

Ray Vahey Richard Taylor (died July 2006)

I'm 68 and Richard's gone. You might think marriage wouldn't be important to me. Well, it sure as hell is important to me. When Richard and I decided to speak out for marriage equality in 2005, we vowed to each other that as long as we drew breath we would speak out against injustice. He kept his promise and I'm going to try to keep mine.

Richard was the light and love of my life. He always, always encouraged me. Every problem that came up, he was there for me. He provided such balance for me and he was so protective of me, and I of him. I was always afraid that I would die first and that he wouldn't get my Social Security. I worried about him having enough to live a good life.

Richard and I used to marvel that we were so lucky that we had each other and loved each other so much. We took great joy in each other. Our level of commitment made the other person the most important thing. The struggles that we had were easier to get through because that foundation was there. We never went to sleep angry.

It's like a passing parade: You're on that float together, and you wouldn't have it any other way. It was a good ride.

Together since September 2, 1956

Roger Hansen John Payton

JOHN: Some people in our Quaker meeting would have been more comfortable if we had asked for a civil union instead of a marriage. We were very clear that we were asking for a marriage. This is something that we are bound to not just by a civil contract but by the pledge we've made in front of our faith community and God. **ROGER:** Our commitment to each other came remarkably quickly and easily. My trust in John is so full, that he will always be with me and I will always be with him. Anything we face, we'll face together. I had a serious operation several years ago. John was just as steadfast by my bedside as any husband or wife might be for their spouse.

ROGER: I don't know what we would ever do without each other, because we have so many little in-jokes, most of which are very stupid but which we find very amusing. We couldn't possibly share them with anybody else. They would just look at us like we were crazy! Some of them are silly puns, some of them we talk back to the TV. I do a little dance for John and that amuses him. I sing off-key and that amuses him. **JOHN:** It's not because he's trying to sing off-key. That's just the way he sings!

*Together since September 20, 1998
Quaker marriage in Illinois, September 7, 2002*

Loree Cook-Daniels michael munson

LOREE: We make so many decisions about people based on our first visual impressions. Decisions about their gender, their age, their race. We put people in these little boxes, and we put people in boxes labeled “like me” and “not like me.” It tends to be, “You’re like me if you look like me.” **MICHAEL:** Loree and I look very heterosexual, but my birth certificate has an F on it. We legally can’t get married. **LOREE:** When people say, “I value marriage,” I want to ask, “Why do you value marriage? What is the goal of marriage?” I think the goal is people loving and committing to each other, building families together, having connections and support. If people thought it through to that point, they would see that heterosexual marriage and gay marriage both serve the same ends: Good things happen when people connect with each other.

Together since February 19, 2000

Gregory Konz-Krzyminski Raymond Konz-Krzyminski

GREG: We are good family members and good friends. In return, we have good friends and supportive family members. We've been very blessed. **RAYMOND:** We've raised two children. We've buried three parents. Now we're caring for my aunt with Alzheimer's. We're always going to parties for our siblings and their children and grandchildren, and if there isn't a party, we make one! When people talk about family values... **GREG:** After Raymond's mom died, he invited my parents to move into our lower flat, where his mother had lived. It was handicap-accessible and my dad had had a stroke. During those years, I was living out of town during the week. I don't know any other in-law who would have done that. **RAYMOND:** Having been caregivers for dependent parents for 14 or 15 years, it's very clear to us that we don't want to put that kind of burden on anyone else. **GREG:** We didn't have to take these things on. We did it because this is who we are. I promised Raymond that, with all the caregiving he's done, he should be able to live where he wants to live. We would love to live somewhere where we could be legally married.

Together since July 6, 1983

Sherrie Howe Joanne Andreshak

SHERRIE: A lot of people think gay people are incapable of long-term relationships. **JOANNE:** A lot of people need to open their eyes and see reality! Besides, I told Sherrie that the only way we'll ever break up is when I turn 90, I can trade her in for two 45-year-olds. **SHERRIE:** We're very compatible. If there's a problem, we talk about it and don't let outside influences get in our way. We've raised our voices at each other probably three times in all the years we've been together. My brother-in-law once commented to somebody, "Did you ever notice Sherrie and Joanne? They have words for a few minutes and then it's over and done with, like nothing happened!" **JOANNE:** I've had a lot of ups and downs in recent years. I don't know where I would be if it wasn't for Sherrie. She's my strength, she's my heart. **SHERRIE:** If there's an afterlife, I want to meet her again! **JOANNE:** I think there's going to be a gay heaven. The guys are going to design and decorate it and the women will fix everything that's broken! **SHERRIE:** She's definitely my eternal flame.

