

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 582
“Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act”
Patrick Wojahn and Dave Kolesar
March 3, 2011

Good afternoon, Chairman Frosh and members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak this afternoon. We are here to testify in support of SB 582, the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act. Dave and I are here as a gay couple in a committed relationship of over nine years. We exchanged vows in a Catholic ceremony before Dignity Washington, the Catholic mass for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, in 2005. In the eyes of our friends, our families, our co-workers, and many in our community, we are a married couple. We share our lives together, struggle over our finances together, go out to eat with friends on the weekends, go to church together, and even sometimes bicker like married couples do. Unlike most married couples, though, we cannot get full recognition from the state of Maryland of our relationship.

I also come before you as a City Councilmember of the City of College Park. For each of the past three years, the College Park City Council has passed resolutions in support of full marriage equality for same-sex couples. Last night, the City Council overwhelmingly passed a resolution in support of both SB 582 and HB 808, its companion bill in the House of Delegates. The Council did this to support the many College Park residents, such as Dave and me, whose relationships do not receive the same recognition as other couples. This includes my friends Liz and Jennifer, who just had their first child a few months ago, and now have to figure out how to ensure that each of them has legal custody over him. This includes my friend Tammy, who married her ex-partner in Canada, but cannot divorce her ex-partner because Maryland law does not recognize her marriage. This includes many other couples, who are forced to navigate complex legal issues, extra taxes, and complicated paperwork, just so they can build a life together, when all their straight counterparts need to do is sign a paper to obtain the over 1,100 rights and benefits that come with legal, state-sanctioned marriage.

These benefits are important to me and Dave, because it's a miracle that Dave is alive today. When Dave was a teenager, he came down with a strep infection in his brain, coupled with meningitis. He was the first person ever to have survived this type of brain infection, and only pulled through due to the wonderful doctors at John Hopkins University. The doctors, however, were unable to predict what might happen to Dave as a result, and we do not know what problems await him in the future. If something happens to him, we do not have the securities of marriage to ensure that I would be able to take care of Dave or even visit him in the hospital.

Despite all this, however, the legal benefits are not the most important part of marriage to us. What is more important is the social recognition that comes with having an equal legal structure, an equal idea of what our relationship means. With this would come the recognition that our relationship is just as important to a stable society, and that the preservation and support of our relationship is just as important to the state of Maryland as those of our heterosexual friends. With this would come the recognition that the state of Maryland does not consider us second-class citizens, that it recognizes my right to establish a life and a relationship with the person I love the most, regardless of that person's gender.

When our opponents suggest that we want to bring down the institution of marriage, they could not be more wrong. If we wanted to destroy the institution of marriage, why would be trying so hard to be a part of it? Our movement affirms the importance of marriage – we want to be able to be married because it means something to be married, not just in our religion, and not just among our friends, but also in our government. In order to remain a strong and significant institution, we feel that marriage must accommodate the diversity of loving relationships that exist in our society. We ask that the state of Maryland affirm the importance of marriage by allowing all loving couples to become part of it, regardless of their gender.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I ask that you vote in support of SB 582, the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act.