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Over 100 LGBTQ couples get married in mass Toronto wedding at historic venue

Diana Mehta, The Canadian Press

TORONTO - Jane Cullingworth and Bonnie Slade could have waited to have their wedding at home in Scotland, where legislation on same-sex marriages will soon be enacted, but that wasn't the way they wanted it.

Instead, the couple flew across the Atlantic to Toronto where they stood alongside 108 others on Thursday as officiants from 12 denominations gave their blessing to the crowd.

The Grand Pride Wedding for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and two-spirited couples was thought to be the first of its kind in Canada and involved individuals from around the world.

"It feels celebratory but also quite political. It's a very strong statement across the world about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered rights," said 50-year-old Cullingworth.

"I think it's a message of love and hope and equality really in its most simplest form — that everyone should have the right to marry a person that they love."

For Slade, opting to wed her partner of 16 years in Toronto instead of Scotland was an easy decision to make.

"The progressive human rights in Toronto and in Canada, it's incredible really," she said, noting the open celebration of the World Pride festival throughout the city. "It's a real sign of progress."

Richard Laslett and Colin Gunther, a couple who had travelled to the wedding from Australia, also noted Canada's lead on same-sex issues while acknowledging that their union wouldn't be recognized when they got home.

"It's sad, it's embarrassing," Gunther said of Australia's stance on same-sex unions. "But we'll know we're married."

"We're husband and husband now," Laslett added. "That's what really matters to us."

Cindy Su and Lana Yu will face a similar situation when they return to Taiwan, but the couple said they were thrilled to make things official.

"We figured we didn't really want any objection to stop us from doing what we want in life," said Su.

"I'm actually looking forward to what happens when we go back. Maybe in the future there will be some problems with the legality but now that we want to start a family, we have to be really brave."

Kisses, hugs and tears abounded after the couples at Thursday's wedding said "I do" in unison.

For Inae Lee, being surrounded by such a large group provided a form of support she wasn't able to get from her own family.

"In my parents' mind they don't believe that this can be celebrated. In their mind it's something that's illegal, it's something that's not allowed, it's very sinful," said the 28-year-old who is originally from South Korea.

"I really want to let them know that we are celebrated, and it's OK for us to get married."

Lee married Jenny Chang Ho, who is originally from Venezuela. The pair met in Toronto two years ago and have been together ever since.

"This actually makes us appreciate more that we're able to do this and be able to live in Canada," Chang Ho said. "It's very accepting and more diverse than other countries."

Canada's first legal same-sex marriage took place on June 10, 2003, just hours after Ontario's Court of Appeal pronounced the Canadian law on traditional marriage unconstitutional.

Other provinces followed suit and the federal government legalized same-sex marriage countrywide two years later with the gender-neutral Civil Marriage Act.

"We recognize that what we have here in Canada is very special," said openly gay Toronto city councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam, who spoke at the wedding.

"We hope that the little bit of spirit that we can give the couples here today will take this energy back to wherever they come from, and that they will continue the fight for equality back home."

The wedding — which organizers said was the largest of its kind in North America — was held in the gardens of Casa Loma, a palatial Toronto home built between 1911 and 1914, which has since become a popular tourist attraction and event venue.

"What we see Casa Loma as is this grand lady at the top of the hill watching Toronto evolve," said Nick Di Donato, president and CEO of the Liberty Entertainment Group which operates the facility and hosted the event. "This is a dramatic part of that evolution."

Di Donato's company took on all costs for the event, with the couples only having to pay for an Ontario marriage licence.

"It's a lifetime event and something they'll remember forever," he said. "Most of these couples are from outside Toronto — they become our ambassadors for the city of Toronto in terms of the openness of the city and the welcome that we've provided them."

Despite the significance — and scale — of the celebration, some warned that the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, queers and two-spirited people (a First Nations term for individuals who are considered to be neither women nor men) still can't be taken for granted.

"This says a lot about acceptance and change in our society, but I don't think we should think that marriage is the great equator of equal rights and human rights," said Helen Kennedy, executive director of national charity Egale, which was involved in planning the "big fat gay wedding"

"We constantly hear things like 'oh, now you have marriage, now what do you want.'"

Kennedy added that more work still needed to be done to combat issues like homophobic bullying, hate crimes and an overrepresentation of LGBTQ individuals among the homeless.

"It's an amazing thing for these couples to express their love and devotion for each other in this ceremony, but we have to remember all of those other people who are still struggling."

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