Together since April 1, 1979

Denise Cawley Anne Hefter

with Aidan Cawley-Hefter

DENISE: Parenting is more work than we thought it would be, but it's more fun than we thought, too. Anne and I have worked hard to construct a really healthy relationship. We were in a great place before we had the baby, and while I was pregnant we fell more in love with each other. ANNE: We just really get each other. We have really good flow together. DENISE: And we have an amazing network of friends. There are people calling, emailing, and coming by all the time. They are so into this baby! ANNE: Deciding to have a baby started with researching a lot. There were so many things we had to figure out. DENISE: One of our biggest concerns was that Wisconsin doesn't allow adoption by same-sex second parents. We were really thrilled when Anne was granted legal guardianship without my guardianship being taken away. Aidan now has two same-sex parents legally. ANNE: Many people don't understand all the ways we don't have equal rights. DENISE: We put out thousands of dollars in legal fees for things that no married couple would ever have to deal with.

Together since March 15, 1996

Diane Banach Jolene Konieczny

with Amanda Banach

JO: I'm a stay-at-home mom for Amanda and I do daycare, currently watching five children. I'm a pretty huge kid magnet. I can't walk into a mall without some child walking away from their parents and coming up to me saying, "Hi!"

So this must be what I'm supposed to be doing. DIANE: When I first came out, I was a full-fledged baby dyke in army jacket and combat boots, ready to hit the world.

Now I'm proud to be a mom. The hardest part of being same-sex parents is dealing with things like insurance and guardianship. Huge frustrations! I mean, I could go down the street and pick up any Tom, Dick, or Harry and, boom, he could adopt Amanda and everything would be covered.

JO: I carry a permission slip from Diane in case I have to take Amanda to the hospital. Legally, I have no parental rights with her and the State of Wisconsin won't let me adopt her.

DIANE: We've talked about changing our names so we're all the same, so there won't be questions of motherness as Amanda goes through school.

Together since January 19, 1998

Pauline Emerson-Froebe Melissa Emerson-Froebe

MELISSA: When I first met Pauline, she was more of a yuppie glamour girl. I had just bought a Volkswagen bus and was ready to hit the road. I really admired her willingness to go with me and live in the bus, because I'm one to just jump in the pool and go for it. **PAULINE:** Those road trips are some of the hardest times of my life, but also some of the most fun. Melissa comes up with all sorts of crazy ideas. Sometimes I think, "No way!" But I'm often overly cautious and analytical, and Melissa has brought out a lot in me that I never thought I could do. Biking all winter long in Milwaukee? No way would I have ever done that! **MELISSA:** I really like traveling with Pauline. We're going to be together for a long time, there's so much to see. **PAULINE:** I don't see us living 30 years in the same house, working the same jobs. You only get one shot, so let's have as much fun as we can. We've been traveling since day one, in Lucy the Volkswagen or Freddie the RV. As long as we keep that spirit of adventure alive, we'll keep us alive.

Together since March 1999

Tim Greene Michael Karl

MICHAEL: I don't need our marriage to be recognized by anybody to feel that we have a marriage. What bothers me is feeling less than, knowing that we are seen as a threat or that we're looking for some sort of special treatment, that laws have to be passed to protect people from us. What do people feel threatened by that they feel they have to change the Constitution? **TIM:** I really grieved after that vote and it still bothers me. I'm not asking to be married in a church. I just want Michael and me to be able to get the protections that heterosexual couples get by signing that piece of paper. **MICHAEL:** With our straight-couple friends, Tim and I will be sitting there arguing about things like buying a new car, or fitting a vacation in, or getting to the grandkid's school event on time. Our friends joke with us that we're just like they are, and just as boring as they are! **TIM:** We work, we pay taxes, we contribute to society. Michael and I have a balanced life together and we complement each other. I plan my life with Michael at my side. **MICHAEL:** Tim cooks for me. That's a very important daily commitment!

Together since May 15, 1989

Paul Mandracchia Gary Hollander

GARY: Gardening for 24 hours over a weekend, having very different approaches, not seeing things eye to eye — how to work together was something we had to learn. I've learned a lot from Paul. He's got a master plan. I'm more impulsive.

