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## Same-sex couples reflect on historic one-year wedding anniversaries



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Jeff Zarrillo, left, and Paul Katami, Burbank, who successfully challenged Proposition 8 in Hollingsworth v. Perry, are married by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa at City Hall June 28, 2013. (Hans Gutknecht/Los Angeles Daily News)

## GALLERIES

Same-sex weddings

By *Jordan Gass-Poore*, [jordan.gass-poore@langnews.com](mailto:jordan.gass-poore@langnews.com),  
[@jgasspoore](#) on Twitter

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There was chaos in the Los Angeles County Clerk's Office, Cecilia Estolano remembered.

It was July 2013.

Less than a month had passed since the U.S. [Supreme Court](#) on June 26 overturned the section of the Defense of Marriage Act, a federal law that included limiting marriage to a union between a man and a woman. That same day California's voter-approved Proposition 8 was also declared to be unconstitutional.



**Cecilia Estolano, left, and Katherine Aguilar Perez-Estolano, with their children. (Courtesy photo)**

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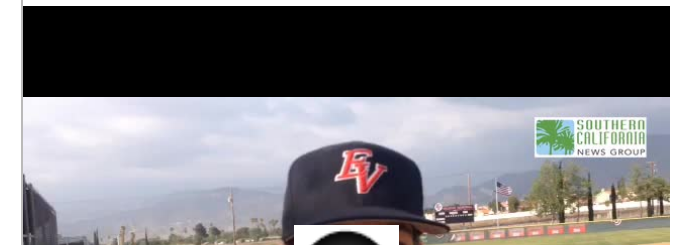
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The court's ruling paved the way for same-sex marriage in California to be legal again.

Two days later, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals lifted California's nearly five-year ban on same-sex marriage, effectively allowing local governments to issue marriage certificates to gay and lesbian couples.

Pasadena residents Estolano and Katherine Aguilar Perez-Estolano, former deputy mayor of Pasadena, gathered with friends and family in the office of L.A. County Supervisor Gloria Molina to receive their marriage license — a piece of paper they once thought unattainable.

And now, Estolano and Perez-Estolano, along with numerous others throughout the state, will be celebrating their one-year wedding anniversaries this year thanks in part to the Court's decision on DOMA and Prop. 8.

In one week, it was a new world for them, one with the cultural and legal benefits of living in a state that now recognized their union.

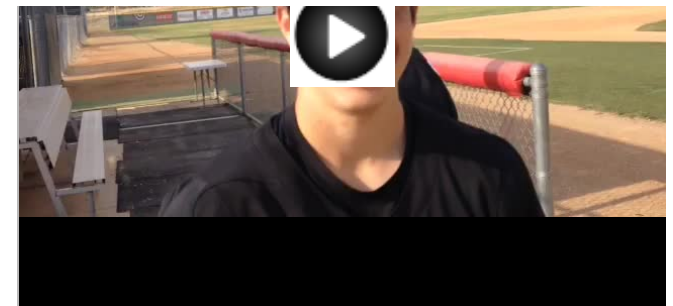
This couldn't have been done without [Paul Katami and Jeff Zarrillo](#), widely known for their federal lawsuit against Prop. 8 that's chronicled in the HBO documentary "The Case Against 8." The couple paved the way for Estolano and Perez-Estolano, among numerous other same-sex couples, to legally marry.

The lawsuit against Prop. 8 began as the answer to a question Katami had: Would calling Zarrillo — his boyfriend of more than 12 years — husband really make a difference?

As victorious plaintiffs in the federal challenge to overturn Prop. 8, Katami and Zarrillo of Burbank were pronounced spouses for life by then-Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa at a City Hall ceremony on June 28 of last year.

"We are still feeling the joy and the happiness and the incredible feeling

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of gratitude, a gratitude of (being) fully-recognized citizens,” Katami, 41, said Thursday. “We didn’t only fight this because we wanted to get married but because we were being treated as second-class citizens.

“When you’re able to break through that barrier and change that ... it makes a difference in your everyday life, in everything you do.”

The last year has been triumphant for the couple and for the LGBT marriage-equality movement, Katami said. Since the landmark decision one year ago, states across the country now have lawsuits filed to ensure the right for all to marry is either reiterated or secured, he said.



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### ‘LEGAL STUFF’ MATTERED

But that doesn’t mean the battle for LGBT equality is over.

L.A. resident Tiffany McMichael remembered what life was like living in North Carolina, a state that doesn’t legally recognize any

same-sex union, where she felt like a voiceless outsider.

McMichael said a similar fear returned when she agreed to marry her now-wife Kanako Sato because Sato’s student visa would eventually expire and she would be forced to return to Japan if Prop. 8 wasn’t overturned.

“But we had hope,” Sato said.

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And hope seemed to be a binding thread for both couples throughout their journey to be legally married.

