

Ideas & Trends

Marriage-Minded

The Gay Rights Movement, Settled Down

By TAMAR LEWIN

SO what does it mean that gay rights activists, once the standard-bearers for sexual freedom, are now preoccupied with the sober institution of marriage — and fighting off President Bush's plans for a constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage?

The glories of marriage have not historically had top billing in the gay rights movement. Indeed, until the advent of AIDS, activists dwelt more on the joy of sexual liberation. But these days, the movement has a very different tone.

"We're growing up, thank God," said Larry Kramer, the writer and longtime gay activist. "I simply no longer want to fight for the right of people to have sex in the bushes. That was what the movement was all about. I participated, and I have AIDS to show for it. But we have to move on to a more responsible place in the world, and what is more responsible than finding someone to love and make a life with?"

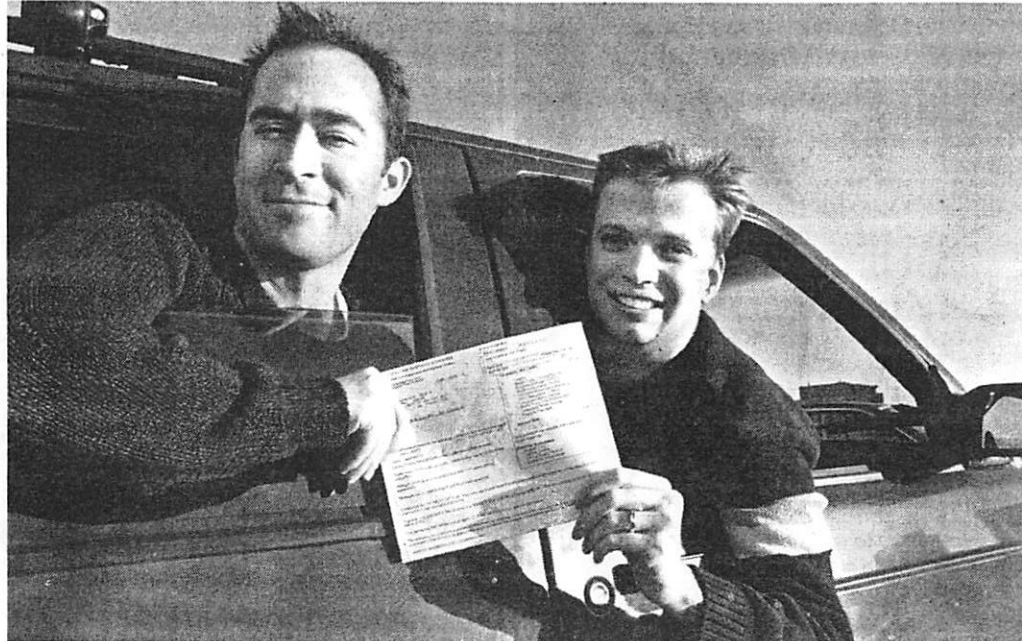
Of course, not all gays thrill to the thought of marriage. While Mr. Kramer does, his partner is only willing to go so far as a civil union. "I'm sentimental, but he doesn't like all those customs and rules," he said.

But civil union or wedding, the gay rights movement has come a long way. "If you look back to the 60's, the movement was about liberation," said David Greer, a gay Republican activist. "Gay liberation had a lot to do with freeing people from gender roles, while marriage was seen as the oppressive male hegemonic institution, which lesbians, especially, didn't want any part of."

Mr. Greer added that the current fight over gay marriage might represent a new ascendancy of conservatives in the movement. "Marriage actually should have been the goal of the movement all along," he said.

This turn in the gay rights debate comes at a time of widespread attention to the benefits of marriage, for the individual and society. Even Gloria Steinem praised the marital estate. After she got married, she said, her new life with her husband showed her, more than ever, how important it is that gays and lesbians, too, should have the right to marry.

"Marriage is not necessarily a conservative institution," she said. "We've spent the last 40 years making it more egalitarian than it used to be. I had always supported the right of two women or two men to marry, but I didn't understand the importance of it until the age of 66, when I went through a year of illness with the friend I



Associated Press

married. It made me appreciate the need for society's recognition of the relationship."

But she and others reject the formulation that the embrace of marriage represents the maturation — or stodgy middle-aging — of the gay rights movement.

"Growing up, and developing, are really ideas about individuals, not movements," said George Chauncey, a historian who directs the University of Chicago's lesbian and gay studies project. "Culturally, marriage has often been seen as maturation. But I don't like to talk about a movement that way. There is no single gay agenda. Marriage can look like the most assimilationist gesture possible or, as has become obvious from the reaction, like the most transgressive and revolutionary gesture."

The debate over gay marriage comes at a time when the message of the movement, overall, is one of sameness: the narratives about gay couples stress that they pay taxes, worry about health insurance, fall in love and raise children, just like the straight neighbors.

Activists care less about liberation, and more about health benefits for partners.

In large cities, gay is just another niche that can seem more like a marketing plan than a social movement, with gay sports leagues, gay choruses, gay religious institutions and gay parents' groups.

If gay culture has been so integrated into the mainstream that it is less different, less edgy, is that a loss?

"I have no apology to make if the culturally hip straight people find us boring," said Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts, who is gay. "I've been fighting all my life for the right to be boring."



Corbis

Two snapshots of a movement: In 1983, a bathhouse in San Francisco, above. On Valentine's Day 2004, a newly married couple in Emeryville, Calif.

The gay rights movement, he stressed, did not arise to change the culture, but to end the oppression of homosexuals. While every civil rights movement has a few radicals who defy cultural norms, he said, the vast majority simply wanted, and still want, to be treated like everyone else.

"It wasn't about trying to uproot society, or be the leaders of a cultural change," he said. "It was about ending the deep oppression of gay people."

The extent to which the gay rights movement is now uniting around same-sex marriage may largely be the result of the intense negative reaction to the Massachusetts court decision supporting such unions and to the drive for a constitutional amendment banning them.

"This has emerged as the central issue of the gay movement less because of its being at the top of any gay agenda than because of the thunderous reaction it has produced," Professor Chauncey said.

Given that domestic-partner benefits and civil unions seemed radical just a few years ago, gay marriage may have been an issue the movement was not quite ready to take on. "A year ago, before marriage reared its ugly head, I think the gay world would have been thrilled across the board to have civil unions," Mr. Kramer said. "But now civil unions have suddenly been made second class, and we're stuck between a rock and a hard place."