



The following are excerpts from an interview with Corey Rothermel, '96.

Thank you to both Corey and Doug for sharing their story with the LGBT Center.

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ITHACA
Love Story

Douglas and I met on the first day of classes at Ithaca College in 1992...

As I think back to that morning, I can clearly remember walking into Friends Hall.. Well, actually, it's really more like, I can vaguely recall stumbling into Friends Hall that morning. My first class at Ithaca was at 8:00 a.m., *Intro. to Poetry with Kevin Murphy*. And as I remember, the only reason I was able to make it there on time that day was through a sheer force of will to start the year off on the right foot. During my time away from school, I made it a priority of mine to avoid any responsibility that required me to be awake before 10:00 a.m.

Who are Doug and Corey?

Doug Neff
Corey Rothermel

Both graduated
from IC in 1996.

Doug graduated
with a double
major in music
and religion.

Corey graduated
with a major in
theatre and a minor
in religion.

Wedding Date:
City Hall
San Francisco, CA
March 10, 2004

Were you involved in a campus LGBT group?

Corey: I belonged to BiGaLA (The Bi-Sexual, Gay, and Lesbian Alliance) and served as the group's Secretary during my first year at IC and then stayed loosely involved with the organization until I graduated. I spoke at the free speech rock on Coming-Out Day in 1993 and traveled along with other members of BiGaLA to the Gay March on Washington that same spring. In my third year at IC I directed and Douglas and I both starred in a Black Box Production of the first one act in the *Torch Song Trilogy* in Dillingham Center.



What was the climate like at IC for sexual minority students at the time?

Well, compared to where I grew up in rural Pennsylvania, Ithaca College and its surrounding community was a paradise of acceptance and tolerance for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people in 1992.

That was the year that Bill Clinton beat the presidential incumbent George Bush Sr. at the polls and the country's attitude toward sexual minorities matured a little thanks to the progressive tone of his campaign and administration. Movies like *Philadelphia* and *The Crying Game* were playing at all the major cineplexes and every newspaper featured headline stories about "Gays in the Military" and the "Gay Civil Rights March on Washington". It seemed everyone in the United States was finally talking about gay rights. True, much of what was said was negative, but we were no longer invisible within our own culture. Straight people, who had never had any exposure to anyone openly gay before, were beginning to see stories that depicted us as decent people struggling with life just the same as them. And seeing us as human beings made it much harder for the average American to hate us without reason. All over the country small changes happened for the better during that time and in liberal towns like Ithaca, being queer became something you could say with pride.

When I'm asked now, I often describe Ithaca as a tiny San Francisco. But instead of having ten of something great, Ithaca has one or two of something great. Instead of ten great vegetarian restaurants, Ithaca has only one really good one (Moosewood). And the analogy applies to the local gay community, too. Instead of having an entire gay neighborhood, like the Castro in San Francisco, Ithaca has a couple of houses down the hill whose occupants proudly display rainbow flags in their windows. Instead of a dozen different clubs, Ithaca has a gay bar you can dance at (The Common Ground). That might not sound like much to some, but for small town America, that is huge!

This isn't to say, however, that Ithaca was perfect by any means. It wasn't then and I'm sure it isn't now. Douglas and I both had to deal with some tough situations while we attended IC. My first set of roommates at the College Circle Apartments called a house meeting to discuss whether or not I would be allowed to continue to live there after I came out to them about my sexuality. And one time Douglas walked out of his dorm room and discovered someone had written, "Neff is a faggot!" on the wipe-away board hanging on the outside of his door. But despite a couple of bumps in the road, Douglas and I loved our time at Ithaca and often talk about moving back there someday to settle down.

Were you involved in other activities?

Yes. I managed Ithaca's Cross Country team the fall of 1992. I attended (and later volunteered on) the Catholic Community's IC Peace Retreats all four of my years at Ithaca (Douglas attended his sophomore year and then volunteered on the retreats his junior and senior years). I was assistant director for and Douglas co-starred in a Black Box Production of an original play called *Traveling Across America* in the spring of '93. I designed and assistant directed a production of *Godspell* for the Muller Chapel Players in the spring of '94. Douglas was the Director of the Catholic Community's Peer Ministry Group his junior and senior year and I was also a member of the group during that time.

How and when did you decide to marry?

When Douglas and I first heard about the marriage licenses being issued in the city, we were hesitant to take part in the event. We'd been planning on having a big commitment ceremony with all of our friends and family sometime in the next year or two and the idea of rushing over to San Francisco to get in line seemed like it would cheapen the experience of the real thing. It was only after the Valentine's Day weekend had passed and the marriage licenses continued to be issued that it became clear to us that this was for real and that we needed to participate in it.

This was history in the making.

We made our decision to get married the day after City Hall started requiring everyone to call ahead for an appointment. Doug and I both spent that morning hitting redial on our phones over and over. From what I was told later, the phone tree in City Hall had collapsed under the volume of incoming calls and their voicemail system was no longer accessible either. They were reduced to four incoming and outgoing lines to handle all of the city's business. Luckily our persistence paid off.



