

MARKETPLACE

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How a Gay Union Led to Paper's Soul-Search

By PATRICIA CALLAHAN

AN UNUSUAL WEDDING announcement sent Charles Broadwell, editor and publisher of the Fayetteville Observer, into a week of soul searching.

News of who-married-whom is routine in the Celebrations section of the North Carolina paper, which has a circulation of 64,000. But then came the request earlier this month from local resident Richard Jernigan. He and his partner, John Nietzsche, were united in a civil-union ceremony in Vermont.

Mr. Broadwell knew that publishing the same-sex couple's announcement would be controversial. The paper, owned by Mr. Broadwell's family since 1923, serves a 10-county Bible Belt area that includes the U.S. Army's Fort Bragg.

Publishers are increasingly facing this question as more gay couples seek to mark their unions the same way heterosexual newlyweds do, submitting photos and short write-ups to local newspapers. Many newspapers, including the New York Times Co.'s flagship paper, turn down such announcements because same-sex civil



The Fayetteville Observer published an announcement about the civil union of Richard Jernigan (left) and his partner, John Nietzsche

unions aren't legally recognized in the states where they publish, including North Carolina. A Times spokeswoman says the paper's policy is under "periodic review."

The Boston Globe, another New York Times Co. paper, is reconsidering its policy of declining to run such announcements. "There seems to be a flurry of requests along these lines," says Martin Baron, editor of the Boston Globe. "Given that these commitment ceremonies have become more common, we thought we'd take a look at the issue with no specific deadline on making a decision." The Washington Post Co.'s flagship paper prints such write-ups in the "Celebrations" feature in Friday's Style section; announcements of heterosexual weddings go in Wednesday's Style section, under the banner "Engagements, Weddings, Anniversaries and Births."

Mr. Broadwell chose to run the announcement, under the banner "Civil Union," on a page facing one filled with short items on traditional opposite-sex weddings, anniversaries and engagements. Like the others, the five-paragraph announcement about Messrs. Jernigan and Nietzsche featured a photo of the smiling couple and listed the usual details, including their parents' names, their home towns, the schools they attended and where they went on their honeymoon.

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"I eventually decided that to refuse such an announcement—which we print for free, along with most of the more standard announcements—would be hypocritical or even discriminatory," Mr. Broadwell told readers in his weekly column last Sunday.

Since then, about 50 readers have called, e-mailed or written. Critical comments have outweighed praise two-to-one, Mr. Broadwell says. One long-time reader called to tell him she planned to cancel her subscription. "As a Christian, she took it as a moral sign that maybe we and society were on a slide," Mr. Broadwell says. "She wanted to vote with her pocketbook."

Another reader noted in an e-mail, "Your paper publishing this announcement is putting a message out there that 'Everyone is OK.' That's not the message I want my children to receive."

Still, some readers commended the Observer for taking the lead on a sensitive issue. "Thank you for recognizing the importance of equal rights for all people," another reader said in an e-mail. "By doing so, your newspaper demonstrates its leadership in embracing the many diverse values and cultures in our nation."

Mr. Jernigan, a 54-year-old rabbi, knew he was putting the paper in a difficult spot. But he says he wanted to open the door for others to make similar announcements. "The announcement was not meant to be flamboyant, not meant to be a slap in the face or something that would cause great discomfort," Mr. Jernigan says.

Mr. Broadwell crafted a new policy: The Observer would run same-sex announcements only when local couples were united in a state-sanctioned ceremony. Such civil unions now are sanctioned only by Vermont. Mr. Broadwell took 17 paragraphs of his weekly column to explain his decision to publish the five-paragraph announcement. "We knew that running it would stir controversy and offend some readers," he wrote. "We also knew that, if we refused to run it, we could face criticism and more controversy."