Now, a year later, the couples reflected on the events that led up to their respective one-year wedding anniversaries, occasions that still seemed to them almost too good to be true.

“I still cry about it now,” Estolano said.

The recognition of both couples’ marriages by the state and federal government means they now receive many of the same benefits as their heterosexual counterparts.

This means that Estolano can now visit Perez-Estolano in the hospital and make medical decisions on her behalf if she’s unable to do so as her next of kin.

Prior to the overturn of DOMA and Prop. 8, both couples wouldn’t have qualified for bereavement leave from work if one partner died, nor would the homes they share automatically go to the surviving spouse in the absence of a will.

It wasn’t like the couples didn’t want to get married — they didn’t have the choice.

At that time the state recognized only registered same-sex domestic partnerships.

So, to honor their love, both couples participated in unity ceremonies with the hope that one day they would be able to legally marry in California.

Edward Goff and David Moreno also ceremoniously committed their lives to each other on Sept. 27, 2009 as they waited for legal recognition of their union.

Exactly four years later Goff, 38, and Moreno, 32, of East Long Beach,



were married at an L.A. County Clerk's Office.

"It was small and intimate," Moreno said. "It was just us and a family member as a witness. We had the big circus wedding at our commitment ceremony."

For these couples, their relationships haven't been sustained through legal benefits, but instead from mutual respect and good old fashioned love.

"I said, 'I'm in love with you and I have to be with you and that's that,'" said Perez-Estolano, referring to her marriage proposal to Estolano in 2010.

Estolano's and Perez-Estolano's unity ceremony took place at the couple's East Los Angeles church.

"Forget the court, it's in the eyes of God that matters to me and my family," Perez-Estolano said.

But the "legal stuff" mattered to Estolano. She and Perez-Estolano are also partners in the urban planning legal firm Estolano LeSar Perez Advisors.

When the couple legally married in 2013 she was resolved not to have people challenge their marriage, so she legally added Estolano's last name to her own - a legal benefit of marriage. This wasn't the case when Perez-Estolano previously married her husband.

Before Perez-Estolano and Estolano began dating in 2010, Perez-Estolano said she was married with three children and that Estolano had a partner and three children of her own.

Now that they're legally married, Perez-Estolano and Estolano are able to cover their family on health plans without paying extra taxes and are eligible to take medical leave to care for their children.

It's a modern-day "Brady Bunch" tale, Perez-Estolano said, a reflection of changing social and cultural norms.

This change allowed McMichael and Sato to legally marry on Oct. 4, 2013.

She said the day Prop. 8 was overturned was the day that "everything changed." She and Sato's lives gained stability because Sato can now legally remain living in the U.S. and the couple are looking forward to raising children.

"It's sort of the new normal," said Estolano, adding that current LGBT youth are now able to imagine and plan their dream wedding, something she never thought was possible when she came out at 13.

Perez-Estolano, adjunct professor at the University of Southern California, said she's noticed that some of her younger LGBT students are now taking their time to get married because they aren't as afraid of having that right taken away from them.

Estolano said today's youth are growing up in a world where being homosexual isn't an issue for them, and the state's decision to overturn Prop. 8 reflects and promotes this change.

"I feel like wherever California moves the rest of the country tends to move, especially on social issues," McMichael said. "We feel really free just to live and that's awesome."

Not everyone shared McMichael's feelings.

The significance of last year's events may have gone unnoticed by some people within and outside of the Inland Empire's LGBT communities, said George Garcia, president of Equality Inland Empire.

"Everybody already felt like it was out of their hands," said Garcia, a sentiment that may have been attributed to the lack of job and income

security, as well as the disconnect felt in this suburban area. The difficulties facing the LGBT communities in San Bernardino County are different than those faced by people in San Francisco and Los Angeles, he said because of the area's politically conservative history of voting against LGBT legislation.

But people from all across the state fought and continue to fight for LGBT equality, independently or with LGBT organizations like Equality California.

“Certainly marriage was a big win but there's still more to do,” said Steve Roth, whose company OutThink Partners has worked with Equality California.

Sherman Oaks resident Sylvia Weisenberg credits those involved with Equality California, as well as other LGBT organizations as being instrumental to the legislative change that allowed her to legally marry the L.A.-based public defender Irene Nunez last October.

The couple's wedding in San Francisco was 13 years in the making.

Weisenberg said she and Nunez had waited for the “equality and justice all Americans are due,” and when news broke that same-sex marriage was once again legal in their home state she said Nunez didn't waste any time and proposed to her.

“I never, ever thought it would happen,” said Weisenberg, who was quick to add that governments still have a huge way to go before LGBT equality is achieved.

Domestic partnerships, civil unions ... Estolano said there's no alternate path to marriage, no separate but equal.

“There's no substitute of having true equality,” she said.

*Staff Writers Brenda Gazzar and Phillip Zonkel contributed to this story.*



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