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Thousands rally in support of same-sex marriage

Proposition 8 backlash propels gay rights agenda onto national stage

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Editor

Thousands of demonstrators from throughout the Midwest descended upon Federal Plaza Saturday in opposition to California's recent same-sex marriage ban.

Proposition 8, a California ballot initiative, amended that state's constitution, restricting the definition of marriage to "a union between a man and a woman." The referendum passed Nov. 4 by less than five points, overriding a previous California Supreme Court decision that found marriage to be a "fundamental right" for all couples. Proposition 8 is already the subject of four lawsuits, and will be weighed by the California Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, the backlash to the Proposition 8 vote is galvanizing the gay rights movement across the country. Demonstrations were held simultaneously at 12:30 p.m. Saturday in more than 100 U.S. cities. In Chicago, participation far exceeded expectations.

"We were completely blown away by how many people showed up," said Missy Lorenzen, an event organizer who responded to the national call made by Join the Impact, an Internet-based marriage rights organization established in Proposition 8's wake.



JESSICA PUPOVAC/Staff

More than 2,000 demonstrators rallied in Federal Plaza on Saturday in conjunction with a National Day of Action against Prop 8. After the permitted rally, participants spontaneously took to the streets, temporarily shutting down traffic along Michigan Ave.



A lesbian couple, married in California prior to the passage of Proposition 8, addresses the crowd at Federal Plaza.

The Office of Emergency Management and Communications estimated that more than 2,000 demonstrators attended; Lorenzen and other attendees said it was closer to 4,000.

Demonstrators waved signs reading "Stop the H8," "Demand equal marriage now" and "I'm not a second class citizen."

"If it stands as it is in California, then we probably have a smaller chance than having it passed here," Lorenzen explained. "But if we get it overturned in California, we can look towards them as a leader, an example."

Bob Schwartz, an Edgewater resident and veteran member of the Gay Liberation Network, said that although the final decision rests with the California courts, the kind of public pressure exerted Saturday could affect those rulings.

"When people join with others in a demand for justice in an unjust society, things happen," he said at the rally. "This is the history of struggle in the United States. This is what advanced the struggle for women, for African-Americans, for workers, for many others."

State Rep. Greg Harris (13th) is hoping the demonstrations will help galvanize support in Illinois for the Civil Unions Act, which he introduced in the House of Representatives last year. House Bill 1826 would extend state-level legal protections and responsibilities of marriage to same-sex couples in Illinois. According to Harris, it would provide the same rights, responsibilities and obligations of marriage at the state level, but would fall short of being called "marriage." It also would not be recognized by the federal government.

"It's great that you are here today," Harris told the crowd, "but Monday, get on the phone, call my colleagues in Springfield - the people who have to vote for marriage equality in Illinois - and tell them that you demand that they vote 'yes.'"

After the demonstrations, Harris said that he and the bill's co-sponsors, which include Reps. John Fritchey (11th), Sara Feigenholtz (12th) and Harry Osterman (14th), are "very close" to having enough support to pass the bill in the House. He said they are waiting until they reach critical mass before sending the bill to the floor for a vote.

If the bill passes both chambers, Illinois would be the ninth state in the country granting legal civil unions and domestic partnerships for same sex couples. It would be the first in the Midwest.

However, to some demonstrators, that isn't enough.

"Civil unions is a good place to begin, but not to end," said Bob Zuley of Lake View, who was one of the first to arrive at Saturday's rally. "That marriage equality, and equal military service and adoption will be achieved is inevitable. But it is a struggle."

Massachusetts and Connecticut, which began same-sex weddings last week, are the only two states that currently allow gay marriage.

Zuley said he was disappointed to not see more elected officials at Saturday's demonstration; but he was encouraged to see so many straight allies joining the movement.

Some gay and lesbian couples at the rally, who were married in California, echoed Zuley's sentiment, emphasizing the importance of marriage.

A similar demonstration is planned for Saturday, Nov. 22 outside Century Theatre in Evanston. A Cinemark executive donated \$10,000 to an advocacy group that worked towards the measure's approval.

Mark Joslyn, a Los Angeles deejay who flew to Chicago with his husband and father to attend Saturday's demonstration, said he married his partner of 10 years on July 10, and would have done it earlier if he could have.

"My mother wanted to see us get married, but she passed away on June 3... We're here in her honor," he said. "When they tell you this will hurt innocent families, you should tell them how they hurt our innocent families."

Following a permitted two-hour rally, the crowd took to the streets, temporarily bringing Michigan Avenue traffic to a halt in an impromptu, un-permitted march. A newly married couple climbed out of a stretched limo, in a bridal gown and tuxedo, and briefly joined the demonstration, taking pictures with the crowd.

No arrests were made, but Andy Thayer of the Gay Liberation Network was issued a ticket for parading without a permit. The ticket could carry a fine of up to \$1,000 and 10 days in jail. He will appear before a judge on Feb. 4.

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