

# Marriage bans unconstitutional

the welcome matt



MATT PETTIT

Over the past few years, the discourse on gay union and marriage rights has ebbed and flowed. It peaks on even-numbered election years when it can be used as a political tool and is then put to bed when it is of less use to those in office. To date, 25 states have passed constitutional amendments banning union of some kind or another between same-sex couples, while many others restrict cohabitation or adoption rights. Massachusetts is the only state to proclaim gay marriage legal. Fortunately for American democracy, a federal ban seems distant if not unattainable.

When I approached the subject of gay rights a few years ago, I created a personal mantra and was quite satisfied with it. Since gay marriage and civil unions don't affect me, why should I oppose them?

I'm straight and an aspiring foreign policy wonk: what does this debate have to do with me? This support by indifference drove me for a while and—though far removed from my outright opposition in high school—let me drift peacefully enough. But I was wrong.

The battle over gay rights cannot be glanced at indifferently, but must be openly engaged. Gay marriage bans are bright violations of the principles that Americans hold dear and that the founding fathers codified in our constitution some 225 years ago. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness was not mere filler: it set the United States apart as a modern democracy and a haven for downtrodden men and women.

*The pursuit of life, liberty and happiness was not mere filler: it set the United States apart as a modern democracy and a haven for downtrodden men and women.*

Yet we have not been entirely faithful to our founding document. The first 100 years of the republic were marred by the practice of slavery and the dehumanization of an entire race. Women had to fight for enfranchisement in the 1920s. Universal suffrage—that is, the extension of voting rights to every citizen—was not established until 150 years of nationhood.

Even throughout the mid-20th century, African-Americans had to shake off the mantle of systematic discrimination and women struggled for parity in the workplace and at home. These movements were the attempts of a broken nation to mend and were often undertaken through strife and mass protest. Though these inequalities have yet to be extinguished completely, we have made substantial steps toward rediscovering our Constitution.

Bans on same-sex unions or marriages are echoes of past discrimination and must be viewed in that light. How different are these bans than the Jim Crow laws that restricted the rights of African-Americans for years after slavery ended? The Constitution envisions freedom not in terms of race, gender or sexual orientation, but for all Americans. It is a document of inclusion and respect for the humanity of the individual. Looking to the Constitution means we must step back in order to move forward.

The debate over gay marriage is not a debate over family but rather over the seminal principles and rights of our democracy. Though many in the religious community view gay marriage as a violation of doctrine, America is a secular nation. Marriage bans are therefore not matters of church but of state. Like it or not, the laws of a particular state may influence but may not and cannot be adopted as U.S. law. Freedom of religion is also freedom from religion in government.

Though most Americans are straight, all are governed by the same laws and should enjoy the same freedoms. This is not a new idea.

If we are all equal, then let's start acting like it and support the rights of those who, for some reason, don't yet have them. Indifference is not an option because freedom affects us all, and we all must fight to keep America free.

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# Letters from abroad

## Post-apartheid South Africa remains segregated

LISA ZOOK  
Guest Columnist

"Umlungu! Umlungu!" That word has been yelled at me frequently this fall, usually accompanied by little children running and pointing at me. To translate for you, "umlungu" is Zulu for "white person." The term is not degrading or insulting but is instead a surprised announcement of an uncommon sight. The greetings and smiles I receive as I walk down the street remind me of Davidson's friendly atmosphere.

White people are a rare sight in the small township outside of Durban, South Africa. For a few months this fall, however, I am one of 22 American students living with a Zulu-speaking South African family while I study Public Health in a country plagued by disease and poverty.

Thirteen years after the end of apartheid, its legacy unfortunately prevails in every aspect of life. I have witnessed the results of apartheid (Afrikaans for separateness) in each of the three places I have called home during my stay here. I am amazed by the differences when among these three homes.

In my current home, I live with my host mother, her 26-year-old sister, 17-year-old brother and 12-year-old son. Our home is comparable in size to the fourth Belk lounge. The women in the family walk an hour each way to work at a restaurant in town, attempting to support the entire family on two meager paychecks.

Their paychecks put rice and stew on the stove every night and provide the family with access to clean drinking water and a flush toilet, two things that seem as rare in South Africa as an umlungu.

Paradoxically, the paychecks also pay for my host family's cellular telephones and television, although they consider hot water too luxurious and a soccer ball a waste of money. Instead, the boys taught me how to make a ball out of trash.

My family in this township is considered middle class in South Africa. The family struggles and money is always an issue, but is nevertheless miles ahead of families in neighboring shantytowns.

