

Same-sex marriages stimulate business

By Jennifer Kavanaugh / Daily News Staff

Monday, May 16, 2005

When same-sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts last May, wedding bells rang from Cape Cod to Williamstown, and many in the marriage business declared the change to be a happy occasion indeed.

While some vendors expressed delight at witnessing a historical moment, others had giddy visions of stylish seaside weddings, pairs of Vera Wang-clad brides floating down the aisle, and the kind of events longtime partners could afford with money in the bank and a longing to express their love.

A year later, though, the champagne flute is either half empty or half full, depending on the person who serves it. Some businesses have successfully courted engaged gay couples, but others wait for the phone to ring and the same-gender cake toppers to be unpacked.

"It's not the explosion everyone thought it would be," said Craig Sutton, who has worked several gay weddings this past year as owner of Craig Sutton Entertainment Services in Framingham. "I think people wanted to wait and see where the politics would go."

Despite ongoing efforts to overturn [gay marriage](#) in the state, more than 6,000 same-sex couples have wed since May 17, 2004, the first day they could. Hoping to cash in on legalized marriage here and civil unions elsewhere, businesses have rushed to create "gay friendly" Web sites and marketing plans.

"Now, more so than ever, it's accepted," said wedding planner Lisette Garcia, referring to same-sex unions. "Because it's such a large market, a lot of vendors want to be a part of it."

Garcia and Bernadette Smith run It's About Time, a Roslindale firm that specializes in gay weddings. Some couples specifically seek out businesses that are gay-owned or that specifically cater to same-sex couples, Garcia said.





"A lot of couples, they don't know what to do," Garcia said. "They don't want to come out every single time to a vendor."

Gay couples taking the plunge will add to what is already an enormous wedding industry. Estimates vary on the industry's size, but Modern Bride magazine tells prospective advertisers that over a 16-month engagement period, couples spend \$50 billion for the actual weddings themselves, and then another \$70 billion to set up their new lives of wedded bliss.






Like all people headed to the altar, same-sex couples want to know that the vendors who are getting hundreds or thousands of dollars will treat them with respect. Given the emotional debate over the issue, vendors say, gay couples worry about how they will be received.

"A wedding is a very big deal," said Piper Jo Nevins, a Waltham photographer who has worked on several same-sex weddings. "There always is a trust issue, and this seems like a larger hurdle to clear."

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Nevins said she understands the difficulty in choosing vendors, as she plans her own nuptials, a September wedding on the Cape to her partner Laurel Long. As for the weddings she has captured, she said she has seen all different approaches, from traditional or religious to casual and quirky.

"With gay couples, there's less of a script to follow," Nevins said. "They get to do whatever they want."

Nevins said the Web wedding sites catering to gay couples are mixed in quality, from ones that seem to list any vendor, to others, like the Asheville, N.C.-based RainbowWeddingNetwork.com, which is more selective.

Sarah Benoit, event coordinator for the wedding expos sponsored by the network, said the network will direct an estimated \$7 million in business to its members this year. Benoit, who organized a wedding expo this past weekend in Cambridge, said the network is choosy about its listings.

"Anybody can kind of say, 'Oh yeah, I'm gay friendly,'" Benoit said. "We really try to follow up and actually screen them."

Yolanda Cellucci, who has been in the wedding-gown and special occasion business for the past four decades, said she has done "hundreds" of gay weddings at her Waltham store, The Event Center at Yolanda's. She has been doing the weddings before they could even be done, she said.

"For a long time, they would come in saying they were looking for an 'occasion dress,' but they wouldn't say what the occasion was," Cellucci said. "Now they come right out and say it. And that's great, because for us, two dresses are better than one."

The Waltham store has gotten media attention nationally for outfitting soon-to-be-married gay customers. She said not every vendor wants to work with same-sex couples or treats them well, "so that's why they come to me." In general, she said, her gay customers seem more self-assured about their decisions, but in the end, the wedding dream is a universal one.

"The same with a traditional bride and groom, they all want the limo, they all want the party, they all want the band," Cellucci said. "They all want the same things. They just happen to be the same sex."

Violaine Diogene, who owns An Exquisite Taste, a Natick catering company, said she cannot generalize the gay weddings she has done, but the circumstances surrounding the gay marriage do affect the nuptials she has seen.

"Some of them were more special," Diogene said. "They fought so hard to be able to do it, that they all put so much time and energy, and care and love into planning their weddings."

And the region has plenty of professionals willing to lend a hand. Nancy Whalen, who runs Creative Papers Ltd. in Natick with her sister Judy, said they have done wedding invitations for one same-sex couple and would like to do more.

"I hope so," said Whalen, whose listing appears on at least a couple of "gay-friendly" Web sites. "Whatever way they come to us, it doesn't make any difference."

Richard Griesel, a Sudbury justice of the peace, said he has married between 12 and 15 same-sex couples over the past year. He said most of the couples he has married have been together for many years.

"I am all in favor of same-sex weddings," Griesel said. "God bless them. If they want to get married, then I'm all for it."

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