

ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL



PHOTOGRAPHY Elisha Clarke MAKEUP Empower Studio

Laura Cunningham discusses the upcoming same-sex marriage referendum and the need for change

SPRING BREATHES NEW life. It delivers growth, renewal and a fresh start to all things. Spring 2015 brings with it one of the most important opportunities for change this small country has seen in quite some time: the chance to afford equal rights to one another, with the long awaiting same-sex marriage referendum. Marriage is a subject close to my heart and an institution I've got big love for, and the idea that only some people are allowed to enjoy it, just doesn't compute. So on an as-yet undetermined date early next year, I'll be heading to the polls, proverbial sledgehammer in hand, hoping to help knock down an ugly and outdated brick wall. Of course, I've been attending and writing about civil partnerships since February 2011. So what's the difference? From guardianship issues to social support rights – by law, civil partnership is not the same as marriage. And therein

lies the issue; it's not the same – not equal. This issue, I spoke to two couples; one who celebrated their love this year with a civil partnership and one determined to wait for equality.

DEIRDRE AND FIONA

Dubliners, Deirdre and Fiona met through mutual friends in 2005 in Cape Cod. "Like all Irish students who do J1s, we arranged to meet for drinks and ended up spending the entire summer together," explains Fiona. The couple, who now live in Glenageary, went travelling together when they finished university and spent two years living and working in Australia. "In 2011 we returned home to Ireland and settled down. We even got a puppy called Winston."

In November 2012, Dee organised a weekend away to Farnham Estate, Cavan and surprised a delighted Fiona with an engagement ring. "Our



wedding day was everything we could have imagined and more. People came home from all over to be with us. A registrar conducted our ceremony at our reception venue, Ballymagarvey Village. We didn't have bridesmaids but each had our next eldest sisters as witnesses and we walked up the aisle together. Two friends said beautiful readings and we

did the usual lighting of the unity candle and exchanging of rings. We had a drinks reception with personalised cocktails: The 1983 Mojito (our birth year) and the Cape Cod Margarita (where we met). We can't stop looking at our photos. It really was the perfect day."

Speaking about their decision to have a civil partnership, Fiona



PHOTOGRAPHY Caprani Photography

says: "We had our wedding at a time that suited us in our lives. Yes, we would have preferred if there had been marriage equality in Ireland at the time, but there was no date set for the referendum and we weren't willing to put off our big day until the government got around to it. We would have loved a humanist ceremony, but unfortunately they aren't legally allowed to carry out civil partnerships."

Asked if they plan to make it (even more) official if the law changes next year, Fiona explains: "We chose to go ahead with a civil partnership to show our family and friends that we are fully committed to each other, but also to show the government that there is an appetite for gay couples' relationships to be recognised. Marriage equality is hugely important and we will be the first in line when it becomes legal. We purposely didn't get wedding bands for our wedding day, as we want to do that when we

have marriage equality, hopefully next year. We exchanged our engagement rings instead."

And finally, their message to the voting public of Ireland: "Don't assume the referendum will be passed. Everybody needs to go out and vote on the day and show their support. It's so important that all our citizens are deemed equal. There are so many LGBT families in legal limbo who need recognition and this is the only way to achieve it."

DENISE AND OLIVIA

Originally from Dublin, Denise and Olivia met 10 years ago when their respective best friends were dating each other, as Denise explains: "We were friends before we started dating. We were both in other relationships, but would see each other at social events. I always thought she was really cute, she thought I was a bit nutty. We got engaged in 2008 in Costa Rica on a group hike/bike/raft holiday. We were staying in a beautiful

place called Claro de Luna and on this particular day, Olivia was quite jumpy, with an almost nervous energy around her. We had a couple of hours before the group would meet for dinner and I wanted to go the local shopping mall to exchange a dress I had bought for my niece. Olivia didn't seem happy, but I thought we had loads of time. Little did I know, she had (with the help of the group) organised a picnic with Champagne under a beautiful tree in a private part of the gardens. Eventually she got me to go 'on a walk'. She was so nervous, she was shaking when she asked me to marry her. She produced the ring and I, of course, said yes. We moved to a lovely little cottage in Wicklow together seven years ago."

Proud Mummies to the completely adorable Isaac, Denise explains the couple's road to parenthood. "Five years ago, we started our journey to have a family. We went through various procedures in different clinics, both here and abroad. It was a very difficult time for us, mentally and physically - individually and as a couple. We decided to give IVF one more try last year. It was our very last chance, as we both decided it was too hard to go through any more disappointment. But all our dreams came through in May this year, when our son Isaac was born in the Coombe hospital. The staff were amazing all the way through the pregnancy; they never questioned Olivia's presence. She was the other mum all along. She was present at the birth and treated very respectfully."

So having been engaged for six years, why haven't the couple tied the knot yet? "Civil partnership is brilliant. It's a major step forward for same sex couples and it provides some very important

safeguards. But, for us, this is about equality. We recently attended my sister's wedding and it was a magical weekend with our family and friends present. Why can't we have the same? We want to share our love on a special day like everybody else and we don't feel our relationship is any different to our siblings. No one treats us any differently. We want to be married, not partnered. Another important issue for us is the fact that right now, Olivia has no rights to Isaac. Even though she is just as much his mum as I am. She has been there from day one; nappy changing, settling him when he cries, giving him kisses and cuddles and protecting him. Marriage would give Olivia and Isaac the right to be legally mother and son."

And their message to voters? "All we want is to be the same as every other couple. We want to have a wedding (not a gay wedding, just a wedding) to show our love for each other and our son - for our family unit. We urge people to vote yes in the 2015 referendum. This is an important step forward for the future of our loved ones and for our children growing up. We want them to live in a world where their choices are respected and seen as legally equal. If people don't support same sex relationships on religious or other grounds, that's their right, but we want them to see beyond the 'gay couple' part and just see us as people looking for the same rights as everybody else." ♥

An IPSOS/MRBI survey in April 2014 found that 67% of people are planning to vote Yes in the forthcoming referendum. However, LGBT bodies (and us!) are urging voters not to be complacent and presume the bill will be passed and to get out and vote in 2015.