

Meet the county's first same-sex married couple

Michelle and Cappi Lucas are first in line to take advantage of their right to wed

By Sergy El-Morshedy

Nix the long white dress, the tuxedo and the layer cake—the atrium at County Center is no place for a traditional marriage. But all the other elements for a successful wedding were there Tuesday morning (June 17): someone to officiate, a witness and \$17 to purchase a marriage license.

Oh yes, and the happy couple: Partners A and B, as they were dubbed on the license.

They're now known as Michelle and Cappi Lucas, and they are Butte County's first married same-sex couple. Congratulations, Mrs. and Mrs. Lucas. (Emily Post, where are you when we need you?)

The Chico newlyweds, who have been together for eight years, jumped at the opportunity to formally tie the knot and showed up at the county clerk-recorder's office early enough to be the first couple there.

"We feel honored to be the first same-sex couple to be wed in the county," said Michelle Lucas, adding that she'd been nervous and excited when she first arrived.

It was a scene repeated in county clerk's offices throughout the state, as hundreds of gay and lesbian couples took immediate advantage of the right to marry, thanks to a May 15 decision by the California Supreme Court. The court ruled that a voter-passed measure defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman was discriminatory and unconstitutional, making it possible for same-sex couples to be legally wed in California beginning on Tuesday.

At many offices, protesters also appeared, carrying signs opposed to same-sex marriage. That didn't happen Tuesday in Oroville.

Leibae McBride-Fisher, who specializes in civil and same-sex ceremonies, conducted a brief and somewhat informal but joyful ceremony for the Lucases in the garden-like atrium just a few feet from the clerk's office.



WE GATHER HERE TODAY ...

Michelle and Cappi Lucas wed in an informal ceremony in the County Center atrium Tuesday morning. The first same-sex marriage in Butte County attracted not only friends and family, but plenty of media attention as well.

PHOTO BY MEREDITH J. COOPER

McBride-Fisher was there to officiate because Butte County Clerk-Recorder Candace Grubbs recently made a controversial decision to stop conducting marriage ceremonies at her office, explaining that it was due to budget cuts. A similar decision by the Kern County clerk-recorder, in Bakersfield, has received far more notice, including an article in the New York Times, yet Butte County has received its share of condemnations.

Following Grubbs' announcement, two local outfits—the Chico Peace and Justice Center, and Lyon Books—stepped forward to offer their marrying services to same-sex couples.

Heather Lyon, of Lyon Books, said she felt inspired to act on the matter quickly after reading about Grubbs' decision. Within a day, she had received her ordination through the online Church of Universal Life and publicized her complimentary ceremony services using the store's weekly newsletter.

About the same time last week, CP&JC Director Sue Hilderbrand, along with other board members, decided that they should offer to perform free marriage ceremonies as well.

Hilderbrand saw some distinct problems with Grubbs' decision to cease conducting wedding ceremonies.

“If marriage is something that is institutionalized, it should be available through the institution,” she said. Ending the only public civil-ceremony service in the county also discriminates against couples, be they same-sex or not, who are not religious but want to get married. “The county is sloughing off [the service] on small nonprofits,” she said. “Local government is not fulfilling its responsibility.”

McBride-Fisher, a licensed minister since 2001, said she came to the clerk's office not only to conduct the Lucases' ceremony, but also hoping to give other couples the option of having a ceremony that morning.

As it turned out, the Lucases were the only couple who showed up to get married Tuesday morning. Similarly, there had been little inquiry to Lyon Books, and the only people to contact the Peace and Justice Center were a heterosexual couple referred to Hilderbrand by the clerk's office.

If Grubbs' decision was indeed budgetary in nature, Hilderbrand said, the timing of its announcement—just after the Supreme Court's ruling—was bad.

Grubbs could not agree more: “In retrospect, coupling this with the issue at hand with gay marriages, I can understand that people would be upset with me.”

Grubbs insists that her decision wasn't based on her personal views regarding same-sex couples and marriage. Rather, her staff was reduced some weeks ago, she said, and she knew that the office would not be able to take the time away from other responsibilities to perform wedding ceremonies on site.

Besides, she added, County Center really isn't a very good place to get married.

"These weddings performed in the atrium didn't lend themselves to a good atmosphere, with people constantly walking through," she said. "I envy other clerks around the state with adequate space for wedding ceremonies.

"If I had known that my decision would upset people, I would have waited until the beginning of the fiscal year, in July."