

Historical wedding in Amherst, Nova Scotia.

By: Gerard Veldhoven.

October 16, 2004, a day we shall remember forever, for this was the day I married Norman Carter. For thirty years we longed for the opportunity to publicly declare our love and commitment to each other. The fact the Nova Scotia Supreme Court ruled in favour of same-sex marriage, was in itself, a day to be remembered by the gay and lesbian community. The marriage law in Nova Scotia was changed on September 24, 2004 to legalize same-sex marriage. We are, of course, greatly appreciative of the three couples who went to court to challenge the marriage laws in Nova Scotia. It was indeed, a great day for gays and lesbians in this province, making it the seventh jurisdiction to change this particular law. Same-sex marriage was legalized by the Civil Marriage Act in Canada on July 20, 2005.

As soon as we heard the decision that the Nova Scotia Government was not planning to fight the issue, we wasted no time in making our way around the corner to see the lady who sells marriage licenses. As we entered her home, she wondered what took us so long. She had already been contacted by the Justice Department to give her permission to sell licenses to same-sex couples. She had all the necessary papers ready for us to fill out. Of course, she was aware that we had been waiting for many years and were not about to waste much time. Since both of us had been married previously, we had to get the proper divorce decrees in order to be able to get the license. This was accomplished very quickly. The excitement was in the air and we decided to proceed with our wedding plans, without delay. We are in our sixties and time was not to be wasted. It seemed many family members and friends already had ideas as to how we should implement these plans. The assistance we received was rather overwhelming.

We decided the date should be October 30th, but that was Halloween weekend. Then it seemed the 23rd would be just fine. We were informed the venue for the reception would not be available that day. Finally, we settled for October 16th and the fun of planning for our special day began in earnest. Everything had to be in place in three weeks. The suggestion was made that we should wait till spring, but that was out of the question. As I mentioned before, time was not on our side and the opportunity to finally be married after a thirty year wait, was not up for discussion.

We contacted the Justice of the Peace and the date we decided on was just fine. First, we had to decide where to have the ceremony. Our friends, Sandy and Doug Gallagher suggested we should have the wedding in their beautiful home, which was very large. A first it seemed ideal. However, with our guest list exceeding 100 people a large tent on the property made more sense and so the decision was made. Now we were able to make up a final guest list and we decided on 135 invitations. The tent was able to hold 150 people. However, we had to allow for space at the front for the wedding party and the Justice of the Peace, Dawn Estabrooks. It worked beautifully. Sandy, her son Doug and friend Lois Ann decided on decorating with fall colours. The end result was quite stunning. Who would ever think a tent could possibly look so attractive.

Now we had to ready the venue for the reception, which was held at Live Bait Theatre, in Sackville, New Brunswick. It was an ideal set-up, as a dinner theatre had just finished that week, therefore the tables were in place. Our dear friends Nelson Hubley and Ron Fielding, who were the ushers, also decided to help out with decorating Live Bait Theatre. We certainly appreciated the help putting in place the usual items one associates with weddings. We also decided on having lots of family photographs around the head table. There were balloons everywhere and the round tables were covered with white tablecloths.

We decided gifts were not a good idea as we already were bursting at the seams in our very large apartment. Norman thought a better idea would be to have a pot luck reception. Ann Speight took charge of contacting guests and organized the dishes of food and sweets in such a manner so there would be a great variety. The many dishes were excellent and plentiful.

There was the matter of music for this occasion. We asked Jenny Wood, who we had met through Live Bait Theatre's dinner theatres and who possesses a beautiful classically trained voice, to sing at the service and the reception. We chose the old Nat King Cole favourite, "When You Fall In Love", which she sang at the service. Another well known Cole song, "Unforgettable" and one of Etta James' songs were Jenny's choice for the reception.

At the service, the entrance music was Josh Grobin's recording of "You Raise Me Up". My son Chris' recording "The Look of Love" was played during the signing ceremony. James Baxter took responsibility for the music to be played at the appropriate times. Our friend Karen Horsefield made up a CD with songs related to the gay and lesbian community, which was to be played at the reception.

Finally, the day arrived and we were ready to stand in front of our family and friends, to declare our commitment to each other, in public and in front of television cameras. The time had arrived in Nova Scotia, for gays and lesbians to tell the world we are totally on equal footing with the rest of society. For us, that day was that kind of moment, to be savoured for all time. The weather did not cooperate at all and the morning of October 16th the wind and rain was disappointing, to say the least. However, this in no way had an effect on what was about to take place in this conservative town.

