



Marriage Equality: It Started In Vermont

By Daphne Northrop
June 2, 2021

An Iranian feminist, 1930s jazz in Harlem, the Broadway theatre, gay rights — the topics that have captivated filmmakers Jeff Kaufman and Marcia Ross are wide-ranging, but they are also integrally related.

“They’re all connected by a fascination with people at the center of a community who change lives and don’t get full recognition for their efforts,” said Kaufman. Their film *The State of Marriage* tells the dramatic and suspenseful tale of the two Vermont lawyers who fought for a decade to gain state recognition for same-sex civil unions. It airs on Thursday, June 24 at 9pm on GBH 2.

“These two heroic women, Susan Murray and Beth Robinson, with Boston attorney Mary Bonauto, created the first successful legal arguments for marriage equality,” said Ross. “They became the precedent for everything that followed.”

Vermont was the first state to pass legislation allowing civil unions for gay and lesbian couples, paving the way for gay marriage initiatives in other states. By 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in every state.

The film follows the lawyers and couples who fight for rights, amid intense opposition and global media attention. Viewers witness the vehement court debates and bitterly contested legislative battles, along with interviews with civil rights advocate U.S. Rep. John Lewis and Tony-winning playwright Terrence McNally.

Ross and Kaufman, who are married, have collaborated on many documentaries, including *Terrence McNally: Every Act of Life* and the new *Nasrin*, which depicts the struggles of Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh.

Kaufman, a Vermont radio host during the legal battle, recalled the intensity of emotion on both sides. “I saw that swirl of social energy, debate and conflict,” he said. “It was a debate about equality, how we treat each other and how we move society forward.”

The film also shines a light on the arduous and gratifying work of public service. “We wanted to celebrate people coming together to debate issues and try to make laws as fair and representational as possible,” said Kaufman.

They were especially moved by the story of Republican State Rep. John Edwards, who represented a conservative district. “He was opposed to gay marriage, but hearing the testimony from Vermonters changed John’s heart,” said Kaufman. “He said, ‘I may lose my seat, I may lose friends, but I’m going to do what’s right.’ I love that role model so much.”

Whether the topic is politics or culture, the filmmakers dig deep into the personal stories of their characters.

“We want to create a strong personal connection to the characters,” said Ross. “These are real individuals and real couples, and you feel their love.”

Kaufman and Ross took that message to heart. Dating, but not married at the time of the filmmaking, they tied the knot the following year. “While we were making this film, we saw what these people went through to be with each other,” said Ross. “It was really inspiring for us.”

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