What can you tell us about your wedding day at City Hall?

When the big day finally arrived we drove over to the city, parked our car and met our friends on the steps of City Hall. Still trying to keep the wedding small, we each asked only a pair of friends to attend. Our co-ministers from our church, The Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, actually called us and asked if they could act as our officiants for the ceremony. We were delighted to have them join us.

Our appointment was for 11:15 a.m. and when that rolled around we gathered up everyone and herded them into City Hall and down to the clerk's office. Once inside we filled out our application for a marriage license and took a number to be processed. The city employees were so gracious to everyone. Each of them looked exhausted, yet radiant with joy to be performing their job. With so many people expressing good will toward one another, San Francisco City Hall became the closest thing this side of heaven.

When our number was called, we sat down with a clerk, swore that we were who we said we were and then signed the paperwork for the license. Because our ministers were serving as our officiants, we didn't need to hire a Justice of the Peace to finish the job. All that was left was to find a spot in the rotunda and get married.



A lot of people have asked me since then if getting married made me feel different. It did. We tried to keep it simple, but our wedding was far more meaningful than I could have ever imagined it would be. It was for real. It still feels that way.

After we finished the service and our witnesses and ministers had all signed the license, we walked our paperwork down to another office in the building to be processed. Getting the official document only took about twenty minutes, but while we waited we got to meet all the other couples who had gotten married around the same time as us. This was one of the best parts of the day. Meeting all these wonderful people who you shared something truly unique with. I'll never forget it.

When we got to our car, we discovered that our friends, Rachel and Gina, had decorated the windows with "Just Married". Tin cans tied onto the bumper and all.

We drove through the city, on our way to the reception, drawing everyone's attention. Taxis were honking their horns and everyone waved or gave us the thumbs up or clapped. It was like being a celebrity for the day.



Some personal thoughts on the whole experience

Personal Journal: March 11, 2004: No More Meteor Showers Inside City Hall

Douglas and I both got up early for work this morning. Much earlier than is normal for us. Douglas had to get to school to prep a worksheet for his New Testament students on the film they would be watching in class that day entitled *Judas* and I had to hit the road bright and early to attend the Recycled Product Trade Show at the Sacramento Convention Center. After spending most of the previous day running around on pure adrenaline, both of us had to drag ourselves out of bed this morning. I thought to myself, "This is what we get for not requesting time off for a honeymoon." Grrrrrr.

Neither of us was near a television or radio, so we never heard the news that the California Supreme Court had ordered San Francisco City Hall to stop issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples sometime around 2:30 p.m. It wasn't until the end of the day, when I'd driven all the way back from Sacramento and was dropping off our agency's display at the office that I talked to anyone who knew what was going on. I was bringing in a stack of boxes from my truck, when a few of our program managers excitedly questioned me all about yesterday's ceremony. One of them said, "Boy, you got in there just in time." I asked what she meant and that's when I found out what happened.

It took a few minutes for it to sink in. Everyone was crowded around my cubicle wanting to look at the wedding pictures we'd posted on the web. Everyone kept saying over and over how lucky we'd been to get in there before the cut-off. But I didn't feel lucky. My mind drifted back over the day before and how Doug had described all the marriages taking place all over City Hall. "It's like a meteor shower in here. Look, there's one! And there's another!" as he pointed to the multitude of weddings taking place on every level of the rotunda. I thought about all those anonymous couples we'd met yesterday, each shaking our hands and giving us bear hugs of congratulations because we were all so happy for one another. We got married. We all got married. For real!! And that made me think of all the couples who wouldn't know that feeling, whose weddings had now been cancelled. Couples who had tuxedos being altered, rings on order and boutonnieres to pick-up at the flower shop. Couples who had family and friends who were going to meet them on the steps of City Hall to witness their special day. They wouldn't know any of the joy and public confirmation we had known. There would be no more meteor showers inside City Hall.

I called Doug as soon as I had a moment to myself and told him the news. He hadn't heard what had happened either. When I tried to explain to him the bad news, an image of a couple we'd met yesterday flashed in my mind and I was reduced to sobbing into the phone. I didn't feel lucky. I felt guilty to have one of the happiest days of my life, when others, just like us, had been denied that same happiness. And isn't that exactly what this issue boils down to; some relationships being publicly acknowledged and celebrated by their community, while others are discredited and ignored.

When Douglas and I got home from work that night, we sat in our living room opening up wedding gifts given to us by friends and family as we watched the local news report on the day's events at City Hall. We felt such grief for the couples we saw being turned away at the city clerk's desk. We wanted to do something to stop this injustice. We discussed all kinds of elaborate ways we could organize protests of the state Supreme Court's ruling, but we realized the best thing we could do was simply tell our story to others. Share this personal moment in our lives with the world and hope that whoever read it would appreciate what an important ritual this was for us and that it should not be denied to other same-sex couples.

The following morning I picked up the phone and started calling every contact I could think of who might be interested in reporting our story. Some of them were and their articles and website postings have now led us to you.