

## **Civil union next step in 16-year journey**

**By Glenn Rolfe**, Sussex County Post

SUSSEX COUNTY—Civil unions in Delaware will become effective New Year's Day, 2012.

Six days later, Milton residents Douglas Marshall-Steele and Corey Marshall-Steele—who exchanged vows in 1995—plan to tie the knot in a now legally-official same-gender civil union in Delaware.

A private ceremony performed by their Episcopal parish priest Saturday, Jan. 7 will mark a major step in their journey toward equality, rights, benefits and responsibilities.

"It's not full marriage, but we're gathering this up, in addition to our ceremony 16-plus years ago," said Douglas Marshall-Steele. "It's another step on the way."

In Sussex County, licenses for civil unions will be available Tuesday, Jan. 3—county government's first business day following the New Year's break. Upon obtaining a license, there is a 24-hour waiting period.

Clerk of the Peace George Parish, a Republican who politically is opposed to same-sex civil unions, has pledged to follow the law of the land and joyfully perform in his office—or other approved staging venue—the ceremony for same-sex couples wishing to bond through civil union.

"We're going to comply with the law," said Mr. Parish. "We're going to treat everybody with respect and dignity which they should expect from elected officials."

"It is always nice when elected officials choose to obey the law, especially in Sussex County," said Douglas Marshall-Steele, the volunteer in-charge coordinator of Toward Equality, a website-based campaign geared at securing equality for all Delawareans.

"And those who have already executed a same-gender marriage or civil union in another state, automatically those become Delaware civil unions on the first (of January)," said Douglas Marshall-Steele. "They don't have to wait until the first business day."

Now retired, Douglas Marshall-Steele, 57, and Corey Marshall-Steele, 42, who's employed by the State of Delaware, first exchanged vows in 1995—at their home, not at their church.

"The bishop at that time would not allow that service to occur in the church," said Douglas Marshall-Steele, noting the ceremony at their residence featured an Episcopal priest and the Eucharist or communion, attended by 40+ guests, with a

three –tiered cake. “We had all the trappings of a wedding, but of course it did not have any legal backing from either the state or the feds.

“And, it was the first blessing of a same-gender union in our diocese, the Episcopal Diocese of Delaware,” Douglas Marshall-Steele added.

Same-sex civil unions in Delaware bring a number of the same rights, responsibilities and benefits afforded to state recognized marriage.

“On the state level it is estimated that the rights, benefits and responsibilities number into the hundreds. Things like health insurance, adoption and many other state issues automatically will accrue to a couple who have entered into a civil union in the State of Delaware,” said Douglas Marshall-Steele. “The (U.S.) Government Accountability Office, the GAO, has determined that there are 1,138 rights, responsibilities or benefits that accrue to marriage on the federal level. *When* that happens, we’ll have all of those benefits.”

For Douglas Marshall-Steele and Corey Marshall-Steele, Jan 7 is a significant day, albeit much later than they had wished.

“For us, it is rather like the two-part European method of marriage: a religious ceremony and a separate legal ceremony—although in Europe those events are not staggered by 17 years!” said Douglas Marshall-Steele. “Essentially, the State of Delaware is catching up legally with what we did 16-plus years ago. Of course the feds have yet to catch up.”