

# At Expo, Few Disagreements on Gay Marriage

Wedding Planners Foresee Expanded Market in Mass.

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass., May 2 -- Deilia Laing Jackson's company, Geneva Balloon, specializes in wedding decorations, but she has never had a same-sex couple as a client.

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She doesn't know any gay people getting married when such unions become legal here in two weeks, and she has never worked a commitment ceremony -- an event held by gay couples to commemorate their relationships where they are legally barred from marrying.

But at Sunday's Gay and Lesbian Wedding Expo, which brought more than 40 wedding-related businesses together with a growing clientele, Jackson shelled out \$250 for a booth and decorated it with a 6-foot-tall pair of inflated grooms with linked arms.

"It seems pretty basic to me," said Jackson, who owns a shop in Dorchester, a neighborhood south of downtown Boston. "I think they should have the right to do what they want, and I want to do business with people who want to do business with me."

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision authorizing gay weddings -- which takes effect May 17 -- has sparked a firestorm across the country and here in this state, where legislative leaders, the governor, the attorney general and the influential Catholic Church have all denounced the decision or launched efforts to override it.

But there's little controversy among those in the wedding industry for whom more marriages mean essentially one thing: more customers. A host of gay-themed start-up companies has emerged, and old-line stalwarts are positioning themselves to capitalize.

Targeting products to gay consumers -- who boast an estimated \$450 billion in purchasing power nationwide and

earn more on average than straight people -- is nothing new for companies such as automakers and television networks. Forbes magazine has estimated the size of the potential market for gay marriages -- if laws across the country were

changed to permit them -- at \$16.8 billion.

Gay couples tend to spend significantly less money on commitment ceremonies or civil unions -- which are legal in Vermont -- than the average straight couple spends on a wedding, industry experts said. And the recent declaration by Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney (R) that out-of-state gay couples will probably not be able to marry here, will mean fewer weddings in the near term.

Some town clerks in Massachusetts have indicated they will not follow Romney's directive to verify couple's residency. Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino told the Boston Globe over the weekend that he, too, may ignore Romney's request.

Unlike the recent spate of hastily arranged gay marriages in San Francisco, Portland, Ore., and New Paltz, N.Y. -- which have since been halted -- couples here have had months to prepare for the May 17 start date, giving ample time for more elaborate ceremonies.

Opinion polls show a consistent majority of Americans opposed to gay marriage. But when Richard Martel, president of the Association for Wedding Professionals International, recently surveyed 20,000 industry members on the subject, the support was unequivocal. Out of 1,500 responses, he said, six people asked to be removed from his mailing list, two said they were opposed to gay marriage, and the rest said they favored it.

In Massachusetts -- ground zero for the debate on gay marriage since the court decision in November -- 50 members of the Boston Wedding Group, a local industry organization, were polled earlier this year. Only one did not want to be involved with gay weddings, said group founder Arlene Cronk. "We're really excited about all this," she said. "Many of us have worked on commitment ceremonies for years, and this is the logical next step."

New companies have sprung up in Massachusetts and beyond. OutVite.com, an online invitation company that targets same-sex couples, was founded a year ago. Company officials had intended to launch a Web site on Jan. 1, but when they realized the court was set to decide its case, they rushed it into service in November.

"The timing was really fortuitous," said Joanne Laipson, the company's director of business development, who said that Web traffic has increased by 650 percent in the past six months.

Bernadette Smith founded It's About Time, a Boston-based wedding planning company in January. She had recently attended a commitment ceremony in South Carolina where a disc jockey and wait staff had seemed uncomfortable with the proceedings. "They made inappropriate comments and acted like they didn't want to be there," said Smith, who is planning three weddings in the Boston area this summer. "I thought there would be a real market for someone who does this right."

But not all of the companies trying to crack the gay wedding market are new, gay-themed businesses. Several local branches of national hotel chains have been marketing their reception spaces. Shreve Crump & Low, a landmark Boston jeweler founded in 1796, with a large flagship store on tony Newbury Street, has advertised heavily in Bay Windows, a gay newspaper based in Boston's South End that has put out a wedding planner supplement for months.

A full-page ad that ran during legislative debates over amending the constitution to ban gay marriage contained the slogan, "This is love. It's not up for a vote."

Marianne Puechl, founder of RainbowWeddingNetwork.com, which produced Sunday's wedding expo at a Cambridge hotel, said that only 15 percent of the 4,000 vendors listed on her firm's registry are gay-owned. At the event, most soon-to-be-married couples said they were thankful that companies were seeking them out.

Jeff Overman, 40, a computer systems analyst from Stoughton, Mass., was browsing formal wear with his partner of 18 years, Mitch Siegel. The two plan to marry in August. "It is nice to know that all of these companies are behind us," Overman said.

Others expressed some resentment at what they perceived as economic opportunism on the part of some business owners. "Yes, it's gratifying, but some people are clearly more comfortable with all of this than others," said Kerri Richardson, 33, a magazine editor from Malden, Mass. "I don't like people pretending to be something they're not to take my buck."

The prospect of a constitutional amendment, which could be on the state ballot here in November 2006, has left some couples in a holding pattern. Rita Markunas, who spent several hours at the expo, said she will marry her partner on May 26, but will postpone a large celebration for two years, to see whether the amendment passes. "I don't want to waste all that money on something that gets taken away," she said.