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## Meet Arizona Families: Joe Connolly and Terry Pochert

"If I could marry you, I would ask you right now," Joe Connolly said from across the table to Terry Pochert. The two men exchanged onion rings at that very moment, a silly gesture that meant much more. Despite how much they loved each other, it was 1995, and the thought of same-sex couples having the freedom to marry was a distant dream. Instead, Terry and Joe made a promise to one another that they would live their lives together in love.

Nearly 19 years later, Terry and Joe are still happily in love, and their dream of being husband and husband has nearly come true. Their love story has come a long way, not unlike the road to marriage equality in Arizona — but their journey is not over.



Terry, a Vietnam War era veteran turned television editing supervisor, was first introduced to Joe at a party hosted by a mutual friend. Joe was working on the IT team of a book publisher, and quickly connected with Terry over their interest in news and media. Both men were living in the Metro Detroit area at the time, and were excited to meet someone that shared similar goals and ambitions. Soon after meeting, they went on their first date in August of 1995 and have been together since.

After Terry retired in 1997, they decided it was time to move together to a new city. Terry wanted to start his next business venture, a web-consulting firm, so they took to the road. The couple packed up and moved to Gilbert, AZ.

"We needed a change of pace, and just wanted to be somewhere new. Our extended families are from the Detroit metro and Pittsburgh areas. We had no ties holding us to a particular place and simply chose Arizona," Joe said. "We have loved starting our lives together here in Arizona, it has been a wonderful place for us. We found an incredible church to be a part of, and have met so many uplifting people there"

Terry and Joe were happy to find an affirming church community, and spend a lot of their time together growing within their faith. "We are people of faith and have a wonderful church community that welcomes all, including gay and lesbian people, and provides a safe place — like Joe and I had in our families growing up," Terry explained. "Our church is our extended family. Our friends are too."

Their faith community compelled the couple to become advocates for the freedom to marry in Arizona, and nationwide. In fact, their decision to file a lawsuit challenging the ban on same sex marriage in their homestate was a grassroots effort that started at their church with a simple conversation with their attorney who is also a member.

"Marriage matters to us as a public statement of commitment. While both of us want civil marriage to be legal in Arizona, a marriage recognized by our faith community is just as important to us. What better way to find a partner with the same values and belief system than through your faith?" Joe said.

Following their deeply-held faith, the couple decided to finally marry in 2008. Since Arizona does not offer the freedom to marry for same-sex couples, Joe and Terry traveled to San Francisco to have a legal ceremony.

"We were married by our former, retired pastor from Arizona at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in a San Francisco. We could not ask our current pastor to marry us otherwise he may have been subject to discipline in various forms," Terry explained. "We were each raised in tight, faith based families that attended church regularly, and our parents married in the church and stay married for life. We wanted to be married in a church as well. From our earliest memories, we both wanted a marriage based in love, trust, faith, hope, and communication, just like our parents had. Our parents are our roles models for the marriage we now have."

After their beautiful, intimate wedding in California, Terry and Joe returned to their home in Arizona. But the second they crossed the border, they became legal strangers.

Despite the couple's 18+ years of love and commitment, Arizona does not afford them the respect and protections they deserve as a married couple. Each day, the couple experienced the impact of Arizona's discriminatory marriage amendment. It was their personal experience, their faith—and their desire to move marriage forward for all same-sex couples — that motivated Joe and Terry to serve as plaintiffs in one of Arizona's lawsuits challenging the state's ban on marriage for gay and lesbian couples.

The case, *Connolly v. Roche*, seeks for Arizona to both recognize the legal marriages of same-sex couples performed in other states and to extend the freedom to marry to same-sex couples right here in Arizona.

"We are proud to be a part of the effort to move marriage forward here in Arizona," Terry said. "We have loved each other for so many years, and know that our family deserves respect — as do the families of all same-sex couples in Arizona. We hope that the courts will see that our love is real, and we deserve to be treated with dignity and respected as a couple."

As the court prepares to hear their case, Arizonans are joining together to support the freedom to marry in our state. Together, we can elevate our voices to show that Arizona is ready for marriage equality — and so are thousands of loving families like Terry and Joe.

"Not respecting our marriage is discriminatory, second-class treatment, and it's appalling. We lack the basic rights needed to protect ourselves, including access to healthcare, joint tax filing, not having to testify against a spouse, adoption, survivor and inheritance rights and more. Our state has embedded discrimination in the constitution regarding marriage, and it must stop," Joe said. "Our life as a couple is real — we stick together through trust, faith — in our creator and in each other, commitment, love, respect, laughter, admiration, common and individual goals and supporting our goals, comforting each other in personal losses, celebrating our individual and combined achievements as a couple, celebrating each other's joys and successes, comforting everyday aches, pains or disappointments. We are there for each other, day to day, and through the years, knowing our commitment is invaluable. It is time for Arizona to agree."

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