

Union reunion toasts marriages

Overflow crowd 2,000 strong celebrates at Hyatt reception

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The crowd cheered wildly at the words "milestone in American history, " at the mention of Mayor Gavin Newsom and at the call to send President Bush packing in November.

But the 2,000 celebrants who crammed into the grand ballroom at San Francisco's Hyatt Regency Sunday for a giant wedding reception honoring the thousands of same-sex couples married in the last 11 days, cheered the longest for "Mrs. and Mrs." Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, leaders in the gay community and the first gay couple to wed at City Hall last week.

Still wearing their "wedding gowns" -- a blue pantsuit for Lyon, 79, and a purple one for Martin, 83 -- San Francisco's matrimonial rock stars, who have been together for 51 years, stepped slowly but surely through a sea of clapping, crying onlookers, some reaching out to touch or hug them as they passed. While the crowd roared, the women were helped onto the stage and sat down, smiling, on matching red chairs. Lyon reached out and touched Martin's arm.

"I felt free. This overwhelming sense of accomplishment, of satisfaction, of validation happened for me in there, in that room," Doretha Flournoy, 43, said immediately afterward. "It really reminds me of when I hear Martin Luther King speak -- of when I watched and read about the civil rights movement. Of when I watched the Watts riots in 1965. When black folks realized they had freedom in the world. As a black lesbian, I felt the same type of freedom a moment ago as I felt then."

Part political rally, part dance party, part potluck, part traditional wedding reception complete with cake and toasts and kisses, Sunday's event was entirely planned in the last week. Local florists donated the flowers, participants were asked to bring food, the invites were sent word-of-mouth and via e-mail, and the organization Bay Area Community of Women laid out \$10,000, much of which they hope to recoup through donations, said Sally McCaffrey, who helped throw it together.

Expectations exceeded

Organizers' expectations that at least 600 newlyweds and 1,800 guests would attend the party were exceeded: By 4 p.m., the ballroom was filled to its 2,000-person capacity and a line of would-be partygoers stretched for half a block outside. More than 3,000 couples have married since Feb. 12, when Newsom instructed city officials to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

"We support everything this stands for and we wanted to be part of history," said Vita Iskandar, 35, who came from Santa Rosa.

"I just wanted to be a part of the continued celebration that is San Francisco," said Leslie Bulbuk, who married her girlfriend last week.

Despite the last-minute preparations, organizers pulled together an impressive lineup of San Francisco's progressive lights. Linda Tillery, the Glide Choir, the Montclair Women's Big Band, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus and the Gay and Lesbian Chorus performed. San Francisco poet laureate Jan Mirikitani read a poem. The Rev. Cecil Williams of Glide Memorial Church, Kate Kendell, director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Assemblyman Mark Leno and San Francisco Recorder Mabel Teng spoke.

"I never thought I'd live to see this in my time," Teng, who's office issued the marriage licenses, said from the stage. "George Moscone and Harvey Milk must be very, very proud."

She was drowned out by cheers, but it was still possible to hear her saying "We did it, we did it," as she thrust her arms into the air.

The Rev. G. Penny Nixon, of Metropolitan Community Church offered a blessing to Lyon and Martin and all the newlyweds. In her day, she's blessed hundreds of same-sex marriages, she said before getting on stage, but this was a little different.

"This is in the context of equality and a long awaited taste of justice, so it takes on huge proportions," she said.

Disbelief at governor

While exuberance was the reigning emotion, the battle outside the ballroom was not forgotten. Guests spoke with disbelief about Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's comments earlier in the day that there were anti-same-sex- marriage riots and protests in San Francisco. They also wondered why they didn't have more support from politicians, including Democratic candidates.

"When you hear so many people in public office talking about fear, and marriage is just between a man and a woman, it does take a human toll on us because we're real human beings," said John Lewis, who married his partner last week. "The governor is my governor and Boxer and Feinstein are my senators. We're real people. It's not a political issue. It's our lives and love."

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