

Same-sex couples exchange vows in Washington

Mass ceremony part of weekend rally for homosexual rights

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WASHINGTON — Fresh from a victory that granted homosexuals marriage-like rights in Vermont, hundreds of same-sex couples gathered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial yesterday to press for an even wider acceptance for civil unions.

Organizers said about 1,000 same-sex couples exchanged rings and vows in front of friends, family and about a dozen protesters, part of a weekend-long rally for homosexual and bisexual rights culminating in today's "Millennium March" on the National Mall.

"We're so happy right now," said Olivia Durant, of Rochester, N.Y., as she professed her love for her partner, Sabrina Beach. "But I hope someday, same-sex marriages will be legal. We've joked about moving to Vermont because of that."

It is the fourth gathering on the Mall by gay-rights groups in the past 21 years. It caps a busy period for activists, who earlier this week had praise for the new law in Vermont and for President Clinton's renewed call to Congress to pass the stalled Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

Supporters and critics also clashed this week at the Supreme Court, where on Wednesday the justices heard arguments over whether the Boy Scouts can bar a homosexual from serving as a troop leader.

"We're just like any other family.

We get up, we go to work," said Pam Lessard, of Melbourne, Fla., who wore a white-laced veil as she waited for the ceremony to start.

"It will be an honor for members of the gay community and their allies to stand before the Lincoln Memorial, this great American symbol of freedom, and demand equal rights," said the Rev. Troy Perry, moderator of the Universal Federation of Metropolitan Community Churches, who performed the ceremony.

Other events yesterday included a concert featuring Garth Brooks and Melissa Etheridge, and the unveiling of new panels to the AIDS memorial quilt on the Mall.

The weekend's events, particularly today's march, have been criticized by anti-gay groups, as well as by homosexual-advocacy groups who contend organizers had not reached out to grassroots organizations and people of color.

"The march's purpose, insensitive elitism, is not our purpose. Our purpose will not be advanced by the Millennium March on Washington," said Ed Brown, co-chairman of the National Association of Black and White Men Together.

Six protesters carrying signs such as "Repent or Perish" and "Got AIDS Yet" taunted supporters and drew the attention of police from across a road in front of the memorial. Some got into arguments with supporters before police separated them.

U.S. Park Police said no one was arrested in connection with yesterday's events.

Another group of protesters, led by Anthony Falzarano of Falls Church, Va., tried to tell homosexuals of a network of "ex-gay" groups filled



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Roberto Hermosilla, front, and Robert Gohlke, both of Provincetown, Mass., embraced during the same-sex commitment ceremony yesterday.

with people who realized "they could change."

"We're here today to be compassionate to homosexuals," said Falzarano who said he left a homosexual lifestyle in 1983. "We know what it's like to be misunderstood. So we're here to tell any homosexual out there it's OK not to be gay."

Organizers hope to draw 300,000 people for the today's march.

"We want the same benefits that legally married couples have," John Catania, of New York said after exchanging vows with his partner. "You want the country to be better, and recognizing this in law makes the country better."