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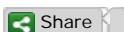
COLUMN ONE

Gay weddings are her niche

Aside from finding the perfect dress and venue, wedding planner Bernadette Coveney Smith makes sure all vendors involved are gay-friendly. And she is likely to see more business with New York joining the market.



Bernadette Coveney Smith specializes in planning gay weddings. "There's a different type of weight to a legal gay marriage ceremony," she said. "The energy is different because there's this feeling of triumph, this feeling that finally, we can be married." (Carolyn Cole, Los Angeles Times / July 21, 2011)



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New York City to hold a lottery for first day of gay weddings

By Tina Susman, Los Angeles Times
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Reporting from New York— As a wedding planner, Bernadette Coveney Smith does a bit of everything for her clients.

She tracks down vegan wedding cakes. She hunts for venues that welcome flower-bearing dogs. She helps body-conscious



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brides find the perfect dress — and sometimes even the perfect tux.

Smith's specialty is same-sex marriages, a business that can be as complicated as love itself as a wedding day draws near.

"Anyone can plan a party. What I'm doing is completely different," said Smith, who opened the country's first gay-focused wedding planning business, It's About Time, in Boston in 2004 after Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. When New York last month became the sixth and most populous state to do the same, Smith launched plans to move the business here. She now calls her company 14 Stories, for the 14 original plaintiffs in the groundbreaking Massachusetts lawsuit.

In many ways, Smith, 34, sounds like any other wedding planner as she recites some of the dos and don'ts of successful ceremonies: Don't make guests stand in long lines for the bathroom or the food; do choose uplifting music; don't put guests to sleep with lengthy, preachy nuptials. She speaks from experience, as a former events planner for a Boston nonprofit. One of the weddings she has planned since then was her own, to Jennifer Coveney, in 2009.

But Smith also has things to worry about that don't faze your typical wedding planner, such as screening florists, caterers, limousine services and venues to ensure they are gay-friendly. Otherwise, clients would have to do it themselves and be forced effectively to "come out" each time they approach a potential vendor, Smith said.

That's one reason Claire DeMarco and her then-fiancee, Meg, sought out Smith to help plan their July 2010 wedding in Boston, which included seven bridesmaids, three male attendants, and one flower dog — their Boston terrier, Lexington. There were 75 guests and that vegan wedding cake, which Smith helped find. Smith also guided them through their decision to switch from a church wedding to a pet-friendly neutral venue after the couple — both Catholics — concluded that finding a gay-friendly church would be a challenge. They married at the Fairmont Battery Wharf Hotel in Boston.

"One of my goals ... was to avoid vendors for whom a same-sex wedding would be a first — some sort of novelty, or worse, something offensive," Claire De Marco said. "I specifically searched for a wedding planner who was explicitly inclusive of same-sex couples and could help preserve the fairy tale ... keeping any potential bigotry at bay."

Smith helps her clients find the right celebrant, or officiant, to perform the ceremony. She helps brides who were once grooms, and grooms who were once brides, find the right dress or the perfectly fitted tux.

In short, she orchestrates an event that to Smith and her clients is more than a wedding.

"There's a different type of weight to a legal gay marriage ceremony," Smith said. "The energy is different because there's this feeling of triumph, this feeling that finally, we can be married."

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With the planning comes a recognition that some guests might be offended if the ceremony is too over-the-top. After all, it's one thing to place a ring on your beloved's finger before scores of friends and relatives, and quite another to put a leash on his neck, as two of Smith's male clients wanted to do.

"My clients can tell me that, and I'm not going to flinch," Smith said. "Can you imagine having that kind of a conversation with a straight wedding planner?" Heeding the couple's concerns about sharing their fetish with those who might find it disturbing, she organized a private collaring ceremony.

"It was smaller, but it was for them," Smith said.

Even ordinary tasks, such as finding the right dress, might carry special challenges. A transgender bride who was one of Smith's clients previously had lived as a man, complete with a beard and a wife. With her broad shoulders and tall stature, the would-be bride was nervous about dress shopping until Smith went with her. Together, they chose an ivory, strapless A-line gown with beaded detail and a sweetheart neckline.

"It was amazing, seeing her become the bride she always wanted to be," Smith said. "I felt like I was giving her a gift."

The woman was marrying another woman (who had previously been married to a man), underscoring another complication that Smith helped resolve: finding a tux to fit and flatter a female form. In this case, it was a custom-made black tux with an ivory bow tie, a red vest, and a white rose tucked into the lapel.

More than 1,000 same-sex couples lined up at city halls across Massachusetts the first day they could legally marry seven years ago. In California, 18,000 gay and lesbian couples wed during the six months that same-sex marriage was legal there, between May and November 2008. The passage of Proposition 8 ended legal same-sex marriage in the state but did not affect the validity of those that had already taken place. New York, which has an estimated 42,600 same-sex couples, is expected to send thousands to the altar beginning Sunday.

At least one public servant, the clerk in the upstate town of Barker, resigned rather than sign same-sex wedding licenses, a reminder that for all the celebratory comments that flew across websites such as gayweddings.com and theknot.com after New York's approval of same-sex marriage, it remains a divisive issue. The National Organization for Marriage, which opposes same-sex marriage, has vowed to protest outside city offices in Manhattan, Buffalo, Rochester and the state capital, Albany, when weddings begin.

But many cities are making special efforts to accommodate gay couples. Niagara Falls is hosting a mass same-sex wedding ceremony Monday near the brink of the famous waterfall. New York City is among a handful of municipalities that will open city offices Sunday for couples wanting to marry right away.

But it will be months before the carefully managed, high-end weddings that Smith specializes in begin in New York.

Generally, she likes to have six months to plan an event, which is not unusual for wedding planners of any ilk, said Kathryn Hamm of gayweddings.com, an online boutique and resource for same-sex couples searching for vendors, planners and other advice. That helps explain the rush of business that gayweddings.com saw in California in 2008, when couples wanting big weddings knew they needed to hurry because of efforts to get Proposition 8 on the ballot, she said.

"Couples were recognizing that the window might close, so they were without a doubt saying, 'Let's hurry up before this gets overturned or challenged,'" Hamm said.

Although 14 Stories offers less lavish services, such as an "elopement package," Smith's ideal clients are couples with a healthy budget and attention to detail, from the song they choose for the procession down the aisle — one pair of grooms chose the dance hit "Finally" — to the number of

aisles in their ceremony. Lesbians often opt for two aisles, with the brides meeting at the altar.

Earlier this month, Smith was in New York to meet with potential vendors, financial planners and others who could help spread the word about her business here. They included Tulis McCall, a celebrant who has been performing weddings since 2004.

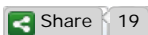
For Smith, the celebrant is key to making guests cry. "It's very important for me," said Smith, who wants spectators to be as carried away by emotion as she often is at weddings. "It's very powerful to be in the back of a room and hear a couple pronounced legally married."

McCall agreed. "That's the nut of the ceremony," said McCall, explaining that her goal is to "touch the gooey center" of listeners.

"My job is to get to that," McCall said. "To have it open like a flower, and have the guests all go, 'Oooooooooo.'"

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