



## Jersey City's First Domestic Partners Give Perspective on Obama's Endorsement of Marriage Equality

By **Matt Hunger** • May 10th, 2012 • Category: **[Blog](#), [News](#)**

When President Barack Obama announced yesterday that his view on marriage equality “evolved” into one of endorsement, it came in sharp contrast to other recent politicized discussions on the civil rights issue. Just a few days before, North Carolina’s voters adopted Amendment 1, a law explicitly forbidding marriage equality in their state constitution. And a few months before that, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie vetoed the state legislation’s decision to endorse marriage equality here in New Jersey.

“An issue of this magnitude and importance, which requires a constitutional amendment, should be left to the people of New Jersey to decide,” the governor said in a statement.

Which is why Beth Achenbach, one half of Jersey City’s first-ever domestic partnership, greeted Obama’s announcement with tempered enthusiasm. “I’m just feeling very proud that I voted for [Obama,] but also there is a part of me that wishes he would have said it earlier on.”

Still, this adamant support of the issue is a big change of position for Achenbach, who once viewed getting married as not “all that important.”

“As long as two people were committed and loved one another,” said Achenbach, “I did not really see the point.”

That changed when she “started hearing the stories of [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender] couples being denied the simplest of rights, like being told they could not be with their dying partner in the hospital, or a woman having to move out of the house that she shared with her girlfriend for twenty-plus years because it was only in one of their names.”

While she does not “need marriage to let people know” she loves her domestic partner of 10-years, “I do need it to protect us, and the civil union in NJ has continually failed to do that for many couples.” In fact, companies get away with denying “rights to benefits” for their LGBT workers and their partners because they use the word “marriage” in place of “civil union,” she explained.

It was with this understanding of civil unions’ importance that Achenbach, who is active in Jersey City’s LGBT community, changed her mind. In fact, she and Catherine Hecht, her partner, decided they “wanted to be the first couple in Jersey City” to get a domestic partnership and arrived around 8am at the City Clerk’s office. “Right when they opened so we were number one,” she said.

Although first, the couple wouldn’t be alone — about 20 minutes later, recalled Hecht, another couple showed up, and a line formed outside the clerk’s office.

“I think Jersey City is pretty progressive in terms of this issue,” said Hecht, “but I also think like any marginalized community, LGBT issues are not clear to everyone, so education is always ongoing.”

In fact, it was on that very day, when Hecht and Achenbach were to be officially recognized in a domestic partnership, that an important lesson was learned all around. City Clerk Robert Byrne, recalled Hecht, reminded everyone on line that they were getting a domestic partnership, not “married.”

“His comment bothered me for a few minutes,” said Hecht. “It made me feel like the commitment we were making was being made to be less-than, and the huge achievement those of us in the LGBT community had worked so hard for wasn’t being recognized.”

“We did understand we weren’t getting all the same benefits as a marriage license, but it was our only option,” she went on. “To us we were getting married and it was a very special day.”

While Obama’s endorsement is seen as an important, marriage equality does not exist in New Jersey because of Governor Christie’s decision to veto the marriage equality bill. The governor maintained at the time that he is for protecting the rights of minority groups, but said he wanted the decision to go to referendum.

It’s an argument that’s been made before, much to the dismay of civil rights activists who note that civil rights should not be subject to the whim of the majority. Christie’s critics cited the moral failings of the “separate but equal” argument, a concern Achenbach echoed.

“Unless we have marriage we will always be second-class citizens,” she said. “And it is very much the case with Domestic Partnership. Try explaining to your family and friends that you are domestic partners. You get these strange looks and you always have to add the explanation of what a domestic partnership means.”

She said it’s “like you need validation that you are equal.”

Added Hecht, “We constantly have to explain what the difference is between all three terms, [domestic partnership, civil union, and marriage.]”

“Regardless of what our status is when we are in Jersey City, the state of New Jersey, or another state that recognizes domestic partnerships, civil unions or same-sex marriage,” she continued, “we are just friends traveling in a car in every other state that has no such laws on the books.”

According to a poll by the Eagleton Institute, just about the majority of the state agrees with marriage equality. The poll, which was conducted in mid-February prior to the legislature’s vote, found that 54 percent of New Jersey residents support marriage equality; however, 53 percent said they also agreed with Christie’s veto. While same-sex marriage is itself not the problem, the people apparently want the chance to vote on it.

“It’s surprising that so many of those who support same-sex marriage are also in favor of a referendum,” Rutgers-Eagleton Poll Director David Redlawski, a professor of political science at Rutgers, said in a statement about the poll. “It may be that given several polls showing majority support among voters, supporters of same-sex marriage think it would win in November. But in the face of a likely intensive campaign from opponents, this could be wishful thinking.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, 60 percent of people who oppose the bill support the referendum, according to the Eagleton poll.

Achenbach added that voters with little interest or knowledge of the realities of what the issue means could unfairly affect a pivotal vote. The poll found that only 25 percent of people polled say same-sex marriage is “one of the most important issues facing New Jersey today,” while 40 percent disagree, maintaining it is “not at all important.”

“I don’t agree with the referendum when it comes to civil rights,” she said. “We should all have equal rights and protections under the law. That shouldn’t be decided in a voting booth. There are plenty of people that don’t even read or understand the referendums and just get in the booth and do a eeny meeny miny mo!”

While a referendum has a better chance of passing in New Jersey than other states, explains Redlawski, “in most places where it has been on the ballot, opponents have been the ones who were intensely concerned and mobilized by the campaign. In New Jersey, most opponents of same-sex marriage appear to not care as much about it as supporters, at least for the moment. But a strong opposition campaign could change that.”

It’s a simpler position for people with no vested interest in the law to push for a referendum. But for people with the lived experience of seeing rights afforded to others but not to them, it’s a very different proposition.

“We are all just humans wanting to love and protect the people we care about. I have the same standards as many do — I’m nice to people, I’m involved in my community, I recycle, worry about bills, what I eat and my future,” said Achenbach. “I take the train to work, support local business, donate money to worthy causes but I just happen to love a girl I have been with for 10 years. I don’t want the ability to have more than anyone else has, just the same.”

The [entirety of the poll can be read here.](#)

(Disclosure: Beth Achenbach’s domestic partner, Catherine Hecht, is the associate publisher of *JCI*. While the LGBT community in Jersey City is of course filled with many important stories and perspectives worthy of being told, from a writer’s standpoint I appreciated the parallel between the first domestic partnership in the city ahead of a vote that may ultimately allow for marriage equality in the state.)

***Like what you've read here? Please consider [making a donation or becoming a sustaining member.](#) As a grassroots news organization, we rely on community support -- as well as paid advertising -- to survive.***



**Matt Hunger** is a staff writer for the *Jersey City Independent*.

**Email this author** | All posts by **Matt Hunger**



## Add New Comment

[Login](#)



Type your comment here.

Showing 0 comments

Sort by newest first

M [Subscribe by email](#) S [RSS](#)

## Reactions