The longer I stay here, the more I realize that my township family is truly lucky for what it has. Recently, I had the opportunity to visit a shantytown with a community health worker who works through a hospice organization. We walked into a dark, one-room mud hut. In the corner sat a young woman holding a baby and on the couch a 32-year-old woman was barely visible under a large blanket. The com-

# Pavarotti's death unnoticed on campus

JOHN EVANS  
Guest Columnist

Unbeknownst to many Davidson students, Sept. 6, 2007 was a tragic day. While America dealt with the painful memories of Sept. 11, four days earlier the world community raised the dirge in honor of a different heartbreak.

On that day, Luciano Pavarotti died of pancreatic cancer after a yearlong struggle that could not prevent him from continuing his "farewell tour." There were murmurs of his death on campus, certainly; but little more than casual conversation and kind regrets have been uttered as a petty tribute to the singer's lifespan. He attained much more than becoming merely the most celebrated of tenors; he was, as many have claimed, the greatest voice the world has ever heard.

The opera community now searches for his successor. Eventually someone will step forward and be recognized as the next great voice. But there will never be another Pavarotti. His stage presence was tremendous, and his emotion extended beyond the joys and sorrows of his characters. Indeed, his passionate voice was a deep experience for any audience.

If you have not heard him sing, please search for him on YouTube. Everyone should feel his voice's power.

During the latter part of his career, Pavarotti bravely crossed genres, often singing with such stars as U2 and James Brown.

Aside from stunning individual achievements, the tenor worked tirelessly for humanitarian efforts, performing during charity events and speaking on behalf of the United Nations as the UN's Messenger of Peace. He was beloved by many and most zealously by his Italian countrymen. Pavarotti was truly a man of the people and for the people; while he was thankful for his personal accomplishments, he was also reknowned for remaining cognizant of his universal influence.

Why then was there no public mention of this man around

community health worker explained to me that the woman was suffering from HIV/AIDS and had recently become bedridden. The woman qualified for antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) and the community health worker insisted that an IV would help her weakness. The woman did not receive ARVs or an IV for one reason: transportation. Although it was possible to see the clinic from her front door, she could not afford bread, let alone the cost to transport from her home to the clinic. Unfortunately, many South Africans find themselves in similar situations.

I also had the opportunity to spend two nights in a rural village. The people of the village spoke Xhosa, one of the 11 national languages of South Africa. Unfortunately, my English and limited Zulu did not help much. At night we sat in a round hut where my host family cooked homegrown food over a fire. Twenty or so children sang Xhosa songs to us as they gobbled up their minuscule dinner portions.

When it was time for bed, a fellow student and I laid our sleeping bags on the dung floor of the hut and blew out our candle. In the silence our host mother whispered across the room in broken English, "Girls, do you understand mice?" Slightly taken aback by the fact that she spoke some English, we answered in the affirmative. Shortly thereafter, we heard mice scrambling across the floor inches from our heads. Evidently, the mice nested inside the bed mattress. The morning sunlight revealed trails of mouse droppings and previously unnoticed mouse holes lining the walls.

The final place I call home here is my classroom. Classes are held in a large four-bedroom house located in an affluent neighborhood.

During apartheid, the neighborhood was designated a white area and practically remains that way today. In the schoolhouse, we have access to hot showers and wireless Internet. Although our township homes are just a 15-minute drive from the schoolhouse, they seem a world away. At school, we can jog around the neighborhood for exercise, unlike in the township where it is too dangerous. We are able to use electricity at our convenience, because money is not a constant consideration. For lunch, we eat fruits and vegetables because, unlike our host families, we can afford them.

It is extremely difficult to describe a typical lifestyle in South Africa. For many, life is a struggle. No matter what, everyone makes the best of what he or she has.

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*The weeks following Sept. 6 witnessed two tragedies: the death of Luciano Pavarotti and Davidson's ignorance or outright indifference to his impact on the world stage.*

Our generation, for whatever reason, seems to have stigmatized opera. To American youth especially, opera as an art form has even become a focus of ridicule. This does not, however, indicate that our generation considers music as something unimportant; visit Patterson Court any weekend and you'll witness music bring together much of the Davidson community. Yet to appreciate music fully and honestly you must engender a love and respect for all types of music and acknowledge that musical expression, like human identity, is not insular: it is dynamic, transformative and soul-splitting, beautiful in itself and in the way it affects its participants. It is the most human expression that we have to share.

Don't forget Luciano Pavarotti. And please, don't forget that you are a part of the human experience and have a duty to delight in every facet of that experience.

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