We began the day with checking on our formal wear for last minute adjustments. Everything was in order and we could relax for awhile. At noon we decided to dress in these antique tailcoats which actually were borrowed from the costume room at White Birches Retirement Home. Sandy and Doug Gallagher were kind enough to let us wear these elegant coats. Norman made the boutiniers in the colours associated with fall. I must say, we did look quite smashing. Norman's cousin Iris came in and took our picture. This actually was the beginning of a bit of nervousness, as we suddenly realized the next step was to get in the car and drive to 379 East Victoria Street.

We drove through downtown, finally observing a great many cars parked along the street and occupying most of the circular driveway. Now we realized the choice we made as far as the tent was concerned proved to be the proper venue. Next we saw the huge tent located on the back lawn and on top flew the pride flag with its six vibrant colours. Another pride flag was placed at the entrance. We concluded this was a perfect set-up. The wind and rain seemed not to matter, as I parked the car at a spot reserved for us. Even if the weather was not up to par, it could not dampen our spirits. We left the car and walked into Doug and Sandy's elegant and spacious home.

We had arrived early as an appointment was made for an interview with Alex Vass from CTV television and a reporter from the Amherst Daily News. The interviews went very well and I commend both reporters for their politeness. They certainly showed off their complete professionalism and understanding. Professional photographs were taken throughout the interview. Also, the reporter from the newspaper took a number of pictures. During the interviews and the photographers' cameras flashing, it became abundantly clear this is the day we have been anticipating for thirty years. Now, in our sixties, we were still able to take advantage of the changes in the marriage laws. We considered ourselves to be very lucky indeed, to not only live to see the change in the law, but to take full advantage of legalizing our relationship. As one

grows older, one also tends to see time as very short. So, here we are in the midst of history in the making. Our dreams were being full-filled.

As soon the interviews ended, we went to another room to have some wine and relax a bit before going to the tent. Family members and our closest friends were there to keep us company. Norman's daughter Laurel was there. His niece, Elaine, was there with her daughter, son and his very pregnant wife, whose baby was due on this day. She was determined to attend our special day. My brother Aart and his wife Norma were there, as was my brother John and his partner Marilyn. Norman's aunt Elly flew in from Montreal. Another aunt, Tilly was in attendance. She was not well, but decided she wanted to be there. Sandy and Doug, Pam and Lannie as well as, Effie Lynn and Stephen were all there to support us. Looking out the window we noticed some guests running towards the tent, so as not to be late. The glass of wine no doubt put us a little more at ease. However, a second helping would have calmed us a bit more. Time did not permit this second glass from touching our lips. Someone came, in announcing the time had come for everyone to take his or her seat. We made our way, the wind tossing our hair about and our coat tails flying up. Thinking back, it all seems so comical. Yet, in a strange sort of way, it all seemed surreal, as we were actually on our way to become a legally married same-sex couple. The first in Atlantic Canada to be so honoured in a very public way. As we approached the entrance, we could hear Josh Grobin's voice filling the air inside this adorned tent with its church-like windows.

We had an orderly way of entering the tent. First, our flower bearer, or rather the bearer of autumn coloured branches and leaves, Quentin Knock, went down the aisle. The floor was actually a carpet of fall leaves. It was quite beautiful. Then, the ring bearer, Trevor Gallant, with the wedding bands pinned to a very decorative pillow. Ron Fielding and Nelson Hubley, our ushers, followed. Gary Pfinder, Norman's witness was next. Norman walks in behind Gary. My witness, my oldest brother Aart, was next, followed by me. As I walked behind the wedding party, I couldn't help but notice all the smiley faces of the guests, some with cameras, in an attempt to record a bit of history. We made our way to the front of this tent where we would in a matter of about half an hour become spouses. As we came to the end of the aisle I looked into a face with a smile which seemed to have no end. This face belonged to Margaret Sagar. Margaret is a United Church of Canada minister. We asked her to perform the ceremony, but the United Church did not yet have all the proper forms in place. However, she did consent to read a poem during the ceremony. Finally, we stood there in a row. It seemed forever before Josh Grobin's voice was finally stilled.

