

Modern Families

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The American family has been changing and there are now many acceptable ways to form and maintain families. Despite these changes, the majority of young Americans expect to marry in the future and continue to hold the institution of marriage in high regard. Marriage is such an important institution that there has been a battle for marriage equality, allowing same-sex couples the same right to marry as different-sex couples.

The idealized traditional family, a married, two-biological-parent family with a male breadwinner and female homemaker, peaked during the 1950s. During the 1950s women were typically age 20 at first marriage and men were 22.5. This age pattern has shifted and today women are on average about age 27 and men are age 29 when they first marry. Indeed, the age at marriage is at a historic highpoint, and rising steadily each year. Later age at first marriage has become nearly universal, and today the age at first marriage differs little among racial and ethnic groups and varies little with regard to educational attainment. Even though Americans are marrying later, most eventually do marry. In 2014, five out of six men and women were married by their early 40s.

This increase in age at first marriage does not mean that young adults are living alone longer. Young adults still form coresidential unions in their early 20s, but they choose to cohabit rather than marry. In fact, cohabitation has become a nearly ubiquitous union among young adults:

three-quarters of young adults have spent some time in a cohabiting union and the majority of brides and grooms have lived together before they walk down the aisle. Furthermore, cohabitation is not just for the young. Older Americans are cohabiting at higher rates than ever before.

At the same time that we have seen changes in rates of marriage and cohabitation, the divorce rate has remained high in the United States. Nearly half of marriages end in separation or divorce. The rates of divorce are declining for young couples (age 35 and younger) and increasing for older couples. In fact, today one in four divorces are to Americans over age 50. Even if the first marriage does not work out, Americans are optimistic and regularly try again: in four out of 10 marriages either the bride or the groom has been married before.

Public support for same-sex marriage has skyrocketed in recent years. Marriage in the United States was transformed on June 26, 2015, when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized marriage for same-sex couples in all states. This decision harkened back to the Virginia v. Loving case nearly 50 years ago that invalidated laws that prohibited interracial marriage. There has long been a movement to support marriage for same-sex couples, but it was not until 2004 that Massachusetts became the first state to legally recognize same-sex marriage. In the following 10 years the majority of states legalized marriage for



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same-sex couples. The June 26, 2013, U.S. Supreme Court decision ensured that at the federal level married same-sex couples share the same rights as different-sex married couples. This decision was consequential and showcased many of the concrete reasons for couples to enter a marriage union: at the federal level, there are more than 1,100 benefits that depend on marital status, including social security, immigration, health and veteran's benefits, now extended to same-sex couples across all states. The U.S. joins a growing number of countries (about 20) that allow same-sex couples to legally marry.

The statewide legalization of same-sex marriage means there will be more marriages to same-sex couples in the United States. There was a surge of same-sex marriages immediately after the Supreme Court decision, as many same-sex couples had been waiting anywhere from a few

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months to a few decades to become legally married. After this initial rise in marriage, I expect marriage rates for gay and lesbian couples will drift to marriage rates among different-sex couples. However, researchers will need to collect and analyze new data to determine marriage rates, divorce rates and overall marital satisfaction for same-sex spouses. Geography will likely matter in the lives of same-sex couples because some states and local areas have provisions that are more supportive of same-sex couples and their families with legal protections regarding employment, well-being, adoption and personal safety. There will be some gays and lesbians who never marry, just as there are heterosexuals who do not have a partner or decide to cohabit rather than enter into a legal marriage.

I was involved in both the 2013 and 2015 U.S. Supreme Court cases on same-sex marriage for professional reasons, based on my research on family structure and child well-being. In particular, I was asked by the American Sociological Association to review published research on the well-being of children raised in same-sex parent families and help prepare amicus briefs for both cases. This project involved a careful review and synthesis of the literature on this topic, with the help of graduate students in sociology at BGSU. The evidence showed, quite clearly, that children raised by same-sex parents fared as well as those raised by different-sex parents.

On a personal note, the U.S. Supreme Court decision was based in part on the experiences of Jim Obergefell and John Arthur who lived in Cincinnati. They were excited about the 2013 Supreme Court decision to federally recognize same-sex marriage, but at that time were not legally allowed to marry in Ohio. Arthur suffered from ALS and could not easily travel to another state to marry. To get married they flew on a chartered, medically equipped plane to Baltimore, where they were married on the tarmac. John passed away from complications related to ALS three months afterward. Their experiences were quite meaningful to me because the same year my father passed away from ALS, just eight months shy of my parents' 50th wedding anniversary. I thought it was tragic that in John's fragile medical state a loving couple had to go to such lengths to be afforded the same legal rights that my parents enjoyed. ■



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An accidental activist

How Jim Obergefell became the face of marriage equality

What do I stand for? What's important to me? What am I willing to fight for? For most of his life, Jim Obergefell never considered those questions. This "accidental" activist discovered the answers when he became the face of marriage equality in America. The answers were simple — love, marriage and honor.

Obergefell, the man behind the landmark Supreme Court case that resulted in the right for same-sex couples to legally marry, spoke to more than 500 people at the University on Oct. 7, 2015. Obergefell, who attended graduate school at BGSU in 1992-93, returned to share the story of his long, but ultimately triumphant, battle for marriage equality.

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"John and I built a life together in Cincinnati. We worked together and built a home together. We were fortunate — our families welcomed us. We were committed to each other, but we couldn't make it legal and public by getting married. We wanted it to carry legal weight and didn't think it would happen in our lifetime."

In the spring of 2011 their lives were shattered when Arthur was diagnosed with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, which is a terminal diagnosis. Obergefell became his full-time caregiver. In June of 2013, the Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act in United States v. Windsor. The federal government now recognized same-sex marriages. Obergefell immediately proposed, but Arthur's fragile health made traveling to a state that allowed same-sex marriage almost impossible.

Due to Maryland requiring only one person to be in attendance to apply for a marriage license, the couple chose that state to say their vows. However, in order to get Arthur there, a medical charter plane would be necessary. Friends and family covered the \$13,000 cost, and after a short flight Arthur and Obergefell said their vows on the tarmac and flew home.

However, the couple learned that when Arthur died, his death certificate would say he was single and that Obergefell would not be listed as his spouse. Ohio had a constitutional amendment at that time that did not recognize same-sex marriages.

"We realized we were willing to fight for love, each other and our marriage. We didn't realize we were fighting for others across the country," Obergefell said. "Eight days after our marriage, we filed suit against Ohio and the city of Cincinnati."

Arthur died three months later from ALS. The battle continued, ultimately working its way to the Supreme Court. On June 26, 2015,



BGSU president Mary Ellen Mazey (left) welcomed Jim Obergefell (right) to campus in October. Of his journey to becoming the lead plaintiff in the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court case on same-sex marriage, Obergefell said, "We realized we were willing to fight for love, each other and our marriage. We didn't realize we were fighting for others across the country."

the high court sided with Obergefell in a 5-4 ruling stating that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples throughout the United States.

What do I stand for? What's important to me? What am I willing to fight for? Obergefell's answer now has another component — equality for all Americans. He said in 31 states, including Ohio, exercising your right to marry whom you want can still mean you can lose your job, or your home, and that the time has come for all citizens to receive the same protections under the law.

Obergefell invited everyone in the audience to be a voice for justice. "Whether it's for you personally, or someone in a class, or someone on the street. Stand up. Speak for someone who is unwilling to speak for themselves. When you hear something wrong or hateful, don't let it go. Stand up for those who need someone on their side."