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Peace and Justice Offers Garden Weddings

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Sue Hilderbrand

In response to the Butte County Clerk-Recorder's decision to no longer conduct civil marriage ceremonies in the county offices, the Chico Peace and Justice Center is picking up the slack and offering its facility to those couples who wish to tie the knot.

The idea came in response to Clerk-Recorder Candace Grubbs' curiously timed announcement to stop marrying folks in the wake of the state Supreme Court's ruling that same-sex marriages are constitutionally protected. Grubbs said the move was a budget decision.

Sue Hilderbrand, director of the CP&JC, said that during a recent board meeting in which fundraising was discussed, someone jokingly threw out the idea of charging people to use the garden behind the center's offices for nuptials.

Hilderbrand said it dawned on her that it was a great idea, except that the services should be offered for free.

"We'd be happy to take donations," she said, "but this is something we should be doing, especially in light of the County Recorder's decision."

The peace center made public its offer a few days before the state sanctioning of same-sex marriages became official in California.

"I've waited for the hate mail and phone calls," Hilderbrand said. "So far we've gotten nothing but signs of support. Not a single negative response."

So far three couples, one male, one female and one of mixed gender have scheduled services, which will be conducted by ordained ministers-for free.

The male-female couple was actually referred to the peace center by none other than Candace Grubbs, Hilderbrand said. In the spirit of the center's promotion of equality and tolerance, it had no choice but to accept request, even though the original idea was to provide a place for same-sex couples to get hitched since the county was pulling out of the business.

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Grubbs said if she had to do it over again, she would have stopped conducting the marriage ceremonies on Aug.1. She was looking at the fiscal year she said, when she made her decision.

"I'm not on either side, (of the debate over same-sex marriage) I'm in the middle," Grubbs said. "I've disappointed both sides now."

She said conducting marriage ceremonies, which she has done since becoming clerk-recorder in 1987, was always a bit of a hassle and a distraction to other county employees.

One of the final straws for her, she said, was when she saw a couple about to get married standing in line in another office to see if their divorces from their respective spouses were final.

Hilderbrand said she is looking forward to the services at the peace center.

"On Monday a couple (male) came in and dropped off a bouquet of flowers with a card that said, 'To the Happy Couple,' " Hilderbrand said. The bouquet is still sitting in the center's office.

After making the announcement, the center's volunteers and staff went to work clearing and cleaning the little garden that sits behind the office, which sits on the west side of Broadway, between Fifth and Sixth streets.

"We worked four straight days, all day to get this ready," Hilderbrand said. The garden, which backs up to the Northstate Bank parking lot, includes planter boxes with tomato plants and herbs, various bushes, ferns and flowers and a few odd sculptures, including a large wood-and-iron sundial. The garden is a surprisingly shady oasis in the otherwise cement landscape that makes up the downtown.

One of those offering to conduct the services is Susan Tchudi, an ordained minister with the Universal Life Church.

"I will be honored to perform ceremonies that allow full equality and justice for people committed to marriage." Tchudi said in the CP&JC press release.

Her church, the release said, "acknowledges all religions and validates all experiences equally."

Also offering his services is Pastor David Moss of Chico's Trinity United Methodist Church. Little surprise. Moss is a socially active minister who's lent his support to such causes as the

local peace movement as well as efforts by recently unionized Enloe Medical Center service employees who are in the midst of contract negotiations with the hospital's administration.

"The Bible tells me that what matters to God is the depth of love and devotion expressed in a married couple's relationship, not the gender of those involved," Moss was quoted in the press release. "I welcome you to talk with me, to discuss your idea of marriage and to plan something meaningful and sacred, something Holy. There is no fee for my service."

Reservations for wedding services can be made by calling (530) 893-9078. The center is located at 526 Broadway.

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