Suddenly, it was apparent the camera lights were occupying the space in front of us, behind the Justice of the Peace. We now not only had 125 guests behind us, but also the public at large, who would witness this historic event on the evening news. We were aware CTV television would be there and the Amherst Daily News. Then we noticed another cameraman and a reporter from CBC television. I must say, this wedding caused a lot of fuss in the media. Rightly so, as this may indicate to the community at large gays and lesbians now have the legal right to marry. CTV and the Amherst Daily News requested permission to cover the wedding and we decided to go for it.

The ring bearer, Trevor, decided he would really prefer to be in another section of the room. He took the pillow with the rings attached, threw it on a chair and took off to sit with his parents. It was an amusing start to an otherwise serious situation. However, another funny thing happened, which I shall get to momentarily. As soon as the music came to an end, Margaret Sagar read the poem "Beginnings". Her smile was there while she was reading. Then Karen Valanne and Charlie Rhindress read a poem, written by my son Chris, called "When My Senses Begin To Fail Me". Chris indicated he thought Norman and I should read it to each other. However, Norman thought

it would be too emotional. Next up was Jenny Wood singing and accompanying herself on the piano with, "When I Fall In Love". It was lovely and very fitting indeed.

Justice of the Peace, Dawn Estabrooks, stood up and proceeded with the service. She elaborated on the change in the marriage law allowing gay and lesbian couples to be legally married. It sounded astonishing, especially with so many witnesses, to listen to these words we have longed to hear for so many years. This was the first same-sex marriage Dawn would preside over and she was delighted to do so. She has performed a number of marriage ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples. The ceremony was both moving and yet celebratory. The only glitch was the fact she had to pronounce us as "husband and wife", in order to make it legal. The Nova Scotia government neglected to change the wording. This was extremely disconcerting and totally unnecessary. As a matter of fact, we were interviewed on CTV the following week to respond to this bizarre incident. Nevertheless, it did not dampen our spirits and we became a legally recognized couple.

The strong winds and the gloomy weather did not deter the feeling of accomplishment. As we stood there listening to Dawn and all the others who shared in our special day, the poles holding the tent together were straining the tent. The noise was scary at times and one could imagine the whole thing coming down over our heads. A few chuckles could be heard as members of the wedding party and guests looked up as the wind showed its wrath! One peculiar point I would like to mention is the appearance of the sun the moment we were pronounced spouses by the Justice of the Peace. On occasion we hear of such stories.

As we walked out of the tent, Norman and some others looked across and noticed quite a number of cars lined up across the street with onlookers. I suppose many were curious how a gay couple would be dressed for a marriage ceremony! I am not certain if anyone could really see us from that distance. However, the picture on the front page of the Amherst Daily News was printed in full colour and the curiosity of many people was satisfied.

Once outside, we were happy to see the sun. Guests began to congratulate us with plenty of hugs and kisses to go around. It was phenomenal. TV and newspaper reporters were anxious to find out how we felt about the ceremony and the equal marriage rights we are now able to enjoy. That out of the way, we mingled with everyone. It was difficult to comprehend the full impact at that time. The reporters were questioning one of our eminent guests: Eldon Hay, a retired United Church Minister and a hard working and highly respected advocate for gay and lesbian rights. In 2006 he received the Order of Canada for his work in this area. Eldon said he was overjoyed at witnessing this union. It had been a long and hard road. I have worked alongside Eldon a number of times in efforts to attain equal rights. Elaine McLeod, Norman's niece was interviewed about how she reacted to the marriage. Everyone strolled on the lawns and then we had to make our way to Sackville, New Brunswick for the reception.

The reception was to begin at 4 o'clock PM at Live Bait Theatre. Guests arrived and began to mingle in the theatre. The place looked fabulous. The theatre is very spacious and in no time it seemed rather filled. The guests made their way to the tables. However, no one seemed to rush. Norman and I settled in at the head table. Also, at the table were Aart on my side, Gary on Norman's side and Ron and Nelson at either end of the table. The staging was slightly elevated from the floor. We were really on show. The chatter from all directions was rather delightful to hear, although I cannot recall ANY of the conversations.

Our good friend Terry Goodwin was the Master of Ceremony. He did a great job as the moderator and introduced the various speakers. First to go to the microphone was Gary. He talked about the many years before and how Norman's family and relatives always considered me as a family

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Dinner

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served*