachusetts since the first same-sex weddings began taking place May 17, 2004 through Nov. 9, 2006, the most recent figures available.

ing in the opposite direction: New Jersey's gay couples gained rights this month when the state legalized same-sex civil unions.

Sharmayne Wesler, a planner with New York's annual GLBT Expo, credited the hubbub and well-publicized gay weddings like that of lesbian rocker Melissa Etheridge in 2003, with encouraging gays to formalize their relationships.

"They, too, want to be traditional," said Wesler, whose RDP Group has 70 wedding-specific vendors at its expo. "The trend... is toward really large weddings, none of these simple affairs."

"They want to go to a ceremony with all the bells and whistles."

McKee and Woods invited 200 guests to their black-tie ceremony, followed by a cocktail hour and reception at the Ritz-Carlton, in Tysons Corner, Va.

Groomsmen received engraved pocket watches. A bagpiper, pianist and DJ serenaded guests, who dined on caviar and lobster.

McKee used gay wedding books, Web sites and a wedding coordinator to find things such as gay-friendly photographers. The ceremony cost half their annual income.

In Virginia, the men were no more legally bound after the lavish wedding than before. Still, they considered it a good investment.