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Marriage equality past, present and future: Equality as a backdrop

by Jennifer Chrisler
contributor
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Jennifer Chrisler, executive director of the Family Equality Council, sees equality as a backdrop to the life shared in her family. Clockwise from top left, Chrisler with wife Cheryl Jacques and their sons Tom and Tim. (Source:Family Equality Council)

I grew up in Upstate New York, but went to college in Western Massachusetts and moved to Boston thereafter. I fell in love with a city and a state so steeped in history yet so forward-thinking. I started my career in politics and advocacy here. I met my future wife, Cheryl Jacques. I gave birth to our twin sons, Tim and Tom. We fought for marriage equality with the rest of our community, our families and friends, and together we won. Tim and Tom were two years old when Cheryl and I married, right here in Boston. We were living in Silver Spring, Maryland, at the time, a few months shy of the November elections, but we still considered ourselves Bay Staters, and in the summer of 2007, literally on the eve of the Constitutional Convention vote, we moved back to Boston.

Cheryl and I are fiercely proud of our state; it's a pride we want to instill in our kids. When I started thinking about the "intangible" benefits of marriage equality, what they were for my family, I went straight to the source -- Tim and Tom, now seven years old, hoping they had an appreciation for what equality brings.

I asked them if it mattered to them that Mom and Mama are married. They said they kind of remembered being at the ceremony and that was cool, they guessed. I pried a little: *But what about at school? Does it make a difference to your friends -- that they know you have two moms and they're married?* I could tell by their faces it was like I'd asked them to solve a riddle (or help with the dishes). Then Tom piped up:

Well, it would matter if, like, Mom had to live in a hotel and we didn't get to see her all the time, if we didn't all live together as a family.

Of course, I thought, that's what matters most to them, at least at this

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Quick Poll

It's looking an awful lot like Melissa Etheridge won't be able to make it to be this year's celebrity marshal at Boston Pride. What local pseudo-celeb would make a good 11th hour replacement?

- Dale Dorman
- New Kids On The Block
- The Inside Track girls
- Ayla Brown

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young age. To the extent that marriage encourages their moms to stick through the tough times and stay together as a family, they think it's significant. If marriage helps us have dinner together most nights out of the week, then Tim and Tom will advocate for marriage equality themselves.

My family is blessed to live in a particularly progressive town with inclusive public schools. I'm sure that has something to do with Tim and Tom not wrestling over the equality question with their peers, but I also think that once equality happens and the opponents of equality quiet down, the reality of everyday families becomes so mundane (LGBT-headed or not) that the differences fade into the background.

The great benefit of marriage equality is that it, in fact, diminishes differences. It makes having two moms or two dads like having parents of different races or religions -- something you don't always see, but a curiosity, not a monstrosity.

The same principle holds true for extended family members and friends. When Cheryl and I were committed partners with young children, we still seemed or felt "less together" than her married brothers and sisters and our other straight friends. Like it or not, marriage is a language that people understand. No one should feel less than because they are not married, but as we do the work of ending stigma for single-parent families, divorced families, and more, couples should also have the option of conveying their life-long commitments through the language of marriage.

One day soon I'm sure Tim and Tom will have their ah-ha moment, realizing how incredibly significant their mothers' marriage is to them, their community and their world at large. In the meantime, I'm perfectly happy for them to feel safe and secure in our family, equality being the backdrop of their lives.

Jennifer Chrisler is the executive director of the Family Equality Council, a national organization that works on behalf of LGBT families.

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