

KATHLEEN A. MARTIN | GUEST VIEWPOINT

One woman's journey to PRIDE



Kathleen A. Martin, of West Springfield, right is seen here with her wife, Andrea Hickson-Martin, and their golden retriever, Piper. (BUNNELL PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO)

June is Pride Month, the annual celebration and remembrance of the fight for LGBTQIA+ civil rights. Rainbows are everywhere — on Facebook profile pictures, retail clothing and accessory lines, home flags and banners, cookies, cakes, and more — providing visibility that is powerfully important and abundantly necessary. Among the parades, there are stories of loss that permeate this fight for recognition, for the right to embrace identities that were first fought for internally.

I grew up as one of those people who believed that things are supposed to happen in a certain way. Go to college, get married, have babies. I intended to squeeze in a

fabulous career with a luscious wardrobe. I had the career and the wardrobe, but the rest was someone else's reality. The universe had another journey planned for me.

When I first saw the woman who is now my wife, I recall her smile, her style and the way she lit up the room of 300 people we were in. She was being welcomed as a new employee at our organization, and, in the span of that 30 seconds when her name was called and she stood up, people were drawn to her. And I was one of them. I was transported back to high school, hoping that the new cool kid would become my friend.

I had only dated men. I had been married to one for four years. The relationship Andrea and I built was — and is — everything that was missing from those that came before it. Competition was replaced with mutual admiration and adoration. There is pride in who we are as individuals and who we are as a couple. There is a mutual love of shoes. Never before have I wanted to make someone as happy as I want to make her.

I don't have a "coming out" story like many others do. Sure, I went through some serious introspection about my attraction to Andrea, what it meant for me to contemplate a same-sex relationship, and how that information would be received by others, but I didn't publicly declare that I'm a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. My declaration was "I'm in a relationship with Andrea."

I chose the direct route simply because I didn't know what box to check. But, the more I thought about which box I would check, a bigger question emerged — does the box even matter?

A friend summarized it profoundly, succinctly and brilliantly, talking about her own process of marrying the first woman she dated — "I didn't know how to come out of a closet I didn't know I was in." That statement still gives me goosebumps.

The box I "should" check is irrelevant. What matters is the person in front of me, the person with whom the broken pieces of me are mended, strengthened, and brightened, who can make me laugh more deeply than ever before, who truly and proudly loves me, supports me, and appreciates me — SHE matters.

For someone who likes things neat and orderly, I now embrace the absence of that order. I don't care as much about the identity label, I care about the relationship

and how I am in it.

When we disclosed our relationship, the support from family and friends was immediate and unequivocal. I never once thought about NOT disclosing. I never questioned the relationship because my head and my heart were finally in lockstep.

The bigger message was not lost on either of us. The ease with which we could announce our relationship was a result of the decades of struggle of those who came before us. That we could marry, buy a home together, be each other's health care proxy and life insurance beneficiary, and more simply but profoundly, express our love for each other without fear, is the reason June is so important.

Now approaching four years of marriage and with our family rounded out by our golden retriever, Piper, we are happy, in love, and content. We are supported and celebrated by a group of friends, gay and straight, who love us both and have joined us on this journey that is just getting started. These are luxuries that many did not and do not have. My privilege is showing.

This June, and throughout the other 11 months, I acknowledge with the LGBTQIA+ community the joy and the work in the journey. Along the way, acknowledging that everyone is on their own path toward peace and happiness gives us all the freedom to meet people where they are, neat and orderly or not, with a box checked or not.

Kathleen A. Martin, of West Springfield, is chief of staff in the office of the president at Springfield College, where she also earned her master's and doctoral degrees.