



**CULTURE CLASH:**  
Supporters of gay marriage face off with opponents in Boston

# THE 'WILL & GRACE' EFFECT

With Massachusetts leading the way, gay marriage is slowly becoming a reality—and dividing generations

BY DEBRA ROSENBERG

**F**OR RICHARD AND JEANINE BENANTI, opposing same-sex marriage was an easy call. "It's against nature, it's against society and it's against the Bible," says 49-year-old Richard, who works for the Boys and Girls Club in Springfield, Ill. His wife, Jeanine, a 46-year-old stay-at-home mom, shared his feelings. "The way I was raised, as a Catho-

lic, marriage was always between one man and one woman," she says. "I don't see how you could make it anything else." The Benantis took their three children to church regularly and sent them to Catholic school. So it was a shock when their 18-year-old daughter, Diana, recently announced her support for gay marriage. Diana says her views solidified after she saw a just-married gay couple on TV. "I just thought how sweet

it was that they finally got what they wanted," she says. "Allowing them to be married is something that America is all about."

Maybe not all of America—yet. Thousands of gay couples tied the knot in a few rogue counties in California, Oregon and other states, but court battles stopped the flow of licenses, some of which were legally questionable to begin with. This week, after years of legal wrangling, Massachusetts becomes the first state to allow same-sex unions with the blessing of its highest court. This time, brides and grooms won't be forced to rush through assembly-line weddings at city hall, but are heading to re-

ception halls, sympathetic churches and picturesque beaches for ceremonies with all the customary frills. That's given a new urgency to the arguments on both sides in the marriage debate. Opponents believe the images of more gay newlyweds will so offend the public that conservatives will win new support for their continuing efforts to ban same-sex unions. Late last week they tried, and failed, to get the U.S. Supreme Court to issue an emergency stay. But supporters say the Massachusetts weddings will prove gay marriage isn't a threat to anyone. "Gays are not going to use up all the marriage licenses," says

Evan Wolfson, director of Freedom to Marry.

The debate isn't just dividing Americans by state—in many families it's the cause of friction at the dinner table. Polls show a sizeable generation gap when it comes to supporting same-sex marriage. In a NEWSWEEK Poll, 41 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds back gay marriage, compared with 28 percent of Americans overall. Generation Y is more tolerant than its elders, says pollster Celinda Lake. Christine Dinnino, 17, has regular fights about the marriage issue with her father, Samuel, a 43-year-old retired Army sergeant in Inverness, Fla. Though Samuel bases his objections on the Bible, Christine sees gay marriage as a civil-rights issue. "It used to be illegal to marry someone of a different race," she says. "That

can only hurt their efforts to portray same-sex marriage as a threat to American culture. "This generation has been subjected to an enormous amount of pro-gay propaganda," says Robert Knight, director of the Culture and Family Institute at Concerned Women for America.

Even so, there wasn't much opponents could do to stop this week's weddings. Gov. Mitt Romney—a Republican who leans conservative on social issues, even in this most Democratic of states—fought the November court decision approving same-sex marriages. He then pushed for a constitutional amendment to ban them. One version passed the state legislature but must be ratified again by lawmakers and voters—and wouldn't take effect before 2006. In the

## RESEARCH FOUND THAT SEEING LIKABLE GAY CHARACTERS ON SHOWS LIKE 'WILL & GRACE' CAUSED ANTI-GAY PREJUDICE TO DROP



sounds pretty foreign to the typical 15-year-old today." While baby boomers tend to view homosexuality as anti-establishment, young people often see same-sex marriage as a way of integrating gays into society, says demographer Neil Howe, who has written about differences among the generations. "They see it," he says, "as domesticating something that might be threatening to society and making it mainstream."

Younger people may also be more accepting because they've had greater exposure to gay people than previous generations had. Fewer gays are closeted, and the average age for "coming out" is now 16, down from the mid-20s in the 1970s. Knowing someone who is openly gay or lesbian is the single biggest predictor of tolerance on same-sex marriage, says Wolfson. And if you don't personally know someone who's gay, you'll find plenty of gay characters and culture on TV. Recent research by Edward Schiappa, a professor of communications at the University of Minnesota, found that seeing likable gay characters on shows like "Will & Grace" had similar effects to knowing gays in real life. In one study, students with few or no gay acquaintances were shown 10 episodes of HBO's "Six Feet Under." Afterward, their levels of anti-gay prejudice dropped by 12 percent.

Cultural conservatives are all too aware that such sympathetic portrayals of gay life

meantime, eager to preserve his national prospects within the GOP, Romney tried to bar out-of-state couples from tying the knot. Marriage opponents still complained that Romney didn't go far enough. Last week former GOP presidential candidate Alan Keyes launched a \$40,000 TV and radio ad campaign chiding Romney for refusing to help recall the four state supreme court judges who backed gay marriage. A weary Romney seemed resigned to the inevitable last week: he said he would attend gay weddings if invited.

Massachusetts may be the first state to open its doors to gays, but it likely won't be the last. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force estimates that pro-marriage lawsuits are underway in 10 states. And though only local couples are supposed to marry in Massachusetts, some out-of-staters could get hitched and then demand legal rights back home. More than a dozen states are trying to head off those maneuvers with anti-gay-marriage measures on the ballot this fall. With both sides so entrenched, "it's very difficult to change minds on this," says pollster Robert Meadow. If present trends hold, Meadows says, gay-marriage opponents will eventually find themselves outnumbered—in the courts, in statehouses and around the dinner table.

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