

&A COVER STORY

Ohio couple ties the knot in Glencoe

St. Elisabeth's hosts church's first same-sex wedding

FOUAD EGBARIA, Editor

The gray skies opened up and the rain fell as Karen Kristoff and Beth O'Harra drove into Glencoe on Thursday, April 9.

By Saturday, April 11, the skies were clearer, the temperature in the low 60s — a perfect day for a wedding.

O'Harra and Kristoff, both 45, drove from Lebanon, Ohio, to Glencoe for their marriage ceremony at Glencoe's St. Elisabeth's Episcopal Church, 556 Vernon Ave. The wedding was the first same-sex marriage held at the church. (Same-sex marriage in Illinois only became legal in June 2014.)

They've been together for 18 years. While much has changed societally since then, same-sex marriage is not legal in their native Ohio.

It's all relative — a rainy five-hour drive is not much when juxtaposed with 18 years.

On that rainy Thursday, O'Harra said they were ready.

"We're ready to," O'Harra started, laughing, "we're ready to tie the knot."

Through a friend of a friend, they heard about St. Elisabeth's, learning that the church would open their doors for their wedding. About a year ago, the church and the couple began communicating, and eventually a date for the wedding was set: April 11, during Easter.

In a way, the wedding coming to Glencoe is a stroke of happenstance out of happenstance.

O'Harra and Kristoff first met through a mutual friend of Kristoff's in college. Kristoff, originally from New Jersey, attended the University of Dayton. O'Harra was living in Columbus at the time with the mutual friend, who was moving to North Carolina.

"I had gone out there to see her before she moved to North Carolina," Kristoff said. "And that's where we met. ... We've been together ever since."

"We fell in love with the church and the parishioners and the community there," O'Harra said. "We're very fortunate that they've allowed us to come in and have our ceremony there with them."

For the Rev. Daphne Cody, however, who has been with the church for more than nine years, the fortune belonged not to the newly married couple. She said many gay couples and individuals have perhaps become hesitant of getting involved with churches because they've felt attitudes of exclusion or were made to feel unwelcome.

"Everyone's talking about how Beth and Karen are coming here to get the blessing of the church," Cody said. "I think that's really ironic, because a gay couple wanting to come here and be with us and give the church another chance is really a blessing to us."

Kay Rossiter, senior warden at the church, has been with St. Elisabeth's for 30 years, since she moved to Glencoe. She said her children were "delighted" to hear the news about the wedding.

The newly married couple felt the warmth of the church's welcome.



St. Elisabeth's Episcopal Church in Glencoe, founded in 1894, flies a rainbow flag outside on Friday, April 10, the day before hosting its first-ever same-sex wedding. FOUAD EGBARIA/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

"Cody and her husband have been very welcoming," O'Harra said. "Just inclusive of us and making us feel like we're a part of their community already."

O'Harra, growing up in a small town in southeastern Ohio, said her coming out story was actually one of acceptance. In fact, 17 years ago, Kristoff and O'Harra had a commitment ceremony at a church in Ohio, which was attended by 200 family and friends.

"We've actually had a very positive experience these last 18 years," O'Harra said. "But as far as society and everybody around us, outside of our circle ... politically, things are changing. I have every confidence in the world that come June, Ohio is going to join the ranks of

Illinois [to allow] same-sex marriage to be legal. It's been phenomenal to see the changes that I've seen the last 20 years."

With that said, O'Harra said she hoped their marriage would one day not be referred to as same-sex or gay marriage: rather, just marriage.

"I don't want extra rights, I just want equal rights," she said. "Adding the extra label of gay or same-sex to the word marriage implies that it's different, that's my hangup with it."

On the heels of the recent controversy regarding the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in Indiana — which was revised a week after it was initially passed after receiving criticism nationwide — Kristoff and O'Harra said

they cherished being in such a welcoming environment. O'Harra did not grow up regularly attending church, but she said she joked with Cody that she wishes they could take St. Elisabeth's and drop it near their home in Ohio, saying she'd be hard-pressed not to go every Sunday if that were the case. "They've just been absolutely wonderful," said Kristoff, who was raised Catholic. "To be in this kind of environment is wonderful. ... They've just been very welcoming."

In light of an Indiana pizzeria's public support for the initial bill, explaining that they would not cater to same-sex weddings, perhaps the Ohio couple's post-rehearsal meal was a fitting one. That meal: Lou Mal-

nati's, eaten after the Friday, April 10 wedding rehearsal.

"It feels so much better to be open than to be closed," Cody said.

O'Harra is a self-proclaimed Buckeye by birth, but she said she's pushing to make the move to Chicago one day.

"As we pulled up [on Thursday] and being able to see the skyline," O'Harra said, "no matter what kind of mood I'm in, even if I'm in a great mood ... I pull into Chicago and I'm just in a better mood."

So, in the days following Saturday's wedding, what were their plans? A honeymoon beckoned.

"Well, you know, the Cubs are in town," O'Harra said.