PAUL: For some couples, working side by side is easy and natural, but it wasn't for us. It took awhile to iron out.

GARY: Paul has always been able to make me laugh more

than any other human being can. **PAUL:** It's the little things that remind me every day that I'm in love with Gary. I cook dinner for him and look after him as much as I can. The house, the garden, the dogs — these simple things have become very important as my world has gotten smaller. The multiple sclerosis has affected my ability to see, my physical strength, my steadiness, my balance. I have numbness in my feet and hands, so I tend to drop things. It has made me more sensitive to heat, so I can't sit out in the sun. A lot of fatigue. **GARY:** Sometimes I'm working in the garden and Paul can't. But as long as he's on the patio or within eyesight, he's working with me. He's going to give me the plan and I'm going to help execute it. It's the same motivator: we're working together.

Together since August 1982

Debbie Lang Donna Plaski

DONNA: When a good friend of ours found out that we're lesbians, he asked his wife, "Who plays the man?" **DEBBIE:** His wife socked him in the arm and said, "Get a clue! There is no man!" We still tease him about that. And there's a man I work with who I'm very fond of, but when the marriage amendment topic came up I heard him say, "What's to stop them from marrying two or three people?" I was floored.

DONNA: A lot of people have the stereotype that lesbians and gay men have a different partner every night. They don't know that there are so many of us in long-term relationships.

DEBBIE: Our commitment to each other extends to our families. We hear horror stories of non-acceptance, but we've been blessed. My family loves Donna, and to Donna's sister's kids, I'm one of their aunts. Thanksgiving is our holiday to have everyone over to the house.

DONNA: It's about 20 people, with a long table through the living room. One time, one of Debbie's nephews noticed a magazine with Melissa Etheridge on the cover. He said, "She's gay, you know," and another nephew said, "Yeah, so what?" It's wonderful to see young kids with attitudes like that. That's what's going to change the world.

Together since August 28, 1992

Garth Wangemann Roy Badger

ROY: Garth's lack of health insurance is really hurting us right now. He's unemployed, and the State of Wisconsin, my employer for more than 25 years, doesn't have domestic partnership benefits. **GARTH:** I was forced to apply for General Assistance for medical. I'm also getting Food Stamps. **ROY:** How does the 30 years that Garth and I have been in a loving relationship hurt heterosexual marriages? Why are we viewed as a threat? **GARTH:** Attitudes toward gay people have improved drastically in the last 20 or 30 years, but there's still a lot of fear. People are afraid of things they don't know about. **ROY:** Twenty years ago, we'd be picked on when we went to the supermarket or the mall. Now, it's no big deal. But after what we've gone through, you learn to be secretive. I suppose that's why I still have that tendency. **GARTH:** Except that time we went out to a nice restaurant and you told the waitress that we were there to celebrate our 25th anniversary. I almost fell out of my chair! **ROY:** I suppose that was my coming out! Our waitress was very friendly and we were surrounded by straight couples celebrating. It just came to me to tell her the truth. She even brought us a special treat for dessert.

Together since November 7, 1976

Brendan Barrett Vance Skinner

with Ashlyn and Bailie

VANCE: Our daughters are fraternal twins and half-sisters, biologically related to both of us. Adoption would have been too difficult for us as gay men, so we decided on surrogacy.

They were born only two days after we finished our house!

BRENDAN: The girls call him Daddy, they call me Papa. We have supportive friends and family and neighbors. While we're at work, Bailie and Ashlyn are at home with my mom.

They call her Meema. VANCE: We found a church that is very good to our family. The Sunday after the amendment vote, the sermon was about acceptance and tolerance. Brendan and I felt as though we were meant to be there that morning.

We were both in tears. BRENDAN: When we go for walks in our neighborhood, or go to the mall, people can see we're a family. The more we're out there, the more people get to know us, the more they'll see that we're not a threat. We're everyday people who just want to be treated equally. VANCE:

Our government should strengthen families, not weaken them. Brendan and I are married, we just don't have that contract. We continue to lay the groundwork, educating people where we can. We have faith that ultimately our civil union will be recognized here. We are all entitled to the pursuit of happiness and the American dream.

