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From the Los Angeles Times

Gay couples are emphasizing low-key weddings

Flamboyant images from same-sex ceremonies, activists say, could be used by opponents to convince California voters that gays and lesbians shouldn't have the right to marry.

By Jessica Garrison

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The gay and lesbian couples who packed a Hollywood auditorium last week had come seeking information about California's new marriage policies. But they also got some unsolicited advice.

Be aware.

Images from gay weddings, said Lorri L. Jean, chief executive of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, could be used by opponents in a campaign designed to persuade California voters that gays and lesbians should not have the right to marry. Those getting married, she cautioned, should never lose sight of what they might be supplying to the other side.

Sitting close to his husband-to-be in the audience, hairstylist Kendall Hamilton nodded and said he knew just what she meant. No "guys showing up in gowns," he said.

"It's a weird subject," added Hamilton, 39, who plans to wed his partner of five years, Ray Paolantonio. "We want everybody to be free, but the image does matter. . . . They are going to try to make us look like freaks."

The first legal same-sex marriages in California were performed Monday night, and thousands more gay couples are expected to flood into clerks' offices in the coming weeks to obtain marriage licenses. It's all happening with both sides keenly aware that in less than five months, voters will decide whether to amend the state Constitution to define marriage as being between a man and a woman only.

With that in mind, proponents are trying hard to manage what kinds of same-sex marriage images Californians see during this year's so-called Summer of Love.

Opponents maintain that Californians' views have not changed substantially since 2000, when more than 60% of voters cast ballots against same-sex marriage. They predict that the spectacle of men marrying men and women marrying women will anger voters and spur them to support the anti-same-sex marriage amendment.

"The more that homosexual activists wave their hijacked marriage licenses in people's faces, the more people will say, 'This isn't right. . . . What can I do about this?' " said Randy Thomasson, the founder of the Campaign for Children and Families.

Proponents predict just the opposite will happen, that when voters witness the love and commitment involved in the marriages, they will be won over and won't vote to disallow them.

Strategists cite polls showing that in 2004, after Massachusetts allowed gay marriage, people who saw the weddings became more supportive.

"All you had to do was just see it, and it was very difficult to then walk away and say, 'That is not a wonderful thing,' " said Eric Jay, an advisor to San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom. "It's the power of marriage."

That said, both sides know that the images of some partnerships may be more palatable than others.

"One of the things that have hurt the gay effort in California is the exhibitionism in San Francisco," which doesn't always play well elsewhere, said political analyst Tony Quinn.

During the campaign for Proposition 22, the successful 2000 initiative that defined marriage as between a man and a woman, Quinn said many Californians were appalled by images of groups like the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of gay male activists who dressed up like nuns.

With the initiative looming, proponents of same-sex marriage now are taking care to emphasize mainstream unions.

By design, San Francisco's first wedding, officiated by Newsom, was of octogenarian lesbians Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who have been together for more than half a century. They also were the first couple married by Newsom four years ago during the so-called Winter of Love, when San Francisco defied state law and began marrying same-sex couples. Those marriages were later invalidated, setting the stage for the legal confrontation that resulted in the Supreme Court decision allowing gay marriage.

The Martin-Lyon wedding on Monday, like other ceremonies held before today's official launch of same-sex marriage, was strictly orchestrated. Martin and Lyon were married in a private ceremony in Newsom's City Hall office, with only two news agencies -- the Associated Press and the hometown San Francisco Chronicle -- allowed to attend.

Many of the other early weddings in the state were also of long-term couples who could have been selected by central casting to appear both nonthreatening and mainstream. In many cases, news releases were issued and the media invited.

In Los Angeles, the first wedding at 5:01 p.m. Monday involved Robin Tyler, 66, and Diane Olson, 54. Today, George Takei, 72, who played Hikaru Sulu on "Star Trek," will get a marriage license with his partner of 21 years, Brad Altman. San Diego's first wedding will be between Bob Lehman, a former Marine who served a combat tour in the Persian Gulf, and his partner of 15 years, Tom Felkner.

One of Sacramento's first weddings will feature a former member of the Assembly, Dennis Mangers, and his partner of 17 years, Michael Sestak.

"One of the things about the gay and lesbian community is we're known for our outrageousness, our flamboyance," said West Hollywood City Councilman John Duran, who is president of the board of directors of Equality California, an organization pushing for same-sex marriage. "But we're under this incredible political pressure not to have those portrayals" right now.

Keeping celebrations tame may be tough, he said. "It's a micro-manager's nightmare. There's no way to control everything. All we can do is remind people that it is really important."

Political analysts said the anti-same-sex marriage side also needs to manage its image by downplaying its fringe elements.

"Whatever side becomes divisive about this, it is to their detriment," said political consultant Rob Stutzman, who managed the winning 2000 gay marriage initiative. "These campaigns should be seeking to run their messaging as mainstream as possible."

In that vein, Jeff Flint, a spokesman and strategist for the campaign to amend the Constitution, said the

campaign would not focus on individual marriages, but on the broader idea that marriage should be defined as only between a man and a woman.

"We don't need to complicate it with other peripheral issues like what is going to happen [this] week," he said.

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Times staff writers Tony Perry, Carla Hall and John Glionna contributed to this report.

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