

'It was a phenomenal sense of empowerment.'

A first for Mem Chu

Gay couple exchange vows of commitment

By **Angie Chuang**
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Business School graduate Terry Rouman remembers his most exciting coming-out experience as the car ride from his commitment ceremony at Memorial Church.

He and his new spouse, Jason Allen, were driven down University Avenue in a convertible as family and friends followed, honking their horns. "We were kissing and people in the street just stood with their mouths hanging open. Somebody yelled, 'That's disgusting!'" he says, smiling.

For Rouman and Allen, the drive down University on Sept. 6 was the culmination of the innumerable challenges they overcame — having to come out to everyone from the church administrators to the bakery staff — as they became the first gay couple to exchange vows of commitment in Memorial Church.

"It was a phenomenal sense of empowerment," Allen says. "I thought, 'My God, if I can do this, I can do anything.'"

While Allen says the fact that they set a milestone for Stanford made the occasion "that much more meaningful," Rouman adds, "It wouldn't have lessened the experience if we weren't the first."

Road to approval

Since Rouman and Allen proposed mutually on Christmas Day, a church ceremony seemed natural. "When I proposed to Jason and he turned around and proposed to me, we had established the foundation that we wanted a spiritual environment for the marriage," Rouman says.

Rouman recalls that he proposed to Allen by giving him a "huge box with little boxes inside each other — each one had a puzzle piece that



Courtesy Jason Allen
Assoc. Dean of Memorial Church Diana Akiyama officiates as Business School graduate Terry Rouman and his spouse, Jason Allen, exchange vows of commitment, the first such ceremony at the church.

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spelled out the words, 'Will you marry me?' and the last one had a ring."

Having just returned from their honeymoon in Indonesia, Rouman and Allen sit in their posh, contemporary San Francisco apartment and reminisce fondly about planning their commitment ceremony, unaware that they are completing each other's sentences.

Allen starts, "We had looked into lots of places, but once we got the idea (of Memorial Church) into our heads, we had our hearts set on it."

It was especially important that the ceremony take place in a church so that their "non-gay friends would see it as equal to their weddings," Rouman explains. "Also, we were raised in churches and would personally relate to it more on a subconscious level."

Rouman was raised as a Greek

Orthodox, and Allen a Roman Catholic. Because both faiths consider homosexuality a sin, however, they both worship at a San Francisco Methodist church, which is "inclusive" of gay people, but does not recognize the couple's union, Allen says.

After approaching the Memorial Church staff and having some initial discussions, the couple asked to meet with Assoc. Dean Diana Akiyama and Dean Robert Gregg.

"We stayed for an hour and a half, and ended up spilling our guts about our families, our experiences — it was really heart-to-heart," Rouman says.

At the end of the discussion, Akiyama and Gregg approved their proposal and the plans went into full swing.

The church's decision

The staff at Memorial Church had anticipated requests like Rouman and Allen's, Gregg says. "We had talked about what we thought would be the right kind of response in terms of justice, com-

passion and our service to the community."

"We agreed that [Rouman and Allen's] relationship warranted that kind of support," he says, explaining that the decision to conduct a certain religious service is made solely by the church. While the University administration and Board of Trustees were notified, they were not participants in the discussion.

"We insisted that the public relations and political ramifications be pushed aside" in making the decision, Gregg says. "We wanted to focus on what we were about religiously."

Akiyama says her personal decision to conduct the commitment ceremony — Memorial Church does not use the legal term "wedding" — was based on her acknowledgment that doing so would be "politically risky, but theologically compelling."

"Ultimately, it was because I think it was very important to take human beings seriously when they want to make a commitment of

fidelity and monogamous love to each other," she says.

Responding to the question of whether there will be future gay commitment ceremonies in Memorial Church, Akiyama says, "We had a first, there will be a second."

Paving the way

Planning the service became a way of pioneering the concept of gay commitment ceremonies for future couples, Allen says. When the couple registered at stores, they began to realize that, though the pre-ceremony details would present awkward moments, they could also raise awareness.

"Because 'Terry' can be a woman's or a man's name, all these people were assuming" he was a woman, Allen says. When they registered, clerks would make comments like, "Well, it's good the groom is doing this for a change" or "I can't believe she's making you do this."

Rouman and Allen insisted they were registered at stores as either "registrar and co-registrar" or

"groom and groom," rather than "bride and groom."

Their persistence not only caused corporations to alter their computer systems, but also prompted some stores to institute employee training on non-heterosexual ways to approach customers.

The ceremony

The fact that the commitment ceremony could not be a legal wedding by state law enhanced the experience in some ways, Rouman says. The couple and the church staff felt they had more room in designing the ceremony to focus on the "blessing of the relationship" rather than meeting legal requirements.

Instead of a marriage license, Rouman and Allen signed a mutual covenant. Akiyama also helped them design a ceremony that would include family and friends in a collective affirmation of their vows.

"The wedding was amazing. It was magic," Rouman says excitedly. His snapshots and souvenirs

reflect a very traditional ceremony, punctuated by certain unique touches — Britten's operatic tribute to his male lover and a cake with two male figurines amid pink triangles.

While response from family and friends was generally supportive, Allen says several people "were sort of taken aback, shocked."

Nevertheless, both men's immediate families were "wonderfully supportive." Even Rouman's father, who didn't attend because he "just wasn't ready for it" called the morning before the ceremony. "He wanted to tell me he loved me, loved Jason (Allen) and wanted to give us his blessing," Rouman says.

Rouman and Allen agree perhaps the most significant reactions they received were from other gay couples who now feel empowered to participate in similar ceremonies.

"Gay friends came up to me during the reception and said we changed their lives," Rouman says. "They didn't think they could do this. It was so moving."