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Black Queers Are Tying The Knot Inclusion

**By The Reverend Irene Monroe
BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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More and more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people of African descent are marrying.

An idea that was once thought of as an anathema to black queer identity, marriage, in our LGBTQ communities, is being celebrated and on the rise. And many of us are now proudly walking down the aisle to tie the knot.

"Is it no longer a white thing?" Jeff Nelson, a white gay resident of Cambridge asked me as I was dashing off to perform the nuptials of two lesbians of color -- Gigi DeRosa and Fulani Butler of Roxbury -- on September 20.

With black local pastors in Greater Boston and beyond still ranting and raving that their reasons for opposing same-sex marriage are prophylactic to combat the epidemic level of fatherlessness in black communities nationwide, and to stem the demise of the nuclear black family, what makes us still forge forward with this act?

And with many of our family members not in attendance at our nuptials, for reasons ranging from shame to religious indoctrination, what message are LGBTQ Americans of African descent hearing now about same-sex marriage that we didn't hear before?

The reason for the shift comes both nationally and locally.

On the national front, civil rights leaders of the 60's such as the late Coretta Scott King, Representative John Lewis, NAACP Chair Julian bond, and Reverend Al Sharpton

publicly offer their support for same-sex marriage. As a matter-of-fact, John Lewis filed a friend-of-the court brief in the Massachusetts case that led to our state becoming the first in the country to legalize marriage equality. And, during a June 12, 2007 Capitol Hill ceremony commemorating the 40th anniversary of *Loving v. Virginia*, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down anti-miscegenation laws -- that was sponsored by several straight and queer civil rights organizations across the country -- the Legal Defense & Educational Fund of the NAACP released a historic statement in support of marriage equality explaining why the struggle for same-sex marriage is indeed a civil rights struggle:

"It is undeniable that the experience of African Americans differs in many important ways from that of gay men and lesbians; among other things, the legacy of slavery and segregation is profound. But differences in historical experiences should not preclude the application of constitutional provisions to gay men and lesbians who are denied the right to marry the person of their choice."

At this commemoration, Mildred Loving, the icon for marriage equality also spoke out in support of same-sex marriage, stating, "I am not a political person, but I am proud that Richard's and my name is on a court case that can help reinforce the love, the commitment, the fairness, and the family that so many people, black or white, young or old, gay or straight, seek in life. I support the freedom to marry for all. That's what Loving -- and loving -- are all about." These public endorsements of same-sex marriage by key African American national figures and organizations helped shift the tide.

On the local front, there was a confluence of on-going factors that has had and continues to have a profound impact on how LGBTQ communities of color now think about same-sex marriage.

In 2005 when Lee Swislow, Executive Director of Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD), a white organization that framed the marriage debate in Massachusetts, reached out to communities of color, inviting a dialogue for an inclusive re-framing of the marriage debate, the collective anger and frustration that LGBTQ communities of color collective felt toward the organization began to dissipate.

Also, having an African American governor Deval Patrick, whose daughter is gay, speaking in support of same-sex marriage helped those in our communities of color know that our state and governor are including us in the struggle for marriage equality.

While speaking in support of marriage equality, Patrick told members of the Legislature in 2006 that, "This is likely the greatest civil rights battle of our lifetime. It is fundamentally wrong to discriminate against gay and lesbian citizens. It is as wrong to write discrimination into our historic state constitution. The next and last constitutional convention is rapidly approaching. We must be organized to stop this discriminatory amendment, and prevent it from reaching an uncertain public referendum. I pledge to do what I can to build on that momentum, so that our Constitution will continue to stand for liberty and freedom, and not discrimination."

In 2008, Dave Wilson, an African American gay male, and one of the seven same-sex plaintiff couples who won the right to legally marry in the landmark case *Goodridge v. the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, became the board president of MassEquality. His appointment was resoundingly applauded throughout black queer communities. And, with the National Black Justice Coalition's publication "Jumping the Broom: A Black Perspective on Same-Gender Marriage" as an outreach tool to the black community, Wilson was instrumental in having the organization conduct town hall meetings and

public forums throughout Greater Boston.

While same-sex marriage is still not the most pressing issue in black queer communities here and nationwide, these efforts nonetheless generated discussions among us and in our communities in the context of our families and lives that matters.

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