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Gay rights mean different things to different generations of community

By Lornet Turnbull
Seattle Times staff reporter

Before there were domestic-partnership registries and commitment ceremonies, before same-sex marriages and civil unions — before the gay-rights movement, even — John McCluskey and Rudy Henry met, fell in love and harbored the notion that they could spend their lives making one another happy.

And for 50 years, the Tacoma men went about doing just that, all the while longing for social acceptance.

Even in gay-friendly San Francisco where they first lived together, they found it necessary to hide their relationship from prospective landlords, and on job applications they would sometimes lie about their marital status to avoid raising suspicion.

Decades later in 2006, at a coffee-shop concert on Seattle's Capitol Hill, Amy Balliett and Jessica Trejo met and they, too, eventually fell in love.

In their 20s, the two had come out as lesbians at a time when young people could find support in groups on high school and college campuses, when they had gay role models in politics and on television, and when their parents probably knew people who were openly gay. By the time the two married in California last October, legal bonds between gays and lesbians were possible in several states.

Balliett and Trejo, Henry and McCluskey are like generational bookends to this modern gay-rights movement, launched 40 years ago this week after a group of activists at a small Manhattan bar called the Stonewall Inn stood up in violent protest to ongoing police harassment.

While older gays and younger ones share much the same agenda of equality, their needs within the movement are also divergent.

Young people, who have at times referred to their own post-gay movement, seek the protections of marriage equality as they form relationships and start families, while gays of their grandparents' generation are more concerned about issues of aging — like survivor benefits and long-term care.

This weekend, across the country and around the world —



JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Partners John McCluskey, 72, left, and Rudy Henry, 74, met in 1958. Henry had a stroke a few years ago, so things such as survivor benefits and long-term care have surpassed their concerns about same-sex marriage.



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Amy Balliett, left, and Jessica Trejo married in California in October. Their dog is Langston.

Milestones in modern gay-rights movement

June 27-28, 1969: Gays riot following police raid of New York City gay bar called Stonewall Inn, sparking start of gay-rights movement in U.S.

1973: American Psychiatric Association removes "homosexuality" from list of mental disorders.

Nov. 27, 1978: San Francisco's gay city Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone assassinated at City Hall.

November 1993: U.S. military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy for gays becomes law.

September 1996: President Clinton signs Defense of Marriage Act, allowing states to ignore same-sex marriages performed elsewhere.

April 2000: Vermont becomes first state to legally recognize gay civil unions.

June 27, 2003: U.S. Supreme Court strikes down sodomy laws.

November 2003: Same-sex marriage becomes legal in Massachusetts.

May 2008: Same-sex marriage becomes legal in California, with more than 18,000 couples marrying there by Nov 3.

including here in Seattle on Sunday — they will join together, young and old, lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender people to mark the anniversary of Stonewall with the usually festive Pride parades.

And while there's much to celebrate — gays can form legal bonds in at least six states, adopt children and are protected in many states from discrimination — the movement has been dogged by legal and social setbacks.

Even those who have married enjoy none of the benefits and protections the federal government confers on married people. Twenty-nine states have constitutional bans against gay marriage, and 19 states — including Washington — along with the federal government all have laws defining marriage as between a man and a woman.

And in Washington state, petitions are being circulated to repeal a domestic-partnership bill passed in the Legislature last spring that extends marriage-like benefits to same-sex couples.

"When I was 18 and 19, I didn't think much of having any rights; I assumed I'd go through this life having to look over my shoulders," said the 72-year-old McCluskey, a retired accountant. "So many of us used to think we had no rights, that we didn't deserve to have any."

By contrast, some gays and lesbians in their 20s and 30s are not shy about demanding theirs; they are restless and impatient with the pace of change. They came of age when many of the battles had been fought; their straight peers stand with them in large numbers in support of gay rights.

They have public role models and have witnessed the shift in how they are portrayed in the media — from caricatures to "rich portrayals of gays living with healthy self-esteem," said Josh Friedes, advocacy director of Equal Rights Washington.

