



IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH



Short

"In Sickness and In Health" chronicles the lives of three same-sex couples fighting to marry the partners they love—and tragically, one couple's heart breaks as its dream dies at the cruel hands of ALS.

Medium

In 2002, seven couples in the state of New Jersey filed a lawsuit in hopes of legalizing same-sex marriage. "In Sickness and In Health" closely chronicles the journey of three of these activist couples.

The most poignant characters in the story are Marilyn and Diane, partners of 14 years, who were dedicated to fighting for the marriage right they desperately desired. Before their dream could be realized, Marilyn was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

You will be forever changed after stepping into the lives of these couples, watching them fight to marry the partners they love—and, tragically, watching one couple's heartbreak as its dream dies at the cruel hands of ALS.

Full-Length

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Chris and Craig have been together for over 36 years. Marcye and Karen are mothers of two beautiful children and have spent the last 15 years together. The most poignant characters in the story are Marilyn and Diane, partners of 14 years, who were dedicated to fighting for the marriage right they desperately desired.

Before their dream could be realized—many months before the New Jersey Supreme Court heard the couple's final argument, Marilyn was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

You will be forever changed after stepping into the lives of these couples, watching them fight for the right to marry the partners they love—and, tragically, watching one couple's heartbreak as its dream dies at the cruel hands of ALS. While Marilyn and Diane never officially took the vow "In Sickness and in Health," they, unfortunately, felt the pain of 'death do us part'.





Diane Marini and Marilyn Maneely met fourteen years ago at a spiritual retreat and had an immediate connection. Shortly afterwards, they made their home together in Haddonfield, New Jersey. Even as they raised Marilyn's five children from a previous marriage—the law prevented them from marrying each other.

In 2002, Marilyn and Diane became one of seven couples who filed a lawsuit against the state of New Jersey fighting for same-sex marriage. During their pursuit, Diane battled and overcame breast cancer. After surviving such a scare, they thought the worst was behind them, but tragically it was not. Diane attended the recent Supreme Court hearing alone, holding a picture of her late partner. She lost Marilyn in September of 2005 to ALS, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Unable to legally sign her partner's death certificate; Diane felt the extreme pain of losing a spouse, but she is still not considered a widow in the eyes of the law.



Marcy and Karen Nicholson-McFadden have been together for 15 years and have built their home in Aberdeen, New Jersey. At the center of their world is their son Kasey—a 6-year old who loves to paint and play with super heroes, and daughter Maya—a 4-year old who likes cooking and relentlessly copying her big brother. Marcy and Karen joined the lawsuit for the right to marry in order to protect their precious children and each other.

The Nicholson-McFadden family faces financial and emotional hardships other couples raising children do not. They have to pay more for less health insurance coverage and filling out forms is an endless nightmare. When Marcy's father Nick died, Karen did not qualify for airline bereavement fares. Even though Nick always considered Karen part of the family, the fact remains: she was not his legal daughter-in-law. The ultimate insult came on the best day of their lives—the day they became mothers. Just after Marcy delivered their son Kasey with Karen at her side, a nurse in the newborn nursery challenged Karen's role as a parent. Karen and Marcy deal with discrimination every day, but they keep Kasey and Maya as their first priority. Professionally, they launched the Nicholson McFadden Group specializing in executive recruiting. They love the joys of family life and have been able to have one parent at home full-time with their children since their birth.



Chris Lodewyks and Craig Hutchison met as freshmen in college and they have been together for 36 years. They live in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey. Chris is retired from a management position in the plastics industry, and Craig works as an investment portfolio manager for Fahnestock Asset Management in Summit. Chris and Craig joined the lawsuit to finally receive the respect and the rights they deserve.

Chris and Craig have a long-standing tradition with several friends of buying food and serving meals at a homeless shelter at least four times a year. Chris spearheaded many community projects, including a town clean-up day, with businesses donating food and prizes to hundreds of volunteers. Craig serves on the board of a YMCA camp.

