

While the debate over same-sex bonds rages, a quieter 'marriage movement' is under way

That other kind of relationship

By Elizabeth Marquardt

If you do a Google news search on "marriage," the majority of articles that pop up are about same-sex marriage. If you're at a party and enter a hot discussion about marriage, in all likelihood it's same-sex marriage you're debating. Same-sex marriage has put marriage on the front page of national papers and at the top of the evening news headlines. Its prominence among the "moral values" issues that led to the re-election of President Bush has only increased public and pundit interest in the question.

But step back from the fire for a moment and look to a far quieter, but much larger, sector of the marriage debate. Over here, you'll find that there are many pressing concerns about marriage on the table today—concerns generally related to the vast majority of marriages that are, and always will be, between heterosexuals.

These vital questions include:

- How do children fare when their parents divorce?
- Why has the out-of-wedlock birth rate climbed so precipitously?
- What does it take for a couple to stay happily married for a lifetime?
- What role should society have in helping couples to achieve lasting, healthy marriages?

Well before our heated, national debate on same-sex marriage broke out a year ago with the court decision that legalized such marriages in Massachusetts, a growing, grass-roots "marriage movement" has been taking on tough issues.

Now, in a statement recently released by 150 leaders across the political and ideological spectrum, this nationwide movement has for the first time come together to define its shared goals.

Their mission is straightforward:

ward: "We unite," they write, "around a vision of America where more children are raised in nurturing homes by their married mother and father, where more adults enjoy mutually fulfilling and lifelong marriages."

The signers, who include professors and clergy, grass-roots activists and policy analysts, acknowledge the centrality of knowledge the centrality of same-sex marriage in the current marriage debate.

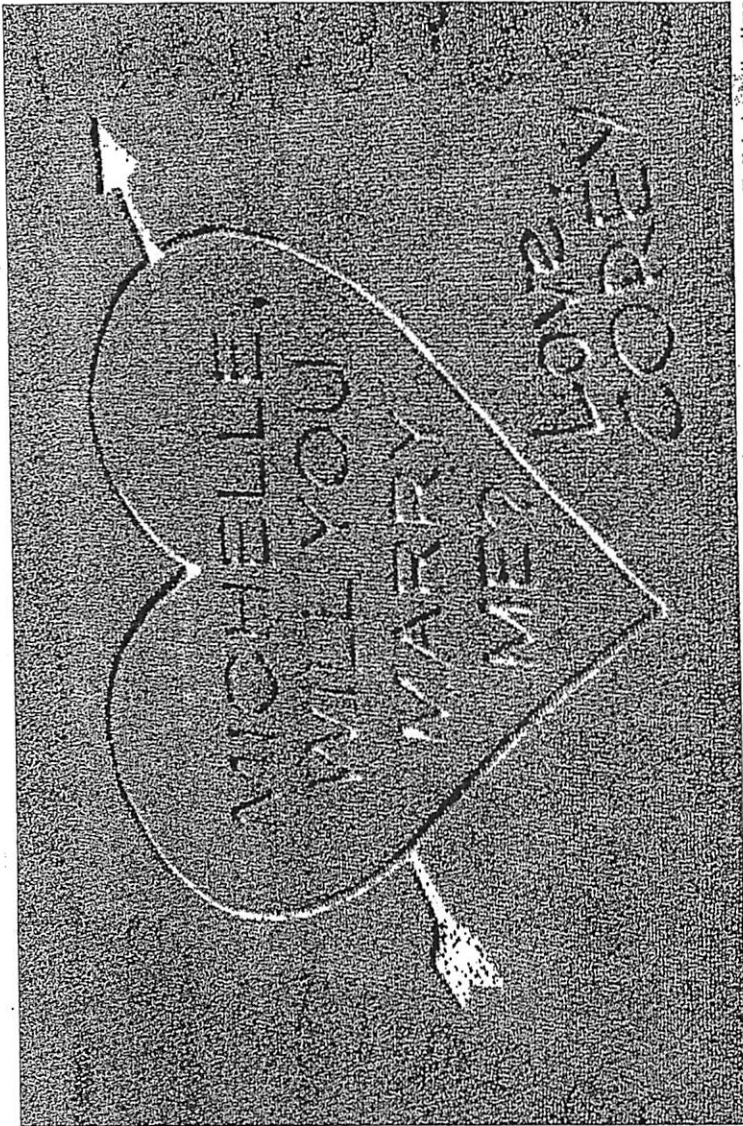
It is an issue, they say, "on which we in the marriage movement currently hold divergent views." At stake in this debate is the need to "reconcile two important social values—one value being the importance of equal dignity and treatment for all citizens, and the other being the importance of marriage as a vital, pro-child social institution."

What the marriage movement must do, right now, is provide a model for civil, respectful and thorough debate on this important and not easily resolved question.

But, these marriage leaders remind us, anyone concerned about marriage today has a lot more to be concerned about than the plight of same-sex couples. The United States leads the world with its divorce rate. The number of children living with cohabiting adults is rising. One-third of all children in this country are born to unmarried mothers and most of them will have few, if any, ties with their fathers.

Children who grow up lacking their married mother and father are exposed to significant social, emotional and economic risks that we continue to learn more about every year.

