

BRIDES TAKE EACH OTHER 'FOR RICHER, FOR POORER, IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH'

Abbott Koloff

Photos by Karen Mancinelli

02/25/07 - Posted from the Daily Record newsroom



Cindy and Maureen prepare to walk down the aisle with Maureen's 90 year old father

Lawrence Kilian.

MORRISTOWN -- Two smiling brides left the church, holding hands, to a standing ovation. They wanted their civil union ceremony to be ordinary, like any other wedding, even if the state does not call it a wedding. They like to refer to themselves as boring.

Then the crowd at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer applauded as Cindy Meneghin and Maureen Kilian left the altar Saturday, and people began to stand and shout.

Meneghin gave high-fives and raised a fist into the air. They will go back to their ordinary lives this coming week. They promised to be as boring as ever, taking kids to school, going to PTA meetings, baking cookies. But on Saturday they were not just another happy couple getting hitched in front of 300 people who wanted to cheer.



Cindy and Maureen sign their Civil Union license, witnessed by Maureen's sister and their children, Josh and Sarah.

They have been pioneers as part of a lawsuit that led to the creation of civil unions for same-sex couples, a law that went into effect this past Monday. On Saturday, they became perhaps the first couple in Morris County to be joined in a civil union.

"I was elated to see so many happy faces of friends and family," Kilian said.

They had come down the aisle together at the start of the ceremony, pushing Kilian's 90-year-old father in a wheelchair. Lawrence Kilian was listed in the program as being father and father-in-law of the brides. Kilian and Meneghin, both 49, of Butler, wore black pants suits. Their 14-year-old son Josh wore a dark suit and their 12-year-old daughter wore a pink top. The first cheers started then.

The Rev. Phillip Dana Wilson, who presided over the civil union, said in his sermon that he had good news and bad news for those who were gathered. The good news is that Meneghin and Kilian are getting legally joined after being together for 32 years. The bad news is that it's called a civil union, and not marriage.

"What is this animal that walks like a duck ... and still you call it a turkey?" he asked.

Under direction from the state Supreme Court, state legislators decided to give same-sex couples access to the same legal rights as heterosexual couples who get married. They just would not call it marriage. Gay rights advocates point out that creating civil unions, a separate institution for same-sex couples, makes them unequal, at least in terms of social perception.



> Maureen and Cindy walk down the aisle, having had their Civil Union blessed by the Rev'ds Elizabeth Kaeton, Phillip Wilson and John Rollins

Traditional ceremony

So Meneghin and Kilian decided to have a traditional ceremony, using traditional marriage vows instead of creating their own. They used the term "wedded partner" but replaced "matrimony" with the legally correct term. They were entering into a "holy civil union." They took each other "for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish ..."

cherish ..."

They wanted to make it clear that they were getting married in every way that matters -- as long as you use a word other than marriage.

"This was a statement," Meneghin said. "We should have the same thing as everybody else."

They have spent the past five years making statements, being part of a lawsuit, losing some privacy. They invited reporters into their home to record moments of their lives. They became the public face of a lawsuit so people would see they are not threatening. They are just two women who happen to be gay and who have loved each other for much of their lives. They have been together since DePaul High School in Wayne. They are raising two children.

"Their life together, I have to tell you, is the most traditional life I have ever seen," Phillip Dana Wilson said during his sermon.

That got a laugh from people who know Meneghin and Kilian. Wilson went down the list -- PTA, owning a house, going to church, owning a van, working in the soup kitchen. But they also are pioneers, and last week some same-sex couples around Morris County who are planning civil unions in the near future, and who never met Kilian and Meneghin, said they wanted to thank them.



Maureen and Cindy rejoice with their friends

'Not over'

"They gave up their private lives so we can be here today doing what we are doing," Wilson said. "The struggle is not over. But because of you, we have come a long way. Someday there will be no such thing as civil union, no such thing as separate but equal."

So the cheers at the end were not just for Meneghin and Kilian. Wilson said he plans to perform a civil union for 10 same-sex couples from his church in a couple of months.

People wiped back tears when Meneghin and Kilian kissed. They seemed to hold their breath when they said simple, ordinary words, when Meneghin loudly emphasized this phrase: "In the name of God."

They applauded when Meneghin and Kilian invited other couples who had been part of the lawsuit to stand with them at the front of the church.

"Peace and God be with you all," Meneghin said at the end, wiping tears from her eyes.