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From the Los Angeles Times

Gay marriages begin as California ruling takes effect

At 5:01 p.m., same-sex couples across the state raced to partake in a legal ritual long denied to them. The first couple in L.A. County to marry are Robin Tyler and Diane Olson.

By Carla Hall, John M. Glionna and Rich Connell

Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

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In Beverly Hills, the wedding couple wore matching ivory suits as a rabbi officiated on a courthouse plaza. In San Francisco, the brides exchanged vows as Mayor Gavin Newsom presided. And across the state Monday, at 5:01 p.m., the moment that same-sex marriage became legal by order of the California Supreme Court, exultant gay couples raced to be first to partake in a legal ritual long denied them.

County registrars and clerks in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Alameda, Sonoma and Yolo counties kept offices open to allow at least two dozen same-sex couples the distinction of being among the first to wed.

Before the ceremonies began, L.A. Cardinal Roger Mahony and seven other Southern California Roman Catholic bishops reaffirmed their opposition to same-sex marriage. In a statement, the clerics said marriage "has a unique place in God's creation, joining a man and a woman in a committed relationship in order to nurture and support the new life for which marriage is intended."

In Los Angeles County, longtime partners Diane Olson and Robin Tyler were the first and only same-sex couple to obtain a license Monday. Together 15 years, Olson and Tyler were the original plaintiffs in the 2004 California lawsuit challenging the ban on gay marriage as unconstitutional. The couple were chosen to receive the county's first license "in recognition of their unique role in the court's decision," said acting L.A. County Registrar-Recorder Dean Logan.

For eight years the couple trekked to the Beverly Hills courthouse on Valentine's Day, only to be denied a marriage license each time. They returned Monday as conquering heroines -- with friends, their high-profile lawyer, Gloria Allred, and a mass of media in tow.

Olson and Tyler were swarmed by news cameras as they entered the courthouse. "We just love each other," gushed Tyler as Olson gently placed her hand on the small of her back.

Around them were dozens of family and friends and a smattering of protesters quietly holding banners offering varying slogans, including "Homo Sex Is Sin!," but all suggesting that gay marriage invokes God's wrath.

At the county clerk's window, as Olson and Tyler's marriage license was prepared, the full measure of the moment hit. "We've never gotten this far before," Tyler said.

"Well, you have today," the clerk said.

As they walked out the glass doors, arm in arm, each taking turns brandishing the long-sought-after paper document high, the crowd cheered and a burst of the "Wedding March" sounded -- as if the wedding was already completed.

They stood before Reform Rabbi Denise Eger, and their ceremony was both crazed and intimate. Tyler was tearful as she slipped a ring on Olson's finger. A wedding singer -- real estate agent Michael Libow -- crooned "Someone to Watch Over Me." Family and friends were forced to strain for a mere glimpse of Olson and Tyler as reporters and photographers surrounded them, a microphone boom intruding under the huppah, the canopy that arches over the couple in a Jewish wedding. Beverly Hills police officers solemnly scanned the grounds as protesters held signs aloft.

From the sidelines, a protester screamed, "Jesus Loves You!"

"Shh! It's a wedding," a guest scolded him.

Their friends seemed prepared for the fact that they were at a media event. "This is not only a wedding, it's witnessing history," said psychotherapist Arlene Drake, a longtime friend of the couple.

The rabbi also acknowledged the long road to the moment, saying they had finally found "justice that reigns not just on you but all of California."

The rabbi had barely intoned the words that Olson and Tyler had waited so long to hear -- "By the power vested in me by the state of California . . ." -- when the crowd roared its approval, momentarily drowning out Eger, who continued: ". . . I now pronounce you spouses for life!"

At the reception, the couple cut a cake with matching bride figures on top.

"My name is Robin Tyler and I'd like to introduce you to my wife!" she declared.

The brides will retain their own names.

"This is the last frontier," said gay Los Angeles Councilman Bill Rosendahl, who attended the wedding. "Women got the right to vote, black people got the right to vote, now gay people can get married."

If only it had come earlier, Tyler lamented Monday.

"I'm 66," she said. "If they had let me get married 10 years ago, I would have been 20 pounds lighter and I wouldn't have needed airbrushing."

The couple rode in a white limousine -- friends chipped in to buy them the ride -- from their North Hills home to the county clerk's office in the Beverly Hills courthouse. Tyler, a comic who also owns a travel business with her partner, and Olson, 54, who has a separate business in Beverly Hills, chose the plaza outside the courthouse for their wedding because of its historic significance in their battle.

"This is a civil rights movement," said Tyler, who has long been active in gay rights issues. "The courthouse is the place where we were turned down."

In San Francisco, protesters arrived early on the steps of City Hall, as did a throng of more than 100 reporters. One protester held up a sign reading "Hello, Gay People. God Is Upset."

Inside, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin's private ceremony in Newsom's office marked a triumph of love, endurance and a pioneering commitment to gay rights spanning five decades.

Now in their 80s, the couple had their initial kiss when Dwight D. Eisenhower was president. They first said "I love you" in an era when most Americans couldn't fathom two women as a committed, sexually active couple.

About 5:10 p.m., moments after the ceremony, a crowd outside the mayor's office erupted in applause and parted as Lyon, dressed in a blue pantsuit, slowly pushed her partner in a wheelchair toward a wedding cake.

"These are two extraordinary people who have lived extraordinary lives," Newsom said. "They have spent a half-century fighting for equality."

Outside City Hall, about 1,000 people waited for the couple to emerge. Some cheered, others booed. One man waved a sign that said "Homo Sex Is a Threat to National Security."

For many years, Lyon, 83, and Martin, 87, couldn't hold hands or embrace on the street. They lived in fear of being outed, labeled as "dirty" or "queer."

But Monday, as they took their vows as wife and wife, the public scrutiny had turned from bitter to oh-so-sweet.

They were more than retiring octogenarians turned social trailblazers Monday. Greeting the press after taking their vows, they were beaming newlyweds.

A same-sex wedding celebration would have been as unthinkable as flying to Mars when the couple met.

Lyon and Martin met through work and became inseparable, but at first only as friends. Soon, Martin revealed a secret. The pair were having drinks with a friend when talk turned to homosexuality. Martin knew details that surprised the other two women. They asked how she knew so much.

"Because I am one," Martin said.

One night, as the pair sat on the sofa in Lyon's apartment, Martin said she was upset that her friend was planning to leave on a cross-country trip. "She put her arm around me and sort of made half a pass," Lyon recalled. "Then I made the other half back."

At the time, both women kept their intimacy a secret. Lyon said she feared being exposed as a lesbian.

After they bought their home, they were invited to form a club with other lesbians in their neighborhood. "We formed a secret social club for lesbians," Martin said. "We just thought that was the greatest."

The club became the Daughters of Bilitis, considered one of the first lesbian organizations in the U.S.

As the years passed, the women became more active in gay and lesbian affairs.

Martin said coming out strengthened their union.

After so many years of keeping secrets, they said, public acknowledgment of their love is the best wedding gift possible. "It's really amazing and exciting," Lyon said.

Added Martin: "And exhausting."

carla.hall@latimes.com

john.glionna@latimes.com

Hall reported from Beverly Hills and Glionna from San Francisco. Times staff writer Duke Helfand contributed to this report.

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