Hitched & Bewitched

An HIVer casts a legal love spell on his new husband

October 1, 2004 By Nick Burns

WHO: Bruce Baldwin
WHAT: Marries Geo Walsh
WHERE: Dorchester, Massachusetts
WHEN: 6.26.04

In May, Massachusetts became the first U.S. state to extend civil marriage to same-sex couples. For HIVer Bruce Baldwin, 56, and his neggie partner, Geo Walsh, 54, wedding bells rang in a new age of shared health benefits and tax breaks. On June 26, they became one of America's first HIVer gay couples to wed—in a witchy ceremony.

Geo and I met nine years ago at a friend's party—the host had hoped it'd turn into an orgy and it did. Soon, we discovered we had so much in common (we even look alike) but differed in HIV status. We shared philosophical outlooks on life and became inseparable. We had a commitment ceremony in 1996, but it wasn't recognized by the state, so in June, we did it again.

Organizing the ceremony was nerve-racking. Geo was a little nuts about starting promptly, and we worried it would rain. We're both Wiccan—a nature-centered religion and variety of paganism—but most of our 30 friends who attended were not. We feared they'd be intimidated by our atypical ceremony—one Geo and I wrote together, from the rituals to our vows. In a Wiccan wedding, your wrists are tied together with a cord (hence "tying the knot") to represent lifetime commitment. But everything went smoothly. I was so happy standing beside the man I love and sharing our union with many friends around us.

Now that Geo is my legal spouse, we have hospital visitation rights, insurance benefits and tax breaks. If something happens to me, Geo can make medical decisions on my behalf and legally inherit our estate. He is a home-health-care aid who specialized in HIV, so it's like living with a doctor. We speak openly about HIV and have set boundaries to avoid putting him at risk.

Wiccan spirituality helped me realize HIV is only a disease, that it shouldn't be so stigmatized. There's more acceptance and honesty about HIV and sexuality in Wicca: Its only law is to take responsibility for your actions and do no harm. HIV is something Geo and I have been dealing with for years. Now, especially with gay marriage, it's just a complication.

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