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Metz big player in civil unions bill

By Bethany Krajelis
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As a lawyer, Jill M. Metz has spent nearly three decades tirelessly fighting for the rights of gay and lesbian couples.

"You have to be creative to help your clients because there are so many holes in the law," Metz said of how current state law treats the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

"But, slowly we are closing those holes," she said, adding that one of the biggest holes will be filled this summer, when Illinois starts recognizing civil unions.

The civil unions bill, which was signed into law earlier this spring and will take effect June 1, "changes the law 180 degrees," Metz said.

As a lawyer who handles a variety of the issues that arise out of same-sex relationships, Metz said she couldn't be happier that there will finally be something on the books to give her clients most of the benefits and rights that have long been afforded to heterosexual couples.

The passage of the bill also marks a high point in her personal life and professional career.

Metz, 59, is a lesbian and the president of the board of directors for the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois (ACLU), which has been heavily involved in the gay and lesbian community's fight for equality. The ACLU was the primary drafter of the state's civil union legislation.

Her colleagues said Metz's legal experience and familiarity with the issues facing the LGBT community made her integral to the passage of the bill.

"Jill was very helpful on the civil unions bill on a couple of levels," said Colleen K. Connell, executive director of the ACLU of Illinois. "She was involved from the little, teeny details to the big strategy and helped us sort out how the legal pieces fit together with all the political pieces."



Jill M. Metz

President

ACLU of Illinois Board of Directors

Age: 59.

Career highlights: Jill M. Metz & Associates (1978-present).

Law school: Loyola University Chicago School of Law, 1978.

Interests: Spending time with her partner, Karen; gardening; cycling; and urban chicken-raising (they just started with a handful of chicks).

Even though she is not a registered lobbyist, Metz came down to Springfield on numerous occasions last year to help lobby for the bill in her capacity as the ACLU's board president. She talked to lawmakers, was on hand for legal questions and was involved in the ACLU's polling and patch-through phone campaign. She also called upon her clients and other members of the LGBT community to share their stories with lawmakers.

"She was able to reach out to constituents all across Illinois to make contacts with legislators," said Rep. Greg Harris, D-Chicago, who sponsored the civil unions bill in the Illinois House of Representatives.

Over the past few years that Harris has been pushing the measure, he has worked closely with Metz and the ACLU. He said he specifically relied on Metz for her legal insight. "Because her practice touched on a lot of issues that were related to the bill, she was able to help us to fine tune the language," Harris said, adding that the subject of his bill was "uncharted territory" for Illinois.

While Metz played an integral role within the ACLU's efforts to pass the civil unions bill, Harris said she has done so much more in her career for the LGBT community.

"She is a fierce advocate for equality and justice," he said of Metz, who was inducted in 2006 into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame.

He said Metz doesn't just talk about fighting inequality, but actually "stands up against injustice." Her dedication, experience and knowledge make her "rather dogged. You don't want to be her opponent," Harris said.

Connell couldn't agree more. She said Metz "is a total class act."

"She is incredibly principled, incredibly smart and incredibly strategic," Connell said. "With the civil unions bill, she had a sense of the big picture. No matter what she is working on, she always has a sense of how to try to refocus people's efforts on the goal and the big picture."

Metz has been involved in the ACLU since her days at Loyola University Chicago School of Law. After graduating in 1978, Metz opened up her own law firm in Chicago, where she has been ever since.

She started out handling criminal defense, but as time went on and more and more friends started asking her for legal advice on various issues arising from same-sex relationships, her practice evolved.

Over her more than three-decade-long career, Metz has handled numerous cases involving child custody, division of assets and health-care decisions within same-sex relationships. She also worked on legislation a few years ago that added sexual orientation to the state's Human Rights Act.

Despite all of the work she has done for the ACLU and the LGBT community, Metz said the recent passage of the civil unions bill tops her list of personal and career accomplishments.

"It was very overwhelming to see," Metz said of the day the General Assembly approved the measure. "I didn't think it was going to feel as personal as it did, but it did ... It was a just a fantastic day and I'm so glad I could be involved in it."

But, there's still a lot of work that needs to be done for complete equality, Metz said, referring to gay marriage, something she expects Illinois will recognize before she retires.