



Grand Pride Wedding goes off with 110 hitches

Couples from around the world tie the knot in North America's largest ever LGBTQ marriage ceremony

By BEN SPURR

Queer couples from around the world made history at Casa Loma on Thursday in what is believed to be the biggest LGBTQ marriage ceremony ever held in North America. Couples of all ages and backgrounds took part in Grand Pride Wedding at the century-old castle, including some from countries where gay marriage remains illegal, such as Ghana, Taiwan, and Australia.

For couples like Donna and Trish Macaulay-Verge, the wedding during WorldPride was the culmination of a whirlwind romance.

"We just met in January and we knew after the first date someday we'd get married," said Trish, who wore a classic ankle-length black dress that complimented Donna's grey-blue tuxedo. She said they had contemplated eloping, but when the mass wedding was announced last month they changed their minds. "It's the perfect elopement: at a castle in the city that we live, and [we're] so lucky to celebrate our love in a country that allows that," she said.

Ben Stansfield and Josh Downing also contemplated a quickie wedding, but couldn't resist the grandeur offered by a ceremony at a hilltop castle. It helped that it was free; the Liberty Entertainment Group, which took over the management of Casa Loma in January, paid the bills for the event.

"It's not something we would have been able to do ourselves," said Stansfield. "I've never actually been to Casa Loma, and I've lived here for eight years. It's pretty."

For others, the ceremony was a milestone in a decades-long love story. Nora, 65, and Erna, 67 met at a bus stop in their native Philippines in 1965. They became secret lovers but tried for years to "get away from each other" Nora said, because they were told homosexuality was wrong. Nora came to Canada and even got married, but when she divorced in 1992 the pair reconnected and have been living together for more than 20 years.

"It's really exciting" to be part of the wedding, especially with so many other couples, Nora said before the ceremony. But while Erna's family had come from Chicago for the event, Nora's relatives aren't supportive and didn't even know she was getting married.

"If they see us on TV or something, so be it," she said. Looking at the dapper crowd that was quickly filling Casa Loma's garden she declared, "This is my family."

For at least one pair of brides, the wedding doubled as a political statement. Cindy Su and Lana Yu are from Taiwan, where gay marriage isn't legal. They've been together for four years and want to move on to the "next stage" of their lives by getting married and having a baby.

"We want to try to make that happen for the other couples" back home, Su said. "[Queer] people in Taiwan they fall in love and be with each other as boyfriends or girlfriends forever, and that's all. That's all they get. We want to show people that there is a second step to life, to relationships."

The ceremony itself took place beneath a white tent whose see-through roof let in the sunshine, and with it, the summer heat. Couples fanned themselves as they listened for just under an hour to no fewer than 12 officiants from Buddhist, Islamic, Eucharistic Catholic, Pagan, and other faiths.

Dr. John Joseph Mastandrea of the Metropolitan United Church did the final honours. Suitably decked out in a rainbow frock, he asked the couples to stand, hold hands, pledge their love for one another, and kiss. The hundreds of friends and family members in the audience let up a big cheer as he pronounced the couples married.

"Take your deepest breath and shout from here to the CN Tower, round the globe, welcome all these people, joined together in marriage!" Mastandrea said, before the wedding band kicked into song.

"That was pretty amazing," said Sydney Downey afterward, her bride Laura Gillam, wearing a kilt, at her side. The pair are planning a reception later in the summer when they return to Kingston but "for the rest of the weekend we got lots of friends in Toronto, and we're ready to party."