



CHRIS GREGOIRE

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HER DAUGHTERS

In 2004, just 31 percent of Americans supported same-sex marriage. As public opinion started to edge upward, LGBTQ campaign researchers came to realize the journey many voters were on. With more co-workers, fellow parishioners, and family members coming out, people were taking a longer look, and asking: Why *did* gay couples want to marry? What was the harm in their commitment? How was it American to deny them that right?

Another powerful force was at work: demographics. By 2011, 70 percent of younger Americans, 18 to 34 years old, supported same-sex marriage. That was almost twice the level of acceptance among folks 55 and older.

Those two factors—straight people looking anew at marriage equality and generational change—converged in Chris Gregoire’s household. The governor was on a self-described “journey,” trying to reconcile her faith and her sense of fairness and justice. She had been married in the Catholic Church. Her two daughters were baptized in the Catholic Church. Her faith did not support marriage equality.

Over her 12 years as the state’s top lawyer, Gregoire had also backed anti-bullying and hate crimes legislation. She knew that hostility aimed at sexual orientation could have devastating consequences. Tragedy had hit close to home. Yet, when Gregoire was elected governor in 2004, she said Washington wasn’t ready for marriage equality. Fully legal marriage in the U.S. existed then only in Massachusetts. And in the Evergreen State it seemed about as far away as Boston Common.

The governor felt more education was needed.

Gregoire always encouraged her girls, Courtney and Michelle, to stand up for fairness. Family values came full circle when they urged her to see marriage

Facing page: Courtney, Chris and Michelle Gregoire on holiday. Their huddle during Thanksgiving 2011 sealed the former governor’s support for marriage equality. *Christine Gregoire*

equality through the same lens. They equated LGBTQ struggles to the civil rights rallies their mother joined when she was young. In dinner table debates and late-night phone calls, they said it was their generation's civil rights movement. Their passion for fairness deeply resonated with their mother.

"We obviously argued a lot," the former governor recalls. "But there was no argument that they could see for allowing others in the country to discriminate. I thought, 'God, it's exactly how I felt [in the 1960s], and said to my own mother, I don't understand how our country can discriminate against race?' So, that's how it came about. Not me seeing myself in them. But *them* raising the issue."

When Gregoire came around, she did so with full conviction. She introduced legislation to legalize same-sex marriage. She vowed to get it passed. Her mediating skill with lawmakers was unsurpassed, says Ed Murray, who was Olympia's preeminent LGTBQ advocate as a state legislator. Murray called her the best "closer" he had ever seen.

HOW DO YOU ARGUE with your mom when she's a three-term Attorney General, never mind one who stared down Big Tobacco and got it to cough up a \$206 billion settlement to 46 states?

It's one thing if you were trying to extend your teenage curfew, Michelle Gregoire says. Good luck with that. But when it came to LGBTQ rights, Michelle and Courtney said it helped that gay and lesbian family friends visited their Olympia home, and their parents talked about rights and equality at the dinner table. Their mom also wanted to hear from her daughters and their peers on a range of issues. And she listened.



When Gregoire entered the Legislative Reception Room on February 14, 2012 to sign marriage equality into state law, chants of "thank you, thank you" erupted from the crowd. *Legislative Support Services*

She was very engaged and “present” with her children. Michelle has memories of kitchen-table conversations going back to when her mom had the family vote on whether she should make her initial run for attorney general.

That kind of attention left an impression, Michelle says. Looking back, she says she felt empowered.

Courtney’s advocacy for the LGBTQ community dates to Olympia High School. Five years older than her sister, she was part of a 1995 committee that wanted to raise awareness about sexual orientation. The Student Activist Club invited Colonel Grethe Cammermeyer of the Washington Army National Guard to speak. A decorated combat nurse, Cammermeyer had been discharged for admitting she was a lesbian. She challenged the Pentagon’s ban that kept members of the military closeted, winning reinstatement in 1994.

Her talk to a voluntary assembly of 600 students raised complaints. A group of state lawmakers scolded the school. One corner store handed out free soft drinks to students who boycotted Cammermeyer’s appearance. Two weeks later, two Olympia students were assaulted by teenagers from the nearby town of Rochester. One of the students was openly bisexual and still recovering from an earlier assault. The second attack sent him into profound depression and he took his own life.



Courtney Gregoire, with husband Scott Lindsay at Seattle Pride 2013, has worked for U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell, President Obama, the Port of Seattle, and Microsoft. She has two daughters. *Scott Lindsay*

After a wave of weddings that followed college, Courtney found herself thinking of her LGTBTQ friends. She had watched straight couples exchanging vows, and being recognized by friends, family, and the law. She thought about friends who were comfortably out and wondered: what’s their path going to be?

On her own journey, she went to Harvard Law School in 2002 and began gathering tools to build her case.

