



Retirees help defeat gay-marriage ban

In Arizona, the campaign against the proposal focused on elderly heterosexuals

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By KIM COBB

When Arizona voters signed enough petitions to put a same-sex marriage ban on Tuesday's ballot, opponents decided their best shot at defeating it was to shine a light on real people who would be hurt by Proposition 107.

If most of those real people were not gay, they said, all the better.

That's how Al Breznay and Maxine Piatt, a charming, elderly heterosexual couple, became poster children for the "No on Prop 107" movement and key players in making Arizona the first state to defeat a gay marriage referendum.

Opponents practically erased gays from their arguments in the months leading to the vote, focusing instead on the impact the law could have on unmarried couples in general.

"A lot of people thought it was just a gay thing," Breznay explained. "We certainly are not gay." Nor are they married.

Arizona law already bans same-sex marriage. Proposition 107 would have codified the ban in the state constitution as well as prohibit state and local governments from recognizing legal arrangements like the civil unions or domestic partnerships popular with gay couples.

Partners in retirement

In Arizona, with its large retiree population, elderly couples frequently forgo marriage to preserve higher benefits under Social Security, Medicare and private pensions. That's why Breznay and Piatt chose, instead, to make their eight-year arrangement formal by signing the city of Tucson's Domestic Partnership Registry.

"We didn't want to be living in sin," said Breznay, 79. "But my goodness, at our age we were mostly interested in companionship and combining our incomes."

Yet Breznay worried that if Piatt, 75, were hospitalized, he would be denied the role they both wanted him to have in making her medical decisions. Their legal relationship through the Domestic Partner Registry got him into the intensive care unit to see her when she was hospitalized last year, he said, and helped him obtain power of attorney for her.

Breznay and Piatt were recruited by "No on Prop 107" supporters to file a lawsuit to block the ballot initiative. But they weren't a tough sell.

When the lawsuit failed, Prop 107 opponents started thinking about what it would take to get public opinion on their side. The group's advertisement points out the approach they decided to take. There were no photos of gay couples. The ad, still on www.noprop107.com features photos of a young heterosexual couple, a child, and two elderly heterosexual couples.

Campaign critique

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force was reluctant to say what combination of factors may have swung the vote in Arizona. But deputy executive director Rea Carey had no criticism of the "No on Prop 107" group for de-emphasizing gay rights in its campaign.

"As we look at this election in the bigger picture, the entire election — not just on the marriage issue — moved toward the center," Carey said. "I think what we're seeing around the country is different campaigns have made choices that they think are appropriate for their state."

Proposition 107 failed 51 percent to 49 percent in a state that has more than 1 million registered Republican voters, 854,000 Democrats and 682,000 independents. Voters approved same-sex marriage bans in seven states Tuesday, joining at least 17 other states.