

Same-sex weddings continue in Wisconsin after judge strikes down ban

Tears flow as 283 couples wed in Milwaukee, Madison

By [Karen Herzog](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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Overcome with the emotion of the day, Todd Halsey burst into tears as his older sister and her partner of 11 years stood on the steps just inside the Milwaukee County Courthouse on Saturday morning, waiting to obtain a marriage license and exchange vows.

"I look at it as the next civil rights protest, and how you carry yourself is important," Halsey said of the battle for same-sex couples such as his sister, Jennifer, and her partner, Margaux Shields, to win marriage equality.

[Between Friday evening and Saturday afternoon](#), 283 same-sex couples in Wisconsin's two largest cities obtained marriage licenses — 146 in Milwaukee and 137 in Madison. Most of the couples got married on the spot by a judge, court commissioner or minister they brought along. Several supporters who didn't know any of them showed up and offered to be witnesses, if needed. They also gave the couples ivory roses and rainbow-colored daisies.

Couples in Milwaukee ranged in age from 23 to their early 80s, said Deputy County Clerk George Christenson. He estimated that more men than women obtained marriage licenses, and perhaps 10% had children.

Todd Halsey was worried the day might never come that his sister and her partner could be legally married like he and his wife, Randee. He was prepared to stand up to any protesters who attempted to spoil their day.

It turned out he didn't have to.

"We've been waiting for a long time; this is well worth it," said Jennifer Halsey, 39, as she and Shields, 36, stood in the courthouse hallway with dozens of other couples and waited nearly an hour for their number to be called to fill out the \$110 marriage license paperwork and pay an additional \$25 for the seven-day waiting period to be waived.

The couple had a ceremony at the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee in 2008 and planned to get married in Chicago in August. But this day was different: They were part of history in the making.

Jennifer Halsey said they decided to marry in Milwaukee on Saturday before anything could happen in federal court to change U.S. District Judge Barbara Crabb's ruling that the prohibition on same-sex vows in Wisconsin was unconstitutional.

Crabb's [88-page decision](#) was different from the others around the country because although she ruled Wisconsin's ban against same-sex marriage was unconstitutional, she did not issue an order instructing county and state officials on what to do about it.

That left county clerks and judges to decide for themselves.

An emergency motion by the state attorney general attempted to halt the scores of weddings that began Friday evening in Milwaukee and Madison. As of late Saturday, Crabb had taken no action on it.

"It was very demoralizing when the constitutional amendment passed, and we realized how many people in Wisconsin didn't support us," Jennifer Halsey said of the 2006 amendment outlawing same-sex marriage that Wisconsin voters overwhelmingly passed.

"We thought about leaving the state," she said. "When you see other states around you embracing marriage equality, it's very hard to have your home state not embrace it."

Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele, who said he tearfully and proudly served as a witness for 10 of the Milwaukee weddings, personally footed the bill for employee overtime at the courthouse.

"Whatever it is, it's easily worth it," Abele said of the tab. "You're watching people who've been together for decades, and finally they're getting the same recognition every other loving couple gets. It's humbling to be part of."

Milwaukee County judges have pretty much seen it all. But on Saturday, about a dozen of them turned their attention from the usual sad and violent circumstances to a procession of weddings marked by lingering hugs, complicated tears and what many said were long-overdue cheers.

Judge William Pocan noted the couples had little time to prepare, since Crabb had overturned Wisconsin's gay marriage ban less than 24 hours earlier.

"On one hand, you could say it was spur of the moment, but when you've been together 20 to 25 years, how spur of the moment is it?" said Pocan, who is used to dealing with felons. "I got a smile or a tear from some of them when I said, 'in sickness and in health.' People together that long have probably been there in sickness already. It was touching."

In Madison on Saturday afternoon, a violinist playing "The Wedding March" strolled from ceremony to ceremony on the lawn of the City-County Building.

In Milwaukee, several weddings also spilled outside, where couples soaked up the sun and posed beside the decorative fountain for pictures with family and friends.

Jennifer Larson and Nicole Arnott were at the movie "The Fault in Our Stars" with their three kids on Friday night when Larson's phone flashed the news of Crabb's ruling.

The Milwaukee couple, who have been together about 10 years, went to Vermont in 2004 for a civil union ceremony, filed for domestic partnership recognition in Milwaukee two years ago, and got matching "Always and Forever" tattoos on their necks. Still, as parents and homeowners, they were excited to make their commitment official in the eyes of the law.

When they got home from the movies, they laid out their wedding clothes — a black-and-white print

dress for Arnott and a dark gray polo shirt and black pants for Larson. They tossed and turned all night, constantly checking the clock to make sure they didn't oversleep.

They were the first couple to arrive at the Milwaukee County Courthouse at 6:45 a.m. Saturday.

The couple didn't know what to expect. They were relieved not to see an army of poster-waving protesters or a long line of people camped out overnight after PrideFest at the Summerfest grounds.

"We wanted to get here early. You never know what might happen Monday," Larson said.

Larson and Arnott exchanged vows with tears welling in their eyes, as a court commissioner reminded them that love and loyalty are the foundation of a family home.

Arnott kissed Larson's wedding ring before placing it on her finger.

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