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'It's a huge deal for us'

Same-sex union law takes effect

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Terry Isner, right, and his partner, Adam Linder, both of Rehoboth Beach, were joined in a civil ceremony at CAMP Rehoboth on Jan. 4. / SCOTT NATHAN/ DELAWARE COAST PRESS

Written by Scott Muska Staff Writer

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REHOBOTH BEACH -- Terry Isner and his partner Adam Linder say they've been together in the eyes of family, friends and God for 14 years, since the day they performed a backyard wedding ceremony.

At noon last Wednesday, they added the state of Delaware to their list of witnesses when they had a small civil union ceremony at CAMP Rehoboth, little more than a day after they acquired a civil union license from the state and only a few days after legislation went into effect allowing same-sex civil unions.

The ceremony was a precursor to a larger celebration they'll have at the end of the month at the same location. The couple -- who were both clad in jeans, blazers and bow ties -- wanted to make their union official before taking off on a cruise this month.

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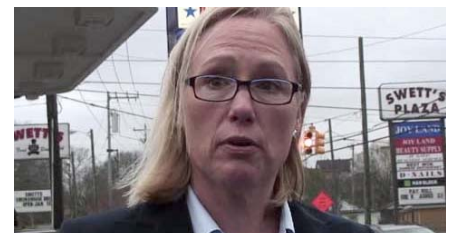


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Isner and Linder exchanged vows and rings, and then a kiss after Tom White, a retired Evangelical Lutheran Church in America minister, made their union official. Festivities were completed with a champagne toast in which guests drank from plastic cups, which Steve Elkins, executive director of CAMP Rehoboth, busted out from hiding shortly after the ceremony.

"It's a huge deal for us," said Linder. "We've lived in D.C., Virginia and now Delaware, and we're finally in a place where we can have our civil union recognized legally, so it's very, very exciting."

The civil union allows them the same rights and obligations of those who are married in Delaware. Isner and Linder are now allowed to make hospital visits, inherit property, jointly adopt children and live together in nursing homes, among hundreds of other rights and responsibilities that have been afforded to opposite gender spouses for decades.

The union does not, however, recognize them as technically married, and they do not have the more than 1,000 marriage-related rights and responsibilities established on the federal level.

"We've had 14 years to grow and live together, and we've always had the support of our family and friends, but to now be able to legally take care of each other in sickness and in health feels great," Isner said. "What we do in our bedroom is our business, and we should have every right others do. We weren't expecting this when we moved here, but we're so glad the state has given us this opportunity."

Milton Councilwoman Mary Hudson and her partner, Lynn Ekelund, had their ceremony on Wednesday as well, at the Sussex County Clerk of the Peace in Georgetown. It is significant legally, she said, because her partner can now share the benefits Hudson garners as a retired state employee who worked for Delaware for 33 years.

"It's a wonderful, emotional event for us," Hudson said shortly before the ceremony.

On Jan. 1, Delaware became the eighth state to allow civil unions or domestic partnerships for same-sex couples. Five other states and the District of Columbia allow gay marriage.

Now that Delaware has legalized same-sex civil unions, Salisbury Mayor Jim Ireton believes it may make it easier for Maryland to do the same.



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In July 2011, Gov. Martin O'Malley and Lt. Gov. Anthony G. Brown announced they would sponsor same-sex marriage legislation during this year's sessions.

"I think now that our neighbor has done it, and that our government is around it, it makes it easier for Maryland to do it," Ireton said.

The civil union legalization is a big step forward, and Jan. 1 was a very good day for Delaware, according to Douglas Marshall-Steele, creator of TowardEquality.org, an LGBT civil rights website he operates from his Milton home.

"But we're not there yet," he said. Marshall-Steele said the Defense of Marriage Act, a federal law enacted in 1996 that defines marriage as a legal union between a man and woman, would have to be overturned. There is legislation in Congress that would do that, so it is now basically a matter of lobbying for elected representatives to vote to overturn it, he said.

There have been a number of recent national polls that have found a majority of Americans are now in favor of same-sex marriage.

"It shouldn't be that civil rights are left up to a majority opinion, but as it happens most Americans are in favor of same-gender marriage on the federal level," Marshall-Steele said. "Now it's just a matter of our elected representatives catching up with what most other Americans already believe."

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