While Chris and Craig have a community of supportive friends who respect and include them, they face expenses, are denied protections, and lack legal recognition for their relationship. They have spent decades paying into Social Security but will receive no spousal benefits. They also have to pay for a second health plan. "After 30 years of commitment and responsibility, the government treats our accomplishments together as worthless," says Craig.



2007 is a huge year for Red Star Productions. It marks the release of our first full-length film and the end of a five-year journey.

The story officially began in 2002 when seven couples in the state of New Jersey filed a lawsuit in hopes of legalizing same-sex marriage. As they began their lawsuit, Red Star Productions began to record their pursuit of justice.

Marilyn Maneely, a long-time family friend of Director Pilar Prassas, was a plaintiff in the lawsuit fighting for the right to marry her partner of 14 years, Diane Marini. The two were raising five children from Marilyn's first marriage.

At the origin of the project, Prassas was drawn to the children of the couples and hoped to produce a true portrayal of reality for children growing up with same-sex parents. Two years into the project, Marilyn was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. ALS is a motor neuron disease that is terminal and brutally debilitating, ultimately resulting in complete paralysis and death.



With Marilyn's approval, Red Star Productions found a new destination. We began filming her personal struggle with the disease, experiencing first-hand the devastation of ALS. We witnessed the coming together of a community to support an activist, the heartbreak of a partner who would never realize the dream of marriage, and the quest of five children to help their mother live her last days with dignity and purpose.



Pilar Prassas - Director / Co-Producer / Co-Cinematographer
Peter Heacock - Editor / Co-Producer / Co-Cinematographer



Pilar Prassas - Director/Co-Producer/Co-Cinematographer

Prassas is a storyteller at heart. With her Broadcast Journalism degree from Boston University, Prassas enjoys bringing other people's stories to life. The documentary "In Sickness and In Health" was a gift that Prassas was given by her main character —the late Marilyn Maneely. Shooting inside the window of Maneely's life has allowed Prassas to attach a human face to a social and political issue. Her goal with her first feature-length film is to create visual opportunity for people to look outside their own eyes, minds and lives. The building blocks for her career came from her experience as a scriptwriter for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, a producer for WEEI Sports Talk Radio, a feature writer for Sports Club Magazine and her current position at Reuters, the World's News Leader.

Peter Heacock – Editor/Co-Producer/Co-Cinematographer

Heacock studied film production at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts where he graduated in 2001 as a University Honors Scholar. While studying under renowned documentary filmmaker George Stoney, Peter directed and shot The Glen of the Downs, an award-winning film about the first international environmental protest in Ireland. Immediately after graduating from NYU, Peter returned to Philadelphia to work as an experimental filmmaker in galleries around the city. Peter signed onto "In Sickness and In Health" in 2005. Along with working to finish this project, Peter is currently editing documentaries for Hahnemann Hospital and writing and developing several projects.



We begin the story with Marilyn Maneely's childhood. Marilyn grew up in New Jersey with her parents and two brothers. She was a good student who went off to nursing school, where she was quickly swept off her feet by a dashing man named Nester. After the two were married, they decided to settle down in a small quaint town called Haddonfield. Over the next ten years, they had five children together. Marilyn was a loving mother to all of them. But despite having everything she'd ever wished for - Marilyn realized that her life wasn't exactly, her dream come true.

The story unfolds chronologically. We are immediately introduced to Marilyn and Diane. They sit on a couch and recount the events that brought them together. Marilyn had a family with five children when she met Diane at a retreat in 1990. They became good friends over the week and were saddened that the trip was coming to an end. When Marilyn told Diane that she wanted to see her again, Diane finally revealed that she is gay. At that point, Marilyn's entire life flashed before her eyes. She has feelings for this woman... "I am gay." Three days later, Marilyn was in front of a divorce lawyer.

