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THE **SEX & ROMANCE** ISSUE

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Legally in Love

Same-sex couples create
their own traditions.

By Fiona Dawson
Photos by Kelly Guenther Studio

It's hard to believe that 2013 marks the 10-year anniversary of the first U.S. State to legalize same-sex marriage. In that same year, Bernadette Coveney Smith launched 14 Stories, the first company in the U.S. specializing in planning legal same-sex weddings. "Same-sex couples had been having commitment ceremonies for years," she says, "but when the law changed we started seeing amazing, very powerful and moving legal marriages. It was very profound to be a part of history."

Coveney Smith, who lives in New York City with her wife Jen and their young son, Patrick, calls herself an activist, as reflected in the name 14 Stories—coined from the 14th Amendment, which has been used as the basis for major civil rights victories throughout history. Furthermore, it represents the 14 individuals who were plaintiffs in that very first case in Massachusetts, which made marriage equality a reality in that state.

As someone who has worked with hundreds of LGBT couples Coveney Smith has multiple stories to tell, many from couples who never thought they would see their wedding day. She walks them through the process with thoughtful guidance on current trends, traditions and ways to express themselves. "Planning a wedding can be a pretty vulnerable experience, and having someone who is relatable establishes a solid foundation of trust," she says.

And not every wedding has to be wildly expensive, Coveney Smith explains. She plans weddings all over the U.S. and also offers affordable elopement packages, which have proven to be very popular and great value. "I start with a blank sheet of paper," she says, "and ask a couple, 'What kind of wedding do you want to have?'"

The passion Coveney Smith has for her business is palpable. "One of the many things that I love is the spirit of joy and triumph present at our weddings. There's something mighty and powerful about the minority celebrating equal rights and I feel that all of our weddings make history and change the world."

But what else makes same-sex weddings so different? In Coveney Smith's experience there are several nuances. For



example, fewer couples choose a place of worship and the wedding parties are much smaller. She usually plans for the formal photos to happen before the ceremony and to avoid the question of, "Who is walking down the aisle last?" she creates two aisles with each partner processing simultaneously. Essentially, 14 Stories honors historic traditions important to the couple and modifies the usual gender roles that define straight weddings. "There are no rules" she says, "and hopefully no expectations from friends and family, so I encourage our couples to be as creative as they like."

Given that the institution of marriage has been based on very gendered functions, it is interesting to see how same-sex couples are changing the mold of what a wedding denotes. Coveney Smith believes that this timeless rite of passage is an opportunity to symbolize equality. "Even if Aunt Bess and Aunt Susan have been living together for 20 years and are beloved by their family, does anyone really know their anniversary?" she says. "Well, after their wedding, people will remember. Equal weddings actually create a

profound ripple effect, which I believe fundamentally changes society."

At print time, 15 U.S. states plus Washington, D.C. have full, legal, marriage equality. According to the national organization Freedom to Marry, "Over 35 percent of the U.S. population lives in a state that either has the freedom to marry or honors out-of-state marriages of same-sex couples."

Coveney Smith attests this equality momentum to the participation of straight ally wedding guests. It is a fact that the rights of a minority were never won without the support of the majority. As Coveney Smith points out, over the past decade more and more straight people have celebrated the union of their friends and family members and, "the sky hasn't fallen." In fact, quite the opposite happens. They are so moved by the unconditional love that has survived in the face of stigma and discrimination, often 14 Stories weddings are even more powerful. The guests go back to their workplace and share, "I went to the best wedding last weekend..." and Coveney Smith concludes, "That is how we change society." (14stories.com) ■