

My name is Valerie Nelson and I submit this testimony in opposition to HCR 3013.

My partner, Diane Gira, and I moved to Wahpeton, ND, in 1976. We have called Wahpeton home ever since.

We were in a loving and committed relationship starting in 1975, but were not able to be legally married until 2014 – 38 years after making that commitment to one another.

During those 38 years, we were unable to have access to the benefits that legally married couples often take for granted. I had a great job at Minn-Dak Farmers Cooperative in Wahpeton but was unable to carry Diane on any of the benefits provided to my straight colleagues:

- She couldn't be on my health insurance, dental insurance, or vision insurance;
- If I were to have died, she would not have received ANY of my pension, it would have gone back to the company;
- When Diane's parents passed away in 1997 and 1999, I was denied paid funeral leave because her parents were not considered my mother-in-law or father-in-law. Minn-Dak's Human Resources Manager told me that they were just parents of a "friend", even though at the time of their deaths Diane and I had been together for 22 and 24 years respectively. It was very painful to be treated this way but there was nothing I could do about it, Diane and I were not married and Minn-Dak was not interested in recognizing our same-sex relationship even though I was a dedicated employee who had been with the company since 1976 and was very open and out about my sexuality.

Before being able to legally marry in 2014, we had to go to extra effort and expense to draw up legal Power of Attorney and Health Care Power of Attorney to be able to represent one another if the need arose. This is something that is taken for granted by straight couples who get married. And we had to make sure we always had those documents with us when we travelled, just in case.

And then there is the emotional pain of being treated as "the other" and being told your love for one another is less than the love shared between a woman and a man. Love is love and all I can say is the love I had for Diane was as total and complete as any straight couple could ever hope for.

I lost Diane in May 2024 after a sudden illness. She was hospitalized for four weeks before her death. I did not leave her side and was with her day and night the entire four weeks, even after she was transferred to ICU. She spent 19 days on a ventilator and I was her voice during that time. I cannot imagine how painful it would have been for me to not be able to be at her side during that time and or to not be able to be updated by Diane's caregivers at Sanford. Because we were able to be legally married, I was afforded all the rights any other married couple would be given.

Diane and I were blessed with 48 years together, 10 of those years legally married. We had a wonderful life and were thrilled when we were finally able to marry. It is hard for me to understand why anyone would introduce a bill urging the United States Supreme Court to restore the definition of marriage to a union between one man and one woman. Gay couples are not looking for special rights, all we want are the same rights and marriage equality has helped provide that.

I strongly oppose HCR 3013 and urge you to NOT pass this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Valerie Nelson