*Together since April 12, 2000
Vermont civil union, April 12, 2002*

Mary Thoreson Wendy Pologe

with Daniel Thoreson-Pologe

MARY: As it said on the cake at our commitment ceremony, “Joined in love and struggle forever.” **WENDY:** We smile and laugh so much together, and we care so deeply about each other. We want to keep growing together, be old together. We have struggles, but there’s this love. She still melts my heart. **MARY:** When we first moved into this neighborhood, it was, “Oh my god, there’s lesbians moving in!” But once they got to know us, it was hard to see us as scary. **WENDY:** I want to say, “Hey, I’m not some scary person! I’m a member of your family: your sister, your daughter, your mother, your aunt.” **MARY:** It’s very difficult for some people to be part of an inclusive society. But they can put up as many obstacles as they want — we’re not going away. **WENDY:** We’ve really worked at our relationship and at being parents, and we’ve had a lot of support, very much an extended family. Daniel’s got aunts and uncles all over the place. **MARY:** Daniel’s friends think it’s cool that he has lesbian moms. **WENDY:** He’s like, “Oh, please! They’re my moms. Come on!” **MARY:** The most optimistic thing we ever did was to have Daniel. **WENDY:** He and his generation really are the hope of the future.

Together since January 25, 1981

Paul Aschenbrenner Winston Sephus, Jr.

PAUL: I'm sick and tired of being reached out to by the Democrats every four years and then being crapped on once they're elected. I'd like to see the gay community give more challenges to the Dems. Our community is very blindly in their pocket, and they really take our support for granted. It was Clinton, supposedly the most gay-friendly president we've ever had, who started "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." And it was Clinton who signed the Defense of Marriage Act that started all of this amendment crap. **WINSTON:** This constitutional amendment is intended to punish the LGBT community, but it's not going to stop there. It's going to hurt unmarried straight couples, too. **PAUL:** Despite the stereotypes about gay people, the reality is that we're not much different from the straight community. What are they afraid of? **WINSTON:** Television tends to flaunt the more extravagant side of the LGBT community. There's so much more variety they could show. When it comes to pride parades, what do they show? The leather people... **PAUL:** ...the drag queens. **WINSTON:** There's not a lot of focus on everyday Joes and Janes like us.

Together since June 26, 2000

Britt Brown Noel Rosado-Brown

with Truman Brown

NOEL: My family is very conservative Pentecostal, and one of my sisters has made gay marriage a divisive issue in the family. BRITT: What are they protecting marriage from? I would like them to explain, without quoting the Bible, exactly what it is about Noel and me getting married that's going to destroy civilization. NOEL: I told my family, "You're siding with people who are literally hateful. People who carry signs saying God Hates Fags. People who believe that we're unnatural and sick, that we're child molesters, that our child should be taken away from us." BRITT: As for our "gay lifestyle" — it's school, work, dinner, walking the dog, and getting homework done. NOEL: We just want Truman to look back and say that he had a good life and was surrounded by supportive people. BRITT: Both of our fathers have passed away, and Truman got it in his head that he needed a grandpa. A straight couple in our church had always been there for Truman, remembering him on his birthday and holidays. When I asked them if Truman could adopt them as grandparents, they said yes before I even got the question out of my mouth.

Together since April 18, 1987

Gerry Coon Stewart Dempsey

STEWART: My parents had a terrible marriage, but I still wanted to get married. I wanted the commitment, the fidelity, the devotion to another person. I've been married for 21 years now, doing all the things that my parents didn't do, yet they had all the legal rights that marriage gave them.

GERRY: Stewart is an incredibly kind and gentle man. He's the nurturer in our relationship. I can be a difficult person, much more rigid, demanding, opinionated.

STEWART: We're very different people, and in some ways I think that's why it works. I'm not the easiest person to live with, either. We

have our moments when we just want to stay mad over some stupid thing.

GERRY: If we have an argument, I count on Stewart to come to me and say, "So now we're done with this silly issue and we're moving forward." We've learned to

compromise, and we have total trust in each other.

STEWART: Just about every night, I prepare a meal and we eat together.

On weekends, we have coffee and read the paper together.

We have our cocoa time and our reading time. I think these

little traditions are supremely important.

GERRY: We really like spending time with each other. Just being in the same

room is nice. Restoring this old house, dealing with this

very challenging neighborhood, we've gone through a lot

together.

Together since June 21, 1986

Mark Hagen Todd Richards

MARK: When Todd makes dinner, he puts together a nice plate for me instead of just yelling, “Come and get it!” I love thoughtful little things like that. Todd likes to see the dining room lights on when he comes home from work, and to have a candle lit in the kitchen, so I try to do those things.

