



Welcome Bernadette to America's #1 Gay and Lesbian Travel Magazine Premium Service

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ITS ABOUT TIME WEDDINGS

Bernadette Smith makes getting married fun

by Andrew Mersmann
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If you've ever played a part in a big wedding or commitment ceremony—Best Man, Bridesmaid, musician, ring bearer when you were four years old—you know that the people around you are never themselves. The union of two lives can bring out the freak in people. Nerves, planning details, family dynamics, out of control budgets, self-image issues, and more can crush even the most stalwart of couples. The days leading up to the big event can be the undoing of many. If you are lucky, you'll only ever plan such a day for yourself once in a lifetime, and thus it is uncharted territory. Like a vacation to an unknown destination, you could navigate the peaks and valleys on your own, but if you have a guide, the journey will most assuredly go more smoothly.

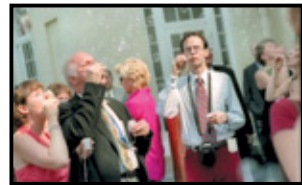
With a job description requiring all the skills of a stage manager, coach, therapist, bargain hunter, advisor, and cheerleader, wedding planner Bernadette Smith, the president of **It's About Time Weddings** (<http://www.itsabouttimeweddings.com>) is the best advocate and friend of same-sex Massachusetts couples looking to tie the knot. On May 17, 2004, Massachusetts became the first (and still only) state in the union to permit gay marriage. When the court decision came down in November of 2003, Smith was working at a non-profit corporation near the capitol and was immersed in the battle. "In that six month period [before the law took effect] there was a lot of excitement at the State House in Massachusetts on both sides of the fence, for and against gay marriage," she recalls. "I was there a lot. I was able to go to a lot of the rallies. It was very inspiring: singing, being with all those people—it just felt really beautiful. Although there was a lot of opposition, there was a lot of strength as well, and I felt it was a beautiful thing—absolutely inspiring."

Around this same time, Bernadette attended a commitment ceremony in South Carolina where the local DJ hired for the event made derogatory comments to the guests and partners. With this in mind, she realized that it would be important to help gay couples navigate an historically straight industry. The spark of an idea and her research showed that of all the wedding and event planners in Massachusetts, none of them directly served same-sex couples. "It was a market they were just ignoring, even for civil unions and commitment ceremonies, there was really nothing there," she was surprised to learn. Here was an opening, a way to make a difference for her community, so Smith formed the first gay-owned, full service, same-sex wedding and event planning service in Massachusetts with business partner, Lisette Garcia.

In addition to the practicalities of planning, Smith and Garcia present seminars in conjunction with the folks at national website <http://www.gayweddings.com>, to shed light on the terrain for couples just starting down the road of planning their affair. "Our goal is to reach out to couples that are at the very beginning of the process and let them know that gay weddings can be anything they want," says Smith. "They're very untraditional if you let them be. They don't have to follow the standard that was in your mind when you were a kid, or all the other weddings you've been to. This is really your time to make this personal and unique." At the well-attended workshops, couples also work through aligning their vision of what the day should be, so everyone is on the same page with expectations. Nuts and bolts items like timeline, budget, and parental involvement stymie many overwhelmed couples, and the seminars are there to allay their fears.

The historically straight wedding industry is a minefield for all couples, but gay and lesbian betrothed face some additional challenges. "The first and probably most obvious thing is that a lot of couples have to come out," says Smith. "They have to come out to everybody whether it's their family members that they're considering inviting, or the florist they call. We come out on behalf of our clients with vendors, but it's still something that they have to do with their family."

The prospect for some proves too much. "We've heard from several couples that they aren't inviting their parents to their wedding. They're just afraid of what the reaction will be and they don't want



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anyone to be there that's not going to celebrate with them and share their joy."

After leaping the hurdle of coming out, if indeed it is a hurdle, the details begin to come up, and the array of choices can be staggering. Smith finds that choosing from the hundreds of vendors for photography, flowers, cakes, attire, invitations, caterers, and more, is the most overwhelming part of planning, and where she excels in vetting and narrowing down the alternatives. The process can be grueling and is not one to be rushed. In a perfect world, Smith says, clients would come to them six months to a year in advance of the proposed ceremony. Circumstances have had Bernadette and Lisette create organizational miracles with less time, like their very first clients, "They called us the weekend before and within that week we hired a ceremonial pianist, photographer, floral designer, made punch, and had the cake made that we served ourselves. The ceremony was at the Unitarian Church and the reception was in the church hall. It was perfect, but that's not ideal."

Most gay couples, in Smith's experience, opt out of some of the frippery and finery of straight couples. "The major [difference] is the ceremony—that's the big one," she says. "The attendants, or lack thereof. We don't see much of the feeding of the cake to each other after the cake cutting. We don't see much throwing of the rice, or throwing of bouquets or garters—all that stuff is scrapped usually. A lot of our clients write their own vows. Things like that which are very personal come up, [rather than] the silly traditional things."

Silly, however, is not entirely out of the question, and there are certainly odd requests. Smith enjoys telling me, "We've transported people to the reception in a vintage trolley. That was fun. We've had two guys have their cat and dog as the ring bearers, and their cake toppers were bears because they were leather bears. We had a couple that wanted cake toppers to be replicas of themselves in their own living room, so we had someone custom make a pile of books, cats that looked like their cats, figurines that looked like them, a TV stand, couch—all of that went on their cake. People really think out of the box and they take it as a time to express themselves."

"Our first wave of clients were couples who were older. Many already had kids, owned a house together, were in their late 30's and 40's, had been together for ten or more years, and they were willing to think more about the non-traditional because they never thought they would see a day when gay marriage would be legal. These couples were really easy to work with because they made decisions very quickly. They knew how their partner thought and how the other person made decisions—so it was a very smooth process. Now we're seeing clients who are at the age of [the majority of] straight brides and grooms. [Many are] in their 20's and more concerned with what input the parents will have, and how much money they have to spend."

Regardless of the age or personality of the couple, Smith sees a lovely phenomenon that occurs among guests. "Some people will invite guests to their wedding and they're not sure of how they will react. There are usually a few of those on every guest list. When a couple stands up in front of the room and you hear the words 'I now pronounce you legally married' (even if they've been together for 10 or more years) it really validates that relationship in the eyes of their friends and family. It adds a level of weight and seriousness. Actually having the marriage ceremony has a ripple effect on how people perceive these relationships."

Smith has a girlfriend but has not gotten married...yet. The lessons she learns every day working intimately with couples as they prepare for the most significant event of their lives inform her own opinions of the perfect wedding. "I really like the idea of a wedding at night. I'd like something that is more casual like a cocktail reception with heavy passed hors d'oeuvres or food stations as opposed to something formal and sit-down. I would want a wedding at a venue that had an amazing view where the actual place itself is spectacular. I think I would choose a DJ over a band. I would want the ceremony in the same space as the reception. I also have really come to appreciate floral design. I'd want some really cool flowers. I would want something very modern and contemporary, not really traditional."

The most important lesson learned, perhaps, is what a generous gift a same-sex couple gives to the world—not just to their immediate family and attending guests, but to the whole world—when they get married.

"To me," Smith says, "every wedding is an historical moment. Even though our clients don't get Federal marriage rights, it's still a huge deal to have those rights in the state [where they live]. It feels like we're actually helping people create history. Every wedding is not just personal, it's political."



