

Get us to the church on time – Gays rush to marry before November

by ANDREW LAM
New America Media

SAN FRANCISCO—A few nights before they got married, Jason Mehrrens, 33, and Alberto Andrade, 27, sat at their kitchen table drinking sake. Alberto's sister Danielle stood between them, arranging a bouquet of flowers. On the table, two wedding rings sat gleaming in their velvet boxes.

It may be a picture of modern domestic bliss, Asian-style – Alberto is fourth-generation Filipino American; Jason is Vietnamese, adopted as a baby – but there's also prenuptial anxiety. They're

sure they've found a soul mate in each other. What they're not sure about is whether same-sex marriage will survive the November election. Proposition 8, a proposed ban on same-sex marriage, is on California's general election ballot.

"Well, we are worried that voters might revoke same-sex marriage rights in November," Jason says. "If we marry now, our marriage will be legitimate no matter what."

In other words, better safe than sorry. Both have seen other gay

couples get married in 2004 in San Francisco, only to see those marriages voided by the state Supreme Court. Mayor Gavin Newsom, going against state law, had granted full marriage rights to gay couples. The same court, however, on May 15, 2008, overturned the state's ban on same-sex marriage, declining to delay its decision until after the November election.

Proposition 8, or the Limit on Marriage Amendment or California Marriage Protection Act, is a constitutional amendment. Its proponents claim its victory would override the court's decision.

This time around, however, there's reason for Jason to be optimistic. A Public Policy Institute of California poll in August found that 54 percent of registered voters oppose ending gay marriage. A Field poll in July found that 51 percent of likely voters also opposed ending gay marriage. It's quite a change, considering a 1977 Field poll showed only 28 percent supported, while 59 percent opposed, gay marriage.

Still, like many gay couples around the state, Jason and Alberto are leaving nothing to chance. "We get married now but our real wedding will take place July fourth 2009. It won't be revoked even if they vote against gay marriage in November," says Alberto, who works in the kitchen of San Francisco's Foreign Cinema res-

taurant. The celebration will take time to prepare and guests will come from all over the state.

The Williams Institute at UCLA law school estimated that more than half of the state's 102,000 gay couples will wed in the next three years. Another 67,000 out-of-state couples are expected to travel to California to marry.

It has been a long struggle for Jason. He was among the orphans in the famous Operation Baby Lift at the end of the Vietnam War. A conservative Catholic couple from Long Island adopted him. He "came out" in high school. "I have a hearing problem, and I'm Asian in a predominantly white school. And I'm openly gay." Jason received death threat notes in his locker. "My parents kicked me out when they found out I was gay."

Jason went to University of California, Los Angeles and now works as an HIV counselor. It took 10 years to reconcile with his parents, he says. "Family is the core foundation of our relationship. It was difficult with my mother. We didn't make up until I moved out to California. She has come to a point now where she's willing to accept and love me for who I am."

Alberto, who grew up in Vallejo, Calif., had a relatively better time coming out. "My high school friends basically dragged me out of the closet. And no one seemed



to care." The two met online at downlink.net, a gay and lesbian social networking site with large membership of Asians. "It seems strange that Jason and I had a bunch of friends in common but we never met," Alberto says. "So I asked him out on a date. It took several tries before he agreed."

"It was when we were eating dessert. The dessert sold me," Jason says. "I was wary at first though 'cuz I was just coming out from a relationship and I was more careful." Experience, he says, helped his relationship with Alberto. "I've been around the block, been dating for a long time. I've had several boyfriends before him. With each boyfriend I learned a little bit more as a person. I grew as a person. I bring all that to my relationship with Al. Basically I took the best of each relationship to where I am now."

For Alberto, Jason is his first serious boyfriend. "I had relationships but nothing serious. Being with Jason was something completely different than anything else. I feel comfortable around him. I don't feel like I have to be someone else to be around him."

Danielle, 18, says she first realized that her brother was gay when her brother brought Jason home. "I thought it's pretty cool and awesome they're getting married. Jason's the first boyfriend he ever brought to see the family and he's it."

Jason and Alberto are now living with Danielle and Alberto's mother, Aya, in the Andrade family home, which has been in the family for four generations. "I can tell you some ghost stories if you want to hear," Alberto says, laughing.

Alberto's mother, Aya, is going through a divorce after 25 years of marriage. "Instead of falling in love, I chose security, and now my husband and I are separated."

Ava says she fully supports her son's decision to get married, and wishes "for them to go on to live a happy life. Alberto accepts Jason, so I accept Jason." Her husband, Alberto's father, still struggles with his son's marriage.

"He's still my son," Aya says. "It doesn't change his personality just because he chooses to marry a man instead of a woman." Then she points out the irony: "I married for security and here's two people marrying for love. I think their relationship is inspirational."

When he was an "unhappy teenager," Jason says he never imagined he would marry a man he loves and have a wedding. "Now it's just so incredible. Beyond my dreams. Getting married surrounded by friends and family."

"The world has really evolved," Alberto says. "There's a lot more acceptance of gay people. Homosexuality was once viewed as a mental illness. But now? I heard a comedian who said, 'Homosexuals are no different than anyone else, except they're from the future.'" ■

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Ike victims wait in line...

PAGE A4 Search-and-rescue teams worried that the worst devastation has yet to be found. In Texas, rescue crews were still going door-to-door in the hardest-hit neighborhoods, looking for the dead and alive, and the days after the storm were proving to be riddled with their own dangers. At least three people were found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning after using generators. A team of 115 searchers flew into Bolivar Peninsula, the last

unexplored part of the Texas coast, and feared they would find more dead. They saw homes that were splintered or completely washed away in the beachfront community that is home to about 30,000 people in the peak summer season. But after several hours, they found no dead. Gilchrist, a town on the peninsula, "is almost completely gone. Like somebody took a razor and went pffft," said Aaron Ramon Reed, spokesman for Texas Parks & Wildlife. ■

Schwarzenegger says...

PAGE A3 The budget deal generated just enough Republican support to reach the two-thirds threshold needed for approval. Its main feature requires Californians to pay their income taxes sooner, a maneuver designed to help close a \$15.2 billion deficit without borrowing or imposing new taxes. Even lawmakers who voted for the plan agreed that it merely delayed the toughest fiscal decisions until next year. Schwarzenegger said the current budget would require a major tax increase or massive cuts to education.

"If (lawmakers) think that's what the people of California deserve, then I don't know what their thinking is of the people of California," he said. "I think the people of California deserve better."

The budget stalemate has forced the state to delay billions of dollars in payments to schools, medical clinics, daycare centers and state vendors. Lawmakers finally cobbled together a patchwork spending plan on the 78th day after the start of the fiscal year, passing a \$143 billion budget shortly after 2 am Tuesday, September 16.

Schwarzenegger said the reforms lawmakers added to the budget were flawed and would do nothing to halt the state's persistent imbalance between spending and the amount of money it takes in.

He also reiterated a threat he made during the impasse to veto any bills sent to him until a budget deal had been struck. If lawmakers override his budget veto, he said he will take a hard line on their legislation, potentially wiping away a year's worth of work. "Hundreds of bills will be vetoed," the governor said. ■