TODD: Our home is a sanctuary from the rest of the world. We love being here, talking about our family and friends, our dogs, home improvements. When we’re coming home from vacation, we can’t wait to be home, in our own bed. **MARK:**

Our little house isn’t anything spectacular, but we really love it. **TODD:** We have redone every inch of this property and made it our own. We host several parties during the holiday season and our family and friends love to come over. We put up 13 Christmas trees. **MARK:** Our families are just wonderful. We get anniversary cards from our parents. My sister made Todd the godfather of her child. **TODD:** People say, “You guys have been together 14 years. What’s your secret?” I don’t know what the secret is, it just works very well. There’s a lot of respect, a lot of understanding, a lot of love. We’re human, we make mistakes and get grouchy, then we apologize and let it go. We have a fun life.

Together since March 2, 1993

Craig Larrabee Michael Bernklau

CRAIG: Many people think about marriage in terms of a church ceremony, a man and a woman, the biblical reference — “That’s the way it’s always been and that’s the way it’s always going to be.” **MICHAEL:** The thought of two men or two women kissing, sharing a life and a bedroom, bothers a lot of people. **CRAIG:** Some people will never change, but others are becoming better informed and more tolerant. Many of those people are moving to a more accepting stand. **MICHAEL:** People need to separate the religious aspects of marriage from the civil aspects. Expanding the benefits of a marriage license to same-sex couples doesn’t denigrate the holiness of marriage. If Craig and I were to get married, we wouldn’t need to get married in a church, but we do expect equal treatment as citizens. We’re a couple, we’ve been together a long time, and we’ll be together the rest of our lives. **CRAIG:** We’re both from farm families, and our families are very open and accepting of us and have been for a long time. We’re fortunate to be so close with them — a lot of people don’t have that support. And we’re fortunate that our relationship has been so healthy all these years.

Together since November 4, 1980

Jeffrey Margenau Peter Duncan

PETER: After Jeff proposed to me with a full-carat diamond ring, we decided to get married in Canada. We go fishing with our nephews near Thunder Bay each year, so we drove up there on Memorial Day weekend and got married.

JEFFREY: In a day and a half we saw all the sights that Thunder Bay had to offer, then came home and planted our garden. Our wedding reception in August was hosted by friends. Peter and I repeated our marriage vows and acknowledged that ours was a mature love, that after ten years together we were truly ready, willing, and able to commit to being the single most important people in each other's lives. **PETER:** I've always been proud that Wisconsin was the first state to pass gay rights legislation. Amending our constitution to reduce my rights is really a blow. And what's this bullshit about the sanctity of marriage? If they really want to protect marriage, they should outlaw divorce. **JEFFREY:** No one seemed to mind that I was gay when I served in the military. I don't get excluded from paying property or income taxes. I do tons of volunteer work, we're both gainfully employed, we vote responsibly. I don't know how Peter and I could be any better Americans. Why are we treated like second-class citizens?

*Together since August 1996
Married May 27, 2005*

Peggy Morsch Kathy Herson

KATHY: I describe my life as a big pie chart. I'm a lesbian, a physician, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a taxpayer. My pie is not much different than 99 percent of the nation's. **PEGGY:** Why would God make us this way if he didn't want us to be this way? I actually think it's a blessing. Walking this path opens our eyes to those who are less fortunate so much more than people who don't have to walk this path. **KATHY:** Anybody who doesn't believe that you're born gay needs to read something that's been published in the last 20 years! Besides, why would anybody choose to be gay? To be treated as a second-class citizen? **PEGGY:** Respecting people for who they are is a core value that our country needs. This basic respect opens up many possibilities. People don't have to spend time and energy hiding. Creativity opens up. So much good energy would be released. **KATHY:** Peggy and I have been truly blessed. We live in a nice, safe neighborhood with wonderful neighbors. We have wonderful, accepting families. In 20 or 30 years, our nieces' and nephews' generation is going to be running things and this marriage fight is going to be past-tense. To them, being gay is no big deal.

Together since May 24, 1994

Elaine Morberg Pat Stepanski

ELAINE: We like having our friends over, a group of women that we've known for many years and have so much in common with. We love to hang with them on our deck and in our basement rec room. Patty and I are very different — she's mostly country, I'm mostly jazz; I like to dance, she doesn't. With our group of friends, we can do everything we like and still be with each other. PAT: Elaine and I have things that we enjoy doing together and things that we like doing on our own, so it gives us a good balance.