MARRIAGE DEBATE started to spread. Vermont opened the barn door, with its practical, secular civil unions, which some called “marriage lite.” That was in 2000. Four years later, King County Superior Court Judge William Downing ruled that Washington’s ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional—setting

the stage for an appeal to the state Supreme Court. That same year, 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. The conservative backlash was swift. President George W. Bush called for a U.S. Constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. His chief strategist Karl Rove orchestrated bans in 11 states.

That was the landscape when Chris Gregoire said Washington wasn't yet ready for marriage equality.

Courtney felt compelled to speak up. She called her mom from her law school dorm. "I definitely remember that late night phone call, 1 or 2 in the morning my time, where I felt I have to say this now: 'This is not fair. And we're clearly not going to see action at the federal level. What can happen? This has to happen at the state level.' "

It was a tense conversation, she says, and it didn't help that Courtney probably said "the Catholic Church got a few things wrong along the way."

Courtney got her law degree in 2005. The Washington Supreme Court ruled against same-sex marriage the next year, overturning Judge Downing's decision in King County. That began a new patchwork strategy.

LAWMAKERS LED by Ed Murray in the state Senate, and Jamie Pedersen, in the House, embarked on a long game. With Gregoire's support, they sought to pass domestic partnership rights in phases, while moving public education down the road toward marriage.

A tragedy in Seattle propelled the plan. A fierce tempest hammered Western Washington on December 16, 2006. Kate Fleming, an audiobook narrator, was trapped in her basement studio by a flash flood for dangerously long before she was rescued. Her partner, Charlene Strong, was told at the hospital she couldn't see Kate unless she got one of Kate's relatives to approve. Strong eventually reached an out-of-state sister, and was at Kate's bedside when she died.

"Beyond belief. *Beyond* belief," Gregoire says about the stark denials same-sex partners faced. They couldn't marry and they couldn't have rights conferred only by marriage. "It ends up educating everyone," Gregoire says of Strong's willingness to publicly share the Catch-22 she faced. "How can anybody can say that's OK?"

Strong's grief became determined advocacy. She was at Gregoire's side, when the governor signed the first of the partnership rights bills.

Wanting to ride the momentum, leading LGBTQ advocates met with Gregoire in late 2007. Some pushed for marriage equality in 2008. Hard. Gregoire calls the

meeting “challenging.”

When the question was called, Senator Ed Murray said he didn’t think his colleagues were ready. Up for re-election in 2008, Gregoire agreed. Some saw her decision as raw politics.

“I couldn’t respect more those who said, ‘Go now, because we’re sick and tired of the discrimination.’ But I’m a pragmatist,” Gregoire says, “And I’m sitting there, thinking to myself, is that going to get to where we want? Or is there a better route? Where we can actually bring people along and get to a better answer?”

AFTER WINNING the closest governor’s race in state history by 129 votes in 2004, Gregoire glided to re-election in 2008 on a cushion of 195,000 votes. She signed bills earlier that year and the next, rounding out the incremental approach to Washington’s version of civil unions. It may have been fortuitous to forgo marriage equality. Californians passed a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage in 2008. At the same time, they favored Barack Obama—not yet on-board with marriage equality—for president by 3.2 million votes. They were ready for some changes, but not others.



Michelle Gregoire, with her mom at Seattle Pride 2008, was a collegiate soccer player and worked for King County Executive Dow Constantine and state Senator Jeanne Kohl-Welles before becoming a prosecutor. She has two sons. *Michelle Gregoire*

Michelle and Courtney celebrated domestic partnerships as a great step forward. “You can’t say it wasn’t,” Michelle says. “Reflecting back, I thought that was such a wonderful moment when we had domestic partnerships. But that was not right. That wasn’t enough.”

Michelle was soon at UW Law School, assembling her own tools of persuasion.

Gregoire’s daughters leaned into 1960s racial-equality arguments with their mother. Brimming with law-school knowledge, Courtney even dropped *Loving v. Virginia* on her mom. That was the 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning laws in 16 states that banned inter-racial marriages.

In that case, Virginia resident Mildred Jeter, a Black woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, were married in the District of Columbia. The Lovings returned to Virginia and were charged with breaking the state’s statute against in-

ter-racial marriages. They were sentenced to a year in jail. The trial judge said he'd suspend the sentence if they left Virginia for 25 years.

By a unanimous vote, the Supreme Court held that Virginia violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

Gregoire's daughters brought up the arguments that had been made about race to allow discrimination. "Which were wrong," Gregoire says, "and I found them all being applied with regard to marriage,"

The similarity or "pattern matching" that struck Courtney was the role of the younger generation in pushing for change in both civil-rights eras.

It would culminate in a meeting at the Governor's Mansion.

THE FAMILY was reunited in Olympia for the Thanksgiving 2011 holiday. Courtney was back from her job in Washington, D.C., at the U.S. Department of Commerce. Michelle took a break from law-school studies in Seattle and came down.

The governor clearly recalls a meeting in the mansion's main bedroom. Courtney says she talked about her friends who were forgoing a civil commitment ceremony because they were waiting for their moment to get legally married. Michelle recalls they had a "kind of huddle." Courtney said she believed older generations were ready to accept full marriage equality. "I can remember mom listening poignantly and then a big hug between us," she says.