Since Marilyn had already been married before, she understood the difference in the level of protection that a gay couple enjoys compared with that of a straight, married couple. So when they received a phone call asking if they would be interested in joining a lawsuit for the right to marry, they immediately accepted. Marilyn and Diane have always been outspoken members of a small, upper-middle class community. They became one of seven couples in the case that Lambda Legal brought against the state of New Jersey.

Through the lawsuit, we are introduced to the lawyer, David Buckel, as well as two other same-sex couples: Chris and Craig, and Marcye and Karen. These two couples, along with Marilyn and Diane, establish immediate bonds with each other while they travel throughout New Jersey trying to educate people about their cause. All the while, David Buckel is behind the scenes taking the case through the lesser courts and appealing the decisions. Years pass. President Bush tries to pass an amendment to the constitution banning same-sex marriage, but the motion fails in the senate. Marcye and Karen give birth to a beautiful daughter named Maya. Chris and Craig travel the world. And Marilyn and Diane see the last child go off to college and look forward to their time ahead. Tragically, that time would be cut short.

In the fall of 2005, Marilyn began to notice that something was wrong. Her balance was off; her handwriting wasn't her own. Gradually Diane began to notice and finally took Marilyn to a doctor. The diagnosis was ALS, otherwise known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Marilyn had a very severe form of the disease and the effects were immediate. One of her children describes it, as "every time we returned home, there was something else that she couldn't do." This was most apparent to Diane, who had to live with this morbid reality everyday.

Fortunately, New Jersey did have some protection for them in the form of Domestic Partnership. In response to the litigation, lawmakers had passed the bill granting 6 rights to same-sex couples. Originally, Marilyn and Diane said that they wouldn't get "DP'd", but the grim reality of the situation forced them to seek any protection they could find.



"In Sickness and In Health" shows Marilyn's health decline and the effects of the situation on Diane and the children. However, even until the end, Marilyn maintained her sense of humor and mental acuity. Although her fate was inevitable, Marilyn refused to succumb to the disease before her first daughter was married. Ironically, the wedding took place in Massachusetts, the only state to have legalized same-sex marriage. We follow Marilyn up to her last weekend with her kids and, finally, we hear Diane's description of her final moments with Marilyn.

Upon Marilyn's death, Diane went on to sign the papers that were necessary to have Marilyn's body donated for science, but she was told that being a Domestic Partner did not give her the right to do so. Empowered by this denial, Diane decided to continue the fight in memory of Marilyn.

Five months after Marilyn's death, the case is heard before the New Jersey Supreme Court. David Buckel presented a passionate argument, while the State's defense relied on the traditional definition of marriage. Eight months later, a decision is finally handed down: all Justice's believe that the couples were denied their rights as citizens, but they differ over how these rights should be defined. The majority voted that the New Jersey Legislature had 180 days to make a final decision.

The Legislature was up to the challenge and took only 60 days to decide. The Legislature declined to call the union "marriage" - what the plaintiffs had fought for five years to achieve. Rather, they granted the couples all of the same rights and called the bond "civil unions". Chris and Craig and Marcye and Karen did not attend the voting of the bill because they knew that the Legislature was not going to come through for them in the end. The two couples felt that they had received "separate but equal" citizenship. David Buckel watched from above as senators vowed to pass same-sex marriage laws "in the near future," but in the end, he felt that the state had failed them all.

On February 23, 2007, gay/lesbian couples across the state of New Jersey received Civil Unions. Without Marilyn by her side, Diane traveled to Collingswood to witness the excitement first-hand. "It was a bittersweet ending." Standing on the side-line, Diane smiled knowing that her and Marilyn had secured all of these rights and protections, but in the same breath, without using the word "marriage" - "same-sex couples are still considered second-class citizens."

At the end of the documentary, we are left with remembrances of Marilyn and how much of her time and energy she gave for the cause. How much more must people give to teach others that love is the only thing that matters?

REDSTARPRODUCTIONS

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