"They have a healthy self-esteem, which many in my generation didn't have," said Friedes, in his mid-40s. "They want full equality, and they are furious they don't have it."

Acceptance, protection

That was most evident last November when, using the Internet, young gays took the lead in a national protest over passage of California's Proposition 8, which did away with gay marriage in that state six months after the state's Supreme Court ruled that gays had a fundamental right to marriage.

Balliett, a 26-year-old search-engine marketer, helped launch the national movement with her site, jointheimpact.org. "I continue to assume that everybody thinks the way I do," she said. "And they don't."

She and Trejo said what they want is full equality, and she believes that in the next decade, LGBT people across the country will have a full range of rights and protections under the law.

"There are two parts to this struggle: social acceptance and equal protection, and before we were married, I thought social acceptance was most important," Balliett said. "Now I know better. Words alone won't keep my wife safe."

As the movement pushes forward, some religious conservatives remain steadfast in their opposition to what they see as the movement's ultimate goal: gay marriage.

October 2008: Same-sex marriage becomes legal in Connecticut.

November 4, 2008: California voters approve Proposition 8 banning same-sex marriage, sparking large protests by gays and others across U.S.

April 2009: Same-sex marriage becomes legal in Iowa and Vermont.

May 2009: Same-sex marriage becomes legal in Maine.

June 2009: Same-sex marriage becomes legal in New Hampshire.

Sources: Stateline.org, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life and Seattle Times archives

Pride events this weekend in Seattle

Breakfast: 8 a.m. Saturday, Central Lutheran Church, 1710 11th Ave. Sponsored by Dignity/Seattle. \$7.

Capitol Hill Pride Festival: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, along Broadway between East John Street and East Harrison Street, featuring music, vendors and comedian Mark "Mom" Finley as emcee. Free.

Seattle Pride Parade: Begins at 11 a.m. Sunday, starting downtown at Fourth Avenue and Union Street and continuing along Fourth to Denny Way. Free.

PrideFest: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Sunday at Seattle Center, featuring music, performances, beer gardens, activism and a celebration of community heroes. Free.

While not wishing to see a return to the days of Stonewall, when gays were persecuted and harassed just for being gay, many opponents say they also don't want to see marriage redefined.

"My goal is to defend and protect natural marriage," said Gary Randall, president of the Faith and Freedom Network, which is spearheading the effort to repeal recent enhancements to the state's domestic-partnership law.

"I respect the right of homosexuals to live as they choose to live, even if I disagree with their decision to go into that lifestyle," he said. "But I am absolutely committed to not letting them deconstruct marriage."

Concern for elders

Using Stonewall as a point of reference, gays tend to fall into three broad generational categories.

Those who were adults — in or out of the closet — at the time of Stonewall; those of middle age who were children or teens coming to terms with their sexuality; and those in their early 30s and younger, who will tell you that their sexual identity does not define who they are.

McCluskey and Henry said it helps that gays are freer about coming out. Henry's father died before Henry came out even to himself, and he never talked to his mother about his homosexuality — even after he introduced her to McCluskey.

"It's amazing what happens when people realize they know someone who's gay, they have a family member who is gay," McCluskey said. "People realize we won't steal their kids."

Still, among gays themselves there is a sometimes painful generational disconnect when it comes to marriage equality. While older gays would be happy if gays achieved marriage, it may come too late for some of them.

Friedes said not enough is being done to see to the long-term care of gays as they age. There are few nursing homes specifically for gays or that are gay-friendly.

Some, as they grow older, are even forced back into the closet because a home-health-care worker may not be sensitive to their needs, Friedes said, or because other nursing-home residents "are still homophobic. They find themselves in their final years in a community that is not accepting of who you are."

For Henry, 74, who suffered a stroke a few years ago, marriage to the love of his life would be great, but "it's not really a burning desire for me.

"I've lived so long without it," he said. "I understand the benefit of it. But what's far more important is to gain equality for everyone."

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