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Gay Marriage | Traveling From Missouri to Staten Island for Big Day

By [SYDNEY EMBER](#)

For their first date, Steve Mulrooney and Jerome Van Wert rode the Staten Island ferry under the moonlight. They were so enamored with each other that night, under the stars and wrapped in a blanket, they didn't realize they had docked until the boat's captain told them they had to leave.

Twenty-nine years later, they were left again with a sense of disbelief.

Wearing leis and ringing gold wedding bells, Mr. Mulrooney, 62, and Mr. Van Wert, 53, were one of nearly 40 couples standing outside Borough Hall on Staten Island on Sunday. They said they were excited, having waited so long. People fanned themselves in the heat. Volunteers passed out water bottles.

"We've been engaged kind of forever," Mr. Van Wert, 53, said. "We've always thought we were married."

The two woke up at 5 a.m. after flying to New York from Kansas City, Mo., intent on being one of the first gay couples to get a marriage license in the city.

Mr. Mulrooney and Mr. Van Wert met in the early 1980s at a bar in Greenwich Village — "it was some enchanted evening," Mr. Van Wert said — during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They believe that meeting each other saved their lives.

Though the bar is now gone, they still try to visit the site on their anniversary.

The couple spend most of their time now with their five dogs in Kansas City, where Mr. Van Wert works as a government contractor. Mr. Mulrooney is retired.

But when the two heard the news on June 24 that same-sex marriage legislation had passed in New York, they immediately made plans to return to the place they first fell in love.

"It was kind of an amazing circle of life," said Mr. Van Wert, who added that his great-grandfather laid the cornerstone at Borough Hall on Staten Island more than 100 years ago. Now, he said, "we're laying a different cornerstone."

Passing cars honked in support as couples stood outside — a temporary computer glitch delayed the marriage proceedings until about 10 a.m. — before being ushered into the building by staff members clad in orange baseball hats. Cupcakes with white frosting and plastic flutes of Champagne sat on a table inside.