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A Question of Fairness

In advocating same-sex marriage, Suzie Hutton '90 helped change state law.

By Sarah (Zeller) Julian '07

Suzie Hutton '90 has always preferred to follow the rules. That meant when it came time to face a law she didn't agree with, it was up to her to change it.

Hutton and her partner Danielle Cook were among nine Illinois couples who were part of a lawsuit through the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to legalize same-sex marriage in Illinois. A member of IWU's Class of 1990, Hutton shared her experience as the featured speaker for a Homecoming event held for Illinois Wesleyan's Pride Alumni Community (PAC).

At Illinois Wesleyan, Hutton majored in English and French education and was involved with residential life, working her way up to residence director. "My passion for social justice started here," Hutton said of her IWU experience. "Having come from a tiny rural town in Illinois, coming here and working with students from all over the world, especially in the International House and with African-American students, and having students share their stories with me, I felt honored but also accountable to work for social justice."

As an undergraduate, she knew something about herself was different, but couldn't quite put her finger on it. "Something was out of sync," she said. "But when I got out of college and I'd been dating the same person for a really long time, the next stage was to get married. And I said okay, I'm going to do that." She and her husband had a son, Caleb (who attended the PAC event), and she focused on a career in secondary education.

In her 30s, Hutton's first marriage ended as she reached the point in her life where she was fully ready to accept her sexual orientation. She met Danielle Cook, who is also an educator, and the two were joined in a commitment ceremony in 2004 — one of three ceremonies the couple eventually held together.

"Coming out was the best thing in the whole world for me," Hutton said. "Everything fell into place. But it was not the best thing in the world for a whole lot of other people. It was a journey." Her parents, especially her father, struggled with accepting her relationship with Cook.



Suzie Hutton (above, standing) spoke at a Pride Alumni Community event, together with her partner Danielle Cook.

“When we decided to go ahead with a commitment ceremony, it threw a wrench into some people’s lives, and they had to face it — okay, so you really are gay,” Hutton said.

Although her father didn’t attend their ceremony, he eventually changed his mind about the relationship. After being hospitalized with several health scares, he reached out to Hutton’s partner. “In the hospital one day, he grabbed Danielle’s hand and whispered something in her ear. When we got out to the car, she told me he had asked her to be patient with him and apologized. From then on, I knew everything was going to be okay with our families.”

Illinois legalized civil unions for same-sex couples in 2011, and Hutton and Cook held a ceremony that year. “My dad asked to be our signing witness,” Hutton said. “When we got back to the car, he was blasting Lady Gaga’s ‘Born This Way.’ When my parents got on board, they got way on board.”

It was at that time Hutton began to question why same-sex marriage wasn’t legal in Illinois. Couples in civil unions do not have any of the protections or responsibilities federal law provides to married couples. These include social security survivors’ and spousal benefits, federal veterans’ spousal benefits, the right to file joint federal tax returns, exemptions from income tax on your partner’s health benefits and many other federal protections.

After their civil union, “we were happy to be where we were, until people at school started asking, ‘Well, you’re civilized? You’re unionized? What does that mean?’” Hutton said. “People struggled to find the words for it. I couldn’t get my car insurance to understand — they didn’t have a space for civil union on their form. We kept having to say, ‘It’s the same as marriage, but ...’ And we just decided, it’s not the same as marriage.”

At first the couple felt hesitant about what joining the ACLU lawsuit meant in terms of coming out so publicly. However, “We realized we were complicit in the silence of not saying anything about ourselves,” Hutton said. “As nervous as we were, we were ready to take that next step for ourselves, our friends who also wanted to be legally married, and also for our students.”



Hutton and Cook with Hutton’s son Caleb, who attended the PAC event. In her 30s, Hutton’s first marriage ended as she reached the point in her life where she was fully ready to accept her sexual orientation.

In 2011, Hutton and Cook began their roles as gay marriage activists. “We learned a lot about what was going on, and just started talking about it,” Hutton said. They were interviewed by local media in Bloomington-Normal, where they lived and worked, “and then we were just out,” she said.

But sharing their voices was difficult at times. “I’m thin-skinned as an activist and Danielle doesn’t like to speak in public, so sometimes it’s amazing to me that we did this,” Hutton said.

In February 2013, the couple traveled to Springfield, Ill., where Cook spoke to a state Senate sub-committee about pending legislation to legalize same-sex marriage.

“She really spoke from the heart,” Hutton said. “But it was also hard because we had to listen to people say some pretty hateful things.” The bill passed in the Senate 61-54-2, after three hours of floor debate.

They returned to the state capitol in May, when they hoped the House would pass the bill as well. Groups opposing the bill lobbied lawmakers as hard as those pushing for the law and also vowed to run primary challenges against some lawmakers who voted for the law.

The bill’s sponsor pulled the vote at the last minute, realizing they hadn’t secured enough votes. “We were heartbroken,” Hutton said. “I just started sobbing. That was a very difficult day for us.”

Finally, on Nov. 5, 2013, they returned to Springfield for another vote. “We said it has to pass today, because we were out of personal days,” Hutton joked. The bill passed the House, and the couple was present on Nov. 20, 2013, when Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn signed it into law, making Illinois the 15th state to allow same-sex marriage.

Reacting to the law’s passage, Hutton told the Associated Press: “We care about our kids. We care about our communities. We’re involved in our church. We just wanted the dignity [of marriage].”

Hutton and Cook were legally married in Chicago on Feb. 28, 2014. “I’ve now married this woman three times,” Hutton said.

“Every time it has meant a huge amount to me — it’s been a chance to say I am truly in love with this person and I’ve found my soul mate, and I’m really, really lucky that I get to marry her again. However, we’re both very excited that we don’t have to get married anymore.”

A seventh-grade English teacher at Bloomington Junior High School, Hutton continues her social justice activism in her day-to-day life. “Our work in this area doesn’t stop,” she said. Three years ago, she helped found a gay-straight alliance (GSA) at the school. “We’re one of the only GSAs in the area,” she said. “We’re not protected, and we’re very lucky that our district said yes. Schools can say no, and they have in the area.” Another challenge is how transgender students are treated in public schools, she said.



ACLU (Illinois) Communications Director Ed Yohnka hugs Hutton and Cook after the Illinois House passed the gay marriage bill.

“There’s still work to do and education to be done,” Hutton said. “But being part of this through the ACLU and sharing our stories, we feel empowered and emboldened to be who we are. We feel like we got a huge gift to be part of this.”

The Pride Alumni Community (PAC) connects members of the LGBTQ community, friends and allies to the University and supports IWU’s educational, admission, career and fundraising objectives, “especially as they relate to and affect LGBTQ students, faculty and staff,” according PAC’s mission statement. For information, contact PAC co-chairs Jim Richter ’93 (richter316@aol.com) or Rachel Paturi ‘13 (rachelpaturi@gmail.com).