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They got the official OK to undertake the first-ever priest-run same-sex commitment ceremony inside a black Episcopal church.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

They attended services on Sundays. Roulette served on the church's cultural program committee; Allen headed the housing committee. They founded a black Episcopalian gay and lesbian worship group, called Epiphany. They took training courses to prepare to adopt a child.

Then they had another idea for an event at St. Philip's. It would make church history.

## A CHURCH IN TRANSITION

The idea arose one evening in their apartment.

"We were watching some show. I think was 'Gay Weddings' on Bravo," Roulette recalls. "I said, 'Why haven't you ever asked me to marry you?'"

Allen asked him the same question.

That was the winter of 2002. By last summer, they decided to go for it.

They took the idea to the church. At the time the national Episcopal Church was embroiled in a national controversy over the naming of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire.

Now St. Philip's debated, at times with difficulty, Allen's and Roulette's planned commitment ceremony. The couple got the OK to proceed inside the church. Five priests agreed to participate.

One was the Rev. Howard Blunt, an openly gay minister who for years has pushed for gay acceptance in the church.

"It's an awkward situation," Blunt says. "The Episcopal Church is still in quite a quandary about the matter."

While it approved the openly gay bishop in New Hampshire last summer, for instance, the church did not approve a proposed liturgy for same-sex ceremonies. Each regional bishop decides how his local churches will handle the matter. Blunt is part of a group of gay-rights clergy that meets regularly with New York's bishop, who has decided priests can proceed with such ceremonies.

So Allen and Roulette set a date: Nov. 29, 2003. The country's leading gay publication, *The Advocate* (which is not affiliated with this publication), ran a feature on the couple's plans for what would be the first-ever gay commitment ceremony officiated by a priest inside a predominantly black Episcopal church. The headline: "Breaking barriers in Harlem."

## "OK. SO WHAT?"

Suddenly Allen needed to tell his family and friends about his relationship with Roulette. Because he wanted them to take part in the ceremony.

For instance, he wanted the son of Sally Brown, one of his closest lifelong friends from Newhallville and from politics, to serve as ring bearer. Her son said yes.

"Chuck's a good person. That's what I look at in Chuck," Brown says. "Who he chooses to love is his business."

Then there were three other central women in Allen's life—his sister, his aunt. And Mom.

"She's like, 'OK, so what? I was relieved,'" Allen recalls.

"About the ceremony," his mom continued, "I don't really understand it. But just tell me what to do. Why would I *not* be there?"

Allen realized something. There are lots of people like his mom who go to church—and love their gay children.

And there have been dozens of black ministers turning out the troops at statewide anti-gay-rights rallies in the past year. Black and Latino ministers and their congregants led a crowd that convinced weak-kneed politicians to kill a New Haven proposal last year to enable same-sex couples to formally register their committed relationships at City Hall.

Until now, Allen says, "I think my mother would have sat through a fundamentalist minister's sermon [trashing gays] and silently disagreed. But now [a minister] cannot preach that I am a threat to the American family. She would challenge them. So would my sister. So would my aunt. Ministers need to hear from mothers, sisters, from aunts.

"If 100 people like me—and there are certainly 100 people like me in New Haven—have conversations with their families," gay-bashing from the pulpit may become a harder sell in congregations throughout the community. "I'm hoping there are a lot of people who will feel that now is the time to be more open. The more that happens, the more public opinion is going to change within the black community. It will happen gradually as more and more people have to cope with that openness. A bunch of us can have tremendous power."

## A SPRING STROLL

It was less than a month before the big day. Allen started having back trouble. It got worse. He went to a doctor and discovered he had cancer. The cancer had already spread.

In between his nine operations, he has been occupying a bed in the Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center across from Central Park's stunning northeastern gateway. The operations devastated Allen. But he kept fighting back.

By last week, he can walk with a cane far enough to see the tulips blossoming in the park. He has regained some of the 60 pounds he lost. He speaks forcefully, energetically again. Especially about his determination to pull the gay genie out of the black community's congregational bottle.

Best of all, the doctors said he was ready to go home. He planned to return to his and Tod's apartment this week.

Then a new round of chemotherapy begins. Assuming it goes well, assuming Allen will be physically able to walk down the aisle, the couple plans to set a new date for their historic ceremony.

Allen is making those assumptions.

"We're going to do it," he declares. "I'm an ultimate survivor. I've been left for dead so many times, I wasn't too impressed by this cancer thing."

By his count, he hasn't used up all his nine lives yet. He can't have. The most important campaign of his life awaits. ■

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