

25 March, 2012

Dear Committee Secretary, Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee

Thank you for providing us with an opportunity to contribute a submission to the Inquiry in to the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010.

We write in support of the proposal to remove all discriminatory references from the *Marriage Act 1961* to allow all people, regardless of sex, sexuality and gender identity, the opportunity to marry.

We are a same sex couple who live in Brisbane. We have been together for eight years, and have a son who is 20 months old. We are both allied health professionals working in the community and health sectors. We own a house in a suburban area of Brisbane, and try to be good neighbours and contributors to our communities. We love each other deeply, and our son has brought a new dimension to our relationship that we could not have imagined previously. **Our aspirations are like any couple – to journey through life together and see our children grow up to be happy, healthy and secure adults.**

We have both struggled immensely as young people coming to terms with our sexuality. As teenagers, we had very few role models. Our school friends could aspire to going to university, having a career, meeting a handsome man, marrying him and having beautiful children(!). Our future in comparison seemed bleak and something to fear – negative labels and stereotypes, being bullied or ostracised by friends, being disowned by parents. These were the things we were exposed to... And if we survived that? – maybe going to university and having a career. **Imagining a wedding or children did not feature at all in our hopes and aspirations for our future.**

Some of the things we had feared did transpire. Coming out as lesbians meant losing friends, and periods of time when we struggled immensely with our mental health and self-confidence. One of our parents barely spoke to us or made eye contact for six years after we started our relationship. This period of time was incredibly painful for the extended family.

However we have also found that the overwhelming majority of our friends, family and colleagues support us as a couple and now as parents. We have a deep love and respect for each other which is evident for those who get to know us. And people in the wider community from all walks of life rarely bat an eyelid when they realise that we are two mums with a son - whether it be doctors treating our son, tradespeople working on our house, or a shop assistant helping us with a purchase. We feel a high level of support in the community.

Despite the general support we experience, and despite the recent changes to legislation to provide legal recognition of our relationship in a range of areas, **we still feel like second-class citizens, whose relationship and sexual orientation is lesser than other Australians.**

Marriage is something that many heterosexual adults in Australia take for granted. Young adults, and couples in new relationships can look forward to formally committing to marriage with another person and creating a family and a life together. This is something that young lesbian and gay Australians can not aspire to. **We believe that if we had lesbian and gay role models, committing to a life together in marriage, it would have made a difference**

to the challenges we experienced as young people. Lesbian and gay teenagers are four times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to commit suicide. We believe that excluding same-sex attracted young people from the hopes and aspirations of their peers is a major contributor to this shocking statistic. When leaders of our country make laws that tell young people that same-sex relationships are inferior, it not only effects same-sex attracted young people, but also their heterosexual peers. When our leaders confer a different status on some members of the community, it encourages discrimination, harassment and bullying in our community. **Changing this legislation sends a clear message to all young Australians that their leaders believe that all people are equal and worthy of the institution of marriage.**

Marriage is a symbolic institution – its meaning and symbolism is different for every Australian, depending on their culture, family history, personal philosophy, and life experiences. We understand that for some people, change to the definition of marriage is a challenging prospect. However, for us personally, marriage is a commitment to a life together. The ceremony itself is a public declaration of love and commitment between two people, with friends and family sharing in the event. This is something we long to be able to experience. **It is devastating for us that current legislation denies us this opportunity that we long for so much.**

We believe that part of the challenge for our family in accepting our relationship has been that we have been unable to make this formal declaration of our commitment together. In the time we have been in a relationship, we have witnessed many family members get married, including siblings younger than us. **Although we celebrate these days with our family, and rejoice in their love and commitment, wedding days are very painful for us.**

The photo below is a photo of us at a sibling's weddings in late 2011. Despite our smiles for the camera, this day was especially challenging for us, perhaps because it was the first wedding we had attended as a family since having our son.



While marriage is currently only allowed between a man and a woman, it gives legitimacy to these partnerships and denies it to same sex partnerships. The exclusion of same sex couples from a major social institution creates a second-class citizenship for that group. **For us, this is a painful and humiliating experience.**

In March 2012, we entered in to a Civil Partnership in Queensland. We did this because we wanted our son to know when he is old enough to understand, that we did everything we could to gain legal protection and recognition for him and our relationship. When we informed friends, family and colleagues that we had entered in to a Civil Partnership, we had some people congratulate us, others asked what it meant, and some said 'why can't you get married?'. Not a single person gave us a card, a hug, a gift, or a congratulatory phone call.

It has been our lived experience that Civil Unions do not have the status, symbolism or recognition of a marriage. We still feel like second-rate citizens with a token second-rate legal recognition of our partnership.

The reason we have written in to this Inquiry is for our son. He is only 20 months old. It is our great hope that by the time he is old enough to understand, he will be living in a country where the love within his family is not treated as less than the love within another child's family.

We would like the opportunity to speak to any Senator who would meet with our family, or appear before the Inquiry. We would be very happy for this submission to be on the public record, including with our photo.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission,

Briannon Stevens and Julie Parry