ELAINE: When people say that they don't think gays should be allowed to marry, I'll say, "Why shouldn't Patty and I have that right?" Oh, they wouldn't have a problem with us marrying! It's like, they know us, so we're okay, but the gay people they don't know are scary. PAT: A big thing seems to be they feel the family's threatened. How does our relationship threaten a traditional family? We cut our grass just like all our neighbors. We pay the same taxes our neighbors pay, and they have so many benefits that we don't.

ELAINE: We're just regular people trying to live a regular life. We don't do anything much different than anybody else — except fly our rainbow flag, just to let them know we're here.

Together since November 16, 1996

Brenda Coley Sandra Jones

SANDRA: Brenda and I were best friends the minute we met in 1977. I was at her wedding, and I was there when her son Jamel was born. After being practically inseparable for 10 years, we decided to build a life together. **BRENDA:** Our parents didn't support our relationship. For about six years it was really rocky, and times were hard for us financially. Part of our commitment was that we were going to eke it out and make things better for ourselves and our child. **SANDRA:** After we moved into this house, the first thing we did was to go around the neighborhood and introduce ourselves as a couple. We are not going to hide or pretend. We aren't sisters. I'm not her mother. **BRENDA:** We have to demand respect and show people how to treat us. When some neighbors started talking about their anniversary, I started talking about ours. They weren't expecting that! Some people on the block stopped speaking to us, but at least everybody knows. We don't want anybody wondering.

Together since October 31, 1987

David Jones Anthony Balistreri

DAVID: We enjoy our house, our quiet. On summer weekends we do a lot of driving around in the '65 Cadillac that Tony inherited from his father. We're both very into our dogs. A lot of animals are treated so cruelly, my dream is to open an animal rescue someday. We're very happy just to be home at night watching TV with our dogs, in bed by 10:30. I think we have a pretty good thing going. TONY: What we have grows every year. DAVID: On May 22, 1993, we had a holy union at a Methodist church. We had everything a straight wedding has — the convertible with "Just Married" on the back, tin cans, a sit-down dinner, and a deejay played all night. TONY: My whole family was there. Not his. DAVID: I stood my ground, went about three years without seeing my family after that. But I kept in contact with them, sent birthday cards, called on holidays. Eventually, they started to come around, and now Tony is part of the family. They wouldn't think of inviting me without him. TONY: It's no different than blacks riding in the back of the bus. It will all change eventually, and the ball's already rolling.

Together since March 21, 1989

Craig Bodoh Mark Trevor Ranum

MARK: In a country where there's so much violence and hatred, I'm shocked that we're changing the laws of our states to be more discriminatory. I believe that the world is only going to be a better place if you allow people who love each other to have equal rights. **CRAIG:** The majority likes to control the minority, and marriage is one of the last bastions of the majority's power and control. So many people are so fearful of gay people. This is one way they try to keep us out of their face, out of their life. **MARK:** People talk about "the gay agenda." I don't know of any agenda except working towards heterosexual people's understanding and acceptance of people who are just a little different than themselves. **CRAIG:** In a heterosexual marriage there are certain roles that society assumes – the husband's going to do this, the wife's going to do this. Same-sex couples have the opportunity to negotiate all this stuff and decide who's going to do what. **MARK:** Almost every day, I go to work with a smile on my face. I function more fully as a healthy, contributing member of society because Craig is in my life. And he is wonderful at remembering anniversaries.

Together since February 1990

Ardyth Cope Kerri Balliet

with Nick and Megan Bailey

KERRI: We've been very open with everybody since day one. If Ardyth and I cannot be comfortable with who we are, how can we expect our children to be okay with it? They need to know that there's nothing wrong, nothing to hide. **ARDYTH:** When it comes to parenting, we've always been a unified force. We have the same beliefs and values for our family, and the kids can never play us against one another. But our parenting styles are different. **KERRI:** Ardyth tends to be a little harder, I tend to be a little softer. I think that's a good mix. It's like we're extensions of each other, like we were meant to be together. So many people wait forever to find what we've found. **ARDYTH:** We mesh really well together, but in many ways I'm not like Kerri. I have a bad temper, I like to yell. She never yells. I'm very focused, can't do two things at once. She keeps the checkbook because it would kill her if I did. **KERRI:** If I could get a message to everybody in America, I would say, "We're just like you. We have the same issues and deal with the same things that you do. We're not so scary — and we are so much a family."

