

In My Own Words



In 2001, B. Birgit Koebke and Kendall French, partners of 14 years, filed a lawsuit against the Bernardo Heights Country Club after it refused to grant them full membership benefits because they were not married. Lambda Legal argued their case at the California Supreme Court and won a groundbreaking victory requiring businesses that extend benefits to married couples to also extend them on an equal basis to registered domestic partners. One year after their victory, B. recalls the events that led up to their day in court and how the decision changed their lives.

When I was first introduced to the Bernardo Heights Country Club in 1983, I wasn't thinking about gay rights. I liked the course, it was close to my home and office, and playing golf was the perfect way to get the angst out after a long day at work. It wasn't until I met Kendall in 1992 that the idea of marriage, and not being allowed to marry, became an issue — and even then I had no idea what something as simple as wanting to play golf with my girlfriend would turn out to mean.

Small victories can mean a lot — especially when they end up changing the lives of thousands of people.

Right away I knew I wanted Kendall to golf with me at the club. We approached the board to try and get Kendall on my membership, thinking that what we were asking for was not a big deal. It just didn't seem right that she was only allowed to play with me six times a year and had to pay a \$70 guest fee each time, because we were not married. The husbands and wives — and even children and grandchildren — of other members could play as much as they wanted to. So I could not understand why we were forced to play by a different set of rules.

The board was not very accommodating. We tried to make it clear to them that all we wanted to do was to have a good time and play golf just like everyone else. We told them that we weren't politically charged and did not have an agenda. The board came back to us and said that they would have to make a bylaw change in order for us to play, and would have to take the issue to the other members for a vote. They also said flat out that they were not in favor of doing any of that.

We tried to resolve this issue with the club internally for five years. We even had an attorney draft up papers to say we were domestic partners before the California law was passed. We wanted the club to know that we were serious, and that we were together. The club continued to refuse our requests so we decided to file a

lawsuit in 2001. We thought that once we filed the draft complaint the whole thing would go away. We were so naïve.

Right away, the club took a hard line. We were ostracized by club members, and the club even went so far as to institute a monthly surcharge on everyone's membership fees to pay for the club's defense in the lawsuit. We pushed our case as much as we could in the first couple of years and the court initially dismissed it. We were out of money, the case was dropped and the club had won. That's when Lambda Legal stepped in and took over our case, and everything changed. Lambda Legal was the only one who really saw the big picture. This wasn't just about golf. The day we won at the California Supreme Court was thrilling and eye-opening. More than 75,000 people are registered as domestic partners in California, and we all won that day — not just us.

A year after our victory the walls at the club haven't collapsed and members haven't left because two lesbians decided to join. The only difference now is that we're allowed to play golf together on the same terms as other committed couples. Lambda Legal has taught me that small victories can mean a lot — especially when they end up changing the lives of thousands of people. ■

B. Birgit Koebke and Kendall French on the grounds of the Bernardo Heights Country Club.

equality

