

Here's to equal rights for all

By **AMY HALLORAN**

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Like halftime at the Super Bowl, acceptance speeches at the Oscars are a good way to measure the cultural barometer of America. While the song and dance that divides the biggest football game of the year is a mirror of stasis, however, the Oscar speeches often reflect change.

Dustin Lance Black, who won the Academy Award for best screenwriter for the film "Milk," spoke from his heart last week. The film is the story of Harvey Milk, San Francisco's gay and assassinated mayor. Black told how Milk's life inspired him as a gay teenager, and he assured gay teenagers that "very soon I promise you, you will have equal rights federally across this great nation of ours."

Wow. Was he writing fiction, or scripting a documentary that will be made in our lifetime?

I hope the latter.

Marriage equality is a matter that is near and dear to my heart. I met my best friend in church when we were 3, and he and I have been pals almost 40 years. In this time, we've had mates, and we've married. I got married in Vermont, and carried more than 1,000 federal civil rights across our 50 states.

My best friend married in Canada, just as he finished filming a documentary about marriage equality, "Tying the Knot." My best friend and his husband's marriage went unrecognized by New York until Gov. David Paterson issued an executive order in May 2008, legally acknowledging the relationships of gays and lesbians who wed out of state.

Our state has been a leader in equality and civil rights, and needs to extend true marriage equality as have Massachusetts and Connecticut. A bill for marriage equality passed the state Assembly two years ago. It still must pass the Senate.

A recent poll in New Jersey, which is considering such a law, found 48 percent of the state's residents in favor of gay marriage, and 43 percent opposed.

In many states, the numbers are similar, even where vicious battles over gay marriage have occurred. California granted same-sex couples the right to marry last year, and 36,000 people legally wed before Proposition 8 narrowly passed in the November election.

These 18,000 marriages are now facing forced divorce, thanks to lawsuits filed in December that questioned the marriages' legality. Legal proceedings have begun, and hopes are that the California Supreme Court will override the anti-marriage proposition as unconstitutional.

The award-winning screenwriter spoke eloquently at the Oscars because such thoughts cross his tongue on a regular basis. Black is an activist for the Courage Campaign, a group that began grassroots, door-to-door fighting against Prop 8 before the November vote.

By Valentine's Day, the Courage Campaign had collected more than 300,000 signatures from around the country. I was happy to add mine to the list.

I am as old as interracial marriage. Before I was born, in 1967, it was still illegal in some states for people of different races to marry. The U.S. Supreme Court declared the state of Virginia's anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional in the aptly named case of Loving vs. Virginia; the couple, whose last name was literally Loving, had been arrested in their home after having married across state lines.

I grew up as heterosexual marriage seemingly fell apart around me.

In college, I was an anomaly among my peers because my parents still lived with and loved each other. My best friend's parents, who shared in the joys of my adolescence, had parted. With divorce rates holding steady at around 50 percent, the big wonder is why there is any resistance at all to people wanting to take a stab at the difficult game of pair pairing.

Married people tend to be happier and healthier than our single counterparts. The institution protects families, and allows couples to share the risks of life: property, health, and lack thereof.

This about making sure our minorities matter as much as the rest of us, to paraphrase a Dutch proverb, because our true humanity is revealed in how we treat the least of us.

My children, my husband and I will witness a sea change, I hope soon, as we watch my best friend and his husband, aka The Uncles, enjoy marriage to the fullest extent of the law.

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