Together since November 1, 1998

Barbara Murray Sara Trampf

BARBARA: Sara's mom told her that she would rather have an alcoholic daughter than a gay daughter. To get back into her parents' graces, Sara had to do the opposite of what she thought she had to do, which was to grovel. Instead, she didn't talk to them for a year, set boundaries, and quit drinking. **SARA:** If I hadn't gotten sober, I don't think Barb and I would still be together. We both faced so much backlash from our families. And we've had financial difficulties, co-parenting issues, career problems, racial issues, mental health issues, suicide, teen pregnancy. You name it, we've probably gone through it. **BARBARA:** To be able to tell Sara all about me, and to have her really hear me, is the best gift I've ever been given. I was very lonely and isolated as a child and had some real bad experiences. I didn't know my roots, I didn't even know my father. Now, to have the privilege of all these people in my life — we're building our own roots. **SARA:** I love all the pieces of Barb — and believe me, she's a complicated person. With Barb, it's always exciting, always fresh. I never know what she's going to do, and I love that, it keeps it alive. Sometimes, when we get a few hours alone, we'll say, "Let's go on an adventure! What do you feel like doing?"

Together since April 6, 1998

Wendy Slusar-Mischler Sue Mischler

SUE: When Wendy calls me at work in the middle of the day, just hearing her voice puts a smile on my face. We watch out for each other, and we enjoy coming home at the end of the day, talking and relaxing in the hot tub. WENDY: I can't believe people are so weirded out by a lifestyle they know nothing about. We're not going out looking for other people. We end up in the same bed at night, and we wake up in the morning together. I can't imagine Sue not being there.

SUE: Wendy has strengths that balance out my weaknesses, I have strengths that balance out hers. If I'm struggling with something, all it takes is talking with her about it. It took me a long time to find somebody who I truly enjoy being with.

WENDY: I love traveling with Sue. Someday, we want to get an RV and visit national parks all over the country. SUE: One day, I asked one of my students if he had ever gone camping with his mom and dad. "I don't have a dad," he said matter-of-factly. "I've got a mom and a mama." In my ideal world, all kids would be able to feel proud of their families like that.

Together since August 21, 1996

Jack Pike Vance Baker

VANCE: I bought an old farm in 1988 — it's a gorgeous piece of land — and I've been going out there for a long time, doing a prairie restoration. I've struggled to establish a planting with a lot of biodiversity, which has been much more difficult than I expected. The project has sort of sucked up my life and become an obsession. JACK: Vance's environmentalism always attracted me. I thought of myself as an environmentalist until I met him, but I was just on the outskirts. When we met, he had a tepee on the land. Now we have a cabin. First we built a one-room cabin, then we had two rooms, and now we have four rooms. VANCE: I'm a nester, but Jack is good at really making a home. That land is such a big part of my life, having somebody who wants to be there and go through that whole progression with me has been great. We've had a lot of fun. JACK: I really admire Vance's intellect, and he's a great doctor. He could have been making twice as much money, but he chooses to work with the disadvantaged and homeless. How can you not admire someone who helps people get off the streets and get their lives back together?

Together since April 16, 1994

Jan Hill Paul Toonen

with John Toonen

JAN: Paul's dad moved in with him when he was divorcing his wife of 37 years, the mother of eight children. PAUL: Dad moved in with me a year before I met Jan. He was only going to be with me for a few months, until he found his own place, but he's been with us the whole time. When one of my brothers was bad-mouthing Jan and me, Dad told him, "If you're going to be a part of this family, you will respect Paul and Jan. They are the anchor of this family now." JAN: Paul and I nursed my mother back to health in our home after she had a serious operation. Paul made her get out of bed and walk, cleaned up after her, helped her shower, made sure she took her pills. And Paul was at her bedside when she died two years later in a hospice, just as he had been with her for 21 years as a son-in-law and friend. Those are the commitments that make marriages for real. PAUL: In 1995, when my brothers and sisters learned that I was HIV-positive, they assumed that Jan would leave me. When they saw him become this incredible caregiver, they gained new respect for his strength and for our love and commitment. We are together for life, no matter what.

Together since April 1, 1978