

## Straight and Narrow in Virginia

Last August my partner and I bought a house in Fairfax County. We already own a house in Arlington County, so now we own two properties in the Old Dominion, which indicates that we are either twice as stupid as some folks thought, or twice as stubborn. Virginia has some of the most anti-gay laws in the country, yet we persist in living here. And this session, the state legislature is considering a raft of new bills aimed at making this state even less hospitable to gay residents.

Although my partner and I have spent thousands of dollars to create living trusts, medical directives and durable powers of attorney, Virginia's so-called Marriage Affirmation Act could be interpreted to nullify those legal contracts. The law bars not only same-sex marriage but also civil unions, domestic partnership contracts and "any other arrangement purporting to bestow the benefits of marriage."

Virginia is the only state that prohibits private employers from adding anyone other than a legal spouse or dependent child to a group health plan. So while more than 7,500 employers in the United States offer health insurance to their employees' domestic partners, Virginia employers are forbidden to do so unless they are self-insured. As a result, fewer than 100 Virginia employers offer this coverage. This puts most Virginia businesses at a competitive disadvantage, and it has forced untold numbers of workers to find jobs elsewhere in order to obtain this critical coverage.

Virginia, like virtually every other state, prohibits marriage between people of the same sex. But for some state legislators, that law just doesn't go far enough. Several of them have introduced a constitutional amendment to enshrine this prohibition in that historic document, setting off a battle that could take three years to play out. Virginia is also one of just 13 states that still have sodomy laws on the books, even though the U.S. Supreme Court found them

unconstitutional in July 2003. Leaving these laws in place is just another stick in the eye to gay people, who for decades have been unfairly targeted under these statutes.

And, to add further insult to these injuries, Richmond is considering a bill to create yet another new license plate, one that will proclaim that the car's owner supports "traditional marriage." Funny, but most of the gay people I know who want to marry also support traditional marriage. Perhaps we should all pay the extra fee and sport this silly message on our vehicles.

So why on Earth do we live here? One reason is that our neighbors in Northern Virginia have never demonstrated one iota of anti-gay prejudice. Our straight neighbors watch our house when we're out of town and bring us vegetables from their garden. Arlington has long had some of the most progressive laws in the state. And our new neighbors in Fairfax County have been even more welcoming, inviting us to parties, offering to pet-sit or lending us tools as we renovate our new home. But the primary reason we stay is that we feel we must. We will not let small-minded politicians -- or the religious-right organizations based in Virginia -- force us across the river or into the closet. We will stay, and we will vote. We will tell our straight neighbors about these mean-spirited laws and we will ask them to help us change them.

-- **Kim I. Mills**  
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