



Leaders of Distinction

Kevin Bourassa and Joe Varnell

in a legal and human rights battle that would consume Canada from coast to coast for almost three years.

"This is a cause that has brought people around it," states Kevin. "It hasn't been Joe or I, it hasn't been a church, it hasn't been a group of lawyers, it's been the issue that people relate to. Everyone can relate to the idea of one group being treated differently than another and the injustice in that. So it's been a really good rallying point to have people defend their constitutional rights as citizens under our charter." And the overwhelming support from across the country has been just the fuel the two have needed to keep going. "It's really been great to see people come together and be willing to stand up and we've really been galvanized by the energy around us," says Joe. "Politicians really do listen when you write a letter or when you get out there on the street and show them that you're willing to stand up for the cause." Seeing themselves as a catalyst, Joe firmly believes that "making noise helps."

The two romantics fell in love at first sight while being introduced by a mutual friend. Joe, was whisked away to Deerhurst to soak up the autumn colours of the countryside and relax in a Jacuzzi while sipping champagne, knew his fate was sealed - Kevin was the man he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

But neither of them expected to become the country's media reps for same sex marriage. "It was so completely transformative to go from relative obscurity saying, 'Yeah Kevin, I'll marry you.' To six hours later having the national media in my living room." "It's an overwhelming experience to suddenly live in this world where everything you say or do the news media wants to talk to you about. It really has changed our lives, our perspectives and it has not come without a cost." A lot of their personal time has gone to speaking all across the country, traveling around the world, writing a book on their experiences of the last three years and, maintaining their website, which has become the leading resource in Canada, if not the world, for same sex marriage. "All off that has come at the expense of Kevin and I spending time together," Joe sighs. "We want to just sit back and watch a James Bond movie. And yes, we fight about who cleans the kitty litter box," he adds with a laugh.

Time hasn't been the only sacrifice for the guys. Kevin walked away from his \$100,000/year salary and they are now living off a single income, but that allows Kevin

As Canada was stepping up to claim the world bronze medal for legalizing same sex marriage, I was sitting on the steps of the Metropolitan Community Church waiting to speak to Kevin Bourassa and Joe Varnell - Canada's torchbearers in the fight to have same sex marriages legally recognized by the Canadian government.

As the Sunday service ended, I watched the congregation leave. Notes of the last hymn still floating on the late spring air. I was surprised to see such a cross-section of people. But, I noticed they all had one thing in common - the smiles on their faces making it clear they all left feeling part of an accepting and loving community.

It's been a long road for Kevin and Joe. Marriage is one of the last institutions that has been held up as sacrosanct against gays and lesbians. And, it has shaken the foundations of the conservative side of Canada. Especially in the religious sector, the average Canadian believes that gays and lesbians shouldn't be treated like second class citizens anymore. That means the gay community is being afforded equal rights across the board - including marriage. However, neither Kevin nor Joe had any idea that they would become the leaders



Photos courtesy of JCRJAS PHOTOGRAPHY

Kevin Bourassa, Rev. Brent Hawkes and Joe Varnell

to focus entirely on advocating for same sex marriage. "After the wedding, once it had been front page news across Canada and it went around the world, we realized there was an opportunity for further work. We could either go home and show up on the courthouse steps every two years or we could do a lot of work in between to help make progress."

Having appeared in a myriad of Pride parades last summer, Kevin and Joe were thrilled at the invite to be the grand marshals for this year's parade in Elsie Wayne's hometown of St. John's, New Brunswick. "I wonder why?" Kevin laughs. They've even gone so far as to name their tour this year in honour of Ms. Wayne, - the 'No We Won't Shut Up, Elsie Wayne' Pride Tour.

"We find, that as we go around talking to various individuals from Vancouver to Halifax, that there are people willing to commit. All they need is leadership to gather around." And yet Kevin and Joe balk at the idea of being considered leaders or role models. In fact Joe scrunches up his face at the mere mention of it, saying with a sigh, "I'm uncomfortable with that label." And Kevin readily agrees, "We've rejected the role-model label from the very beginning." And yet they've done so much for attaining equality for gays and lesbians. Why do they want to steer clear of what they so clearly earned? "Primarily because I'm not out there advocating that every gay couple get married," says Joe. "I'm saying that everybody has to have the choice of getting married. I think people have to find their own way through life, their own voice through life and I want to open up all the options for them to find their own way through." And Kevin agrees, "I hope that people

do get inspired by the example that it is possible for people to make a difference. I think gay people all across the country are finding more courage to stand up and become a little more vocal, become a little more public."

How have the guys managed to pull through it all? In large part, they are overwhelmingly thankful for the love and support from close friends, family and the people they've met along the way. Without whose help they would have been lost. "We've tread in areas that we would never have dreamed of going because of that teamwork," says Kevin with a smile. "When we win, that's only the beginning. I regard that as the beginning of acceptance and the end of tolerance," Joe positively beams.

It's hard to believe that these energetic guys consider this more the beginning than the end. "What's next?" asks Joe? "We're going to be moving towards that greater acceptance in the community."

"And then, I think, we're going to reclaim more of our personal lives," Kevin says with a sly smile. "We actually refused to take a honeymoon until the government registers our License," Joe adds with an answering grin.

With the changed law comes the changed attitude. It'll take time, but it's clear that the majority of Canada is ready to step forward internationally and continue being a world leader in the fight for equality and human rights. "At the end, it all comes down to love and fighting for the person that you love," says Kevin as he gazes into Joe's eyes. And isn't that what love is all about?