The marriage movement has been taking on these concerns for several years, with some success. Divorce rates have declined just a bit. Rates of unwed childbearing have hit a plateau since 1995. Teen pregnancy is



The Blade photo by Herral Long

A traditional marriage proposal is etched in a cornfield in September of this year near Napoleon in southeastern Indiana.

strengthen its numbers, scope and diversity.

The diffuse nature of the marriage movement is reflected in its long list of goals. The movement takes all kinds, including community organizers, culture changers, marriage educators, government officials, legal reformers, policy analysts, religious leaders, researchers, theoreticians, therapists and youth educators.

Their goals are impressive in their scope and specificity:

- Make marriage education widely available to all couples who seek it.
- Provide public funding to evaluate community marriage initiatives.
- Create pro-marriage public service announcements.
- Inform lawmakers about the negative impact of current family law and disturbing new trends in the law.
- Collaborate with other leaders who, like those in the marriage movement, share the goals of increasing child well-being and healthy relationships.
- Widen the scope of the marriage movement among religious denominations.

Because, they say, such a renaissance is possible. "For the first time in at least three decades, our society as a whole seems to be rediscovering the importance of marriage." Why?

Because, they say, "most of us know in our hearts that the divorce and unwed-childbearing revolutions have failed. Many of us have been a part of these trends. Very few of us want our children to be a part of them."

Marriage is a sometimes deeply flawed institution. Some marriages certainly must end.

But marriage remains the best solution we have ever come up with for helping to ensure children the protection, love

and support of their own mother and father. Marriage is neither a conservative nor a liberal idea. Similarly, although marriage has been tremendously influenced by religions, it is not solely a religious institution. If you are concerned about child well-being, you might find many like-minded souls in the marriage movement, no matter your background.

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William Raspberry

Reasons for Marriage

It's all over the news: gay and lesbian couples lining up for marriage licenses; jubilant celebrations that homosexuals have shed another unfair disadvantage; opponents fearing the diminishing of the very concept of marriage and proposing to amend the Constitution to make same-sex marriages unlawful.

And this wry observation from David Blankenhorn: "The only way anybody is talking about marriage these days is in the context of same-sex marriage."

Blankenhorn heads the Institute for American Values, whose all-encompassing theme for the past decade has been the importance of marriage to the well-being of children. The irony of the present situation, he says from his Manhattan headquarters, is that most of the current debate hasn't really been about marriage at all.

"The debate is mostly between those who want [to legalize same-sex marriage] because they see it as part of their demand for equal dignity for gays, and those who don't for a host of philosophical and religious reasons," he said. "But for all the intensity of the debate, it doesn't take you very far down the road of discussing marriage."

So, does Blankenhorn favor gay marriage or oppose it?

"I don't have a dog in that fight," he said. "What got me into this whole field some 15 years ago was the disturbing phenomenon of father absence. Thirty-five percent of our children are living without their fathers, a fact that exacerbates a whole range of social problems—and almost the entire problem of father absence is due to heterosexual behavior. But that doesn't make the opponents of gay marriage wrong."

"As Isaiah Berlin taught us, in a liberal society, a lot of our difficult choices are between two goods. That's the case here. There is the social good of equal dignity for all people. I support that. Equal dignity is a very American idea, in theory if not always in practice."

"On the other hand, if there is one thing in this life I know, it's that children need mothers and fathers. This is my whole public life, that children deserve, as a sort of birthright, mothers and fathers—preferably the mothers and fa-



BY DAVID ZALUBOWSKI—ASSOCIATED PRESS

thers who brought them into this world."

But does same-sex marriage interfere with that ideal any more than, say, adoption? Blankenhorn thinks it might.

He points to no-fault divorce, a development many of us hailed as a move toward giving women equal rights and allowing them an honorable escape from oppressive or abusive marriages. Blankenhorn wouldn't argue. But he points out that making divorce easy goes against his notion that children have a birthright to mothers and fathers. The more we focus on marriage as a personal relationship between two adults, the weaker the position of children becomes, he believes.

"The first thing that would happen if we legalized same-sex marriage is that we would find ourselves talking about parents, not fathers and mothers. And even the term 'parent' would be changed to something like 'the person in the home caring for the child.' That is not a definition in the long-term interest of children. We'd have to change the way we talk about marriage—in our schools and textbooks and in our curricula."

"And finally, if I say—as I deeply be-

lieve—that every child needs a mother and father, I will be venturing dangerously close to hate speech."

The gay-marriage steamroller got a perhaps decisive push when Massachusetts's court held that the state's Constitution forbade discrimination against same-sex couples. Then San Francisco announced that it would recognize same-sex marriages, and suddenly everybody has an opinion on the subject.

But as Blankenhorn notes, much of the discussion has been a referendum not on marriage but on our attitudes toward homosexuality. He's hoping somehow to get the discussion back where it needs to be—on marriage. He's even writing a book on the subject—going back to the earliest anthropological studies of marriage.

"I'm all for the principle of establishing equal social justice," he said. "But that's not the reason human beings came up with marriage. I think we'd better review the reasons for marriage—and ask ourselves which of those reasons are still relevant for the 21st century."

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