

LoveWins, but it hasn't always. On Friday, June 26, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that states may not discriminate by precluding two consenting adults from marrying. The ruling on "gay marriage," or just marriage as we now call it in the United States, is not about granting special rights to sexual minorities. It goes to the heart of the American, and universal, value of ensuring equal rights for all. As it has in other pivotal moments of America's evolution, the Supreme Court has looked beyond human bias to demand equality – even when officials have demurred.

"John, we won. We helped bring marriage equality to the United States. Hard to believe we did it. And I wish you were here to celebrate with me." These are the words Jim Obergefell would say to his late spouse of 21 years, had he been alive to witness last month's Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage throughout the United States. For Jim Obergefell and John Arthur, and millions of other same-sex American couples, the Supreme Court ruling is about more than wedding bells and exchanging vows. It's about being allowed the right to family, and all

Love is Love – Same-sex couples given right to marry in the US

the benefits, securities, and responsibilities – in life and in death – that come with that designation.

Jim Obergefell and John Arthur began their relationship in their hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio in 1993. The two had met twice before, but it wasn't until their third meeting that John and Jim felt a connection. "It was love at third sight," said Jim, "and then I never left." Jim and John were inseparable for the next 20 years. The couple shared similar tastes for local art, for traveling and for remodeling old houses.

Throughout their decades-long relationship, John and Jim talked about getting married, but the native Ohioans wanted to marry in their home state, one of the 13 states that, before last week's Supreme Court ruling, did not permit same-sex marriages. But by 2013, two major factors – one very sweet and one very bitter – had changed their lives. The first was a Supreme Court ruling that forced

SEXUAL MINORITY FORUM



with Amb. Virginia Palmer – Guest writer

the Federal Government to recognize same-sex marriages performed in states where they were legal, and the second was Arthur's rapidly declining health. In 2011, Arthur was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a terminal neurodegenerative disease with no known cure. By that summer Arthur was using a cane, then a walker, and then a wheelchair. By 2013, ALS had rendered him completely confined to a bed, with Jim as his full-time caretaker.

The couple determined that with John's condition, he would not survive to see their marriage legalized in Ohio, and so resolved to marry elsewhere before John

passed. To fulfill that promise, Jim and John traveled from Ohio to Maryland, where same-sex marriage was legal, and were wed inside a privately chartered medical plane on the tarmac of the Baltimore airport.

When the couple returned to Ohio, they received news that the state would not legally recognize their marriage. Ohio law would not allow Jim to be listed as the surviving spouse on John's impending death certificate. In the eyes of Ohio law, John would die alone. There would be no acknowledgement that they were ever married, or that he ever shared his life with anyone else. To Ohio, the two were strangers, in

life and in death. Jim would not be permitted to be buried next to his partner of 21 years, for their burial plot was for "family only." It was a state-imposed separation Jim considered "hurtful for the rest of time."

Eight days after their wedding, the couple filed a lawsuit to have their marriage recognized in Ohio. John passed away three months later. Though the case outlasted John's life, last week's Supreme Court decision finally won Jim the right for his marriage to be recognized in all 50 of the United States.

In its ruling, the Supreme Court affirmed again that tradition alone cannot form a rational or legal basis for discrimination. At the time of the ruling, 13 of the United States' 50 states and 43 percent of Americans did not support same-sex marriage. This ruling, like pivotal Supreme Court cases before that forced the desegregation of public schools in 1954 and banned the prohibition on interracial marriages in

1967, compels American society – sometimes kicking and screaming – to act in accordance with our Constitution, in this case to uphold the right of all people to equality before the law.

People in South Africa used to ask me "President Obama has a wife; why does he want me to be gay?" That's not what this ruling is about. The United States government isn't advocating gay marriage; the United States government now simply acknowledges Jim and John's right, and the rights of other gay and lesbian couples to join one of civilization's oldest institutions, promising them the full and equal rights that opposite-sex couples have enjoyed for so many centuries. The ruling has reaffirmed that we are all created equal; that people are people and that love is love – no matter who you are or who you love. ■

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