Her daughters had prevailed. Their generation was right. "And I remember the three of us embracing and all three of us crying. And saying, 'We need to do something about this,'" Chris Gregoire says. And off she went.

"I don't know if you got the flavor of what was really happening to me," she says. Her daughters had underscored America's journey to address racial inequality. "I related so well to them and their generation, which doesn't see why in the world you would deny marriage to a loving couple who happen to be the same sex. They just don't see it. I go back to myself at their age, and I was of exactly the same mind. Why in the world do we discriminate? Why do we say you have to be in a separate school? Why do we say you can't marry?"

GREGOIRE ANNOUNCED her change of mind on January 5, 2012. She rejected the idea she was finally backing same-sex marriage because she was not seeking re-election. Tapping her chest during a news conference, she said, "It's right here that frees me up to do this. I have not liked where I've been for seven years. I have sorted it out in my head and in my heart."

She admitted she had been struggling with her religion. "I have always been

uncomfortable with the position that I have taken publicly,” she said. “And then I came to realize the religions can decide what they want to do but it is not OK for the state to discriminate.”

Josh Friedes, director of marriage advocacy for Equal Rights Washington, said he respected Gregoire’s path. “Her journey was very much like so many other people’s journey. But she’s taken it publicly. I think this is going to help other people move in the direction of support for marriage equality.”

While many people might have assumed politics was behind the governor’s conversion, Michelle disagrees. “I would say at the end of the day, again, it comes back to this core belief that my mom has, that she’s instilled in my sister and I to do what’s right and fair. She knew it was the right thing to do.”

THE ISSUE SHIFTED to the Legislature, where the vote count in the Senate remained uncertain. Gregoire wanted lawmakers, above all, to debate the issue without rancor. “I knew that this issue was going to get national attention,” she recalls.

She began bringing lawmakers with strong feelings, from both parties, into the governor’s office. She talked to them about where they were on the issue, and what she had gone through herself. At the end of the conversations, she recalls, she asked that during floor debate, “please be respectful of others who didn’t share their views.”

With a majority appearing thin in the Senate, she stood close to the floor for the vote. “More as a reminder to those whom I had spoken, ‘I’m there for you; I support you. I know you’ve been on a journey. I respect that you’re going to take a tough vote here, but you’re doing the right thing.’ And to those, who didn’t agree, ‘Please, be respectful.’ “

Marriage equality passed both chambers, and Gregoire signed it into law on February 13, 2012. She heaps credit on the Legislature’s civility, saying she had witnessed their “finest hour.”

Gregoire says Ed Murray was “unbelievably helpful” to her as they weighed how and when to push ahead with gay civil rights legislation. “And I will forever be thankful for that. Thankful on a personal level. Thankful as a governor, for helping me strategize how to make things happen, where he identified some legislators, and said, ‘I think you can make a real difference if you talk to them.’ ”

The former governor also maintains that the allegations Murray sexually abused several teens years earlier—stories that prompted his resignation as Seattle’s mayor in 2017 while insisting “the allegations against me are not true”—



Chris Gregoire on Jamie Pedersen, left, with his husband Eric Cochran and their four boys: “He’s just solid. He’s very much a pragmatist, a guy you can talk to and say, ‘I need your help; how do we get there from here?’” *Legislative Support Services*

journey,” Gregoire says. “How—when you see him, and you get to know him—can you say, ‘You can’t get married?’”

Representative Maureen Walsh, a Republican from Walla Walla, also personalized matters in a floor speech that went viral. In an unscripted, homespun four minutes, Walsh spoke of the love she shared with her late husband, Kelly, and how she couldn’t deny others, such as her daughter Shauna, a lesbian, the right to such a commitment. Walsh had also learned from her daughter that domestic partnerships weren’t equal. “Everything she said was just so humanizing,” Gregoire says of candid Walsh’s tour de force.

In emotional remarks she gave at the bill signing, Gregoire stressed a letter she had received from a 16-year-old who was “coming to grips” with her sexual orientation. In the future, the governor said, she did not want the young woman and others to have to “get on bended knee and ask, ‘Will you civil union me?’”

Michelle and UW Law School classmates drove down for the bill-signing ceremony. “It felt like the voice of your youth can really make an impact for change and better. But I would also say my mom raised me to be always looking for how you can strive to make equality in a slew of issues.”

Courtney recalls being in her Washington, D.C., office at the time. “And a colleague of mine came running in, in tears, into my office, saying, ‘What your mom just did is going to change not just the law, but hearts and minds. She spoke about her evolution, and politicians just don’t do that.’”

should not nullify his achievements as a leader of the LGBTQ civil rights movement. She still wants to “recognize a pivotal and instrumental role [he] played in making things happen.”

Jamie Pedersen was instrumental in the House, she says, adding, “You can’t assume that all those votes in the Legislature were just by accident.” Pedersen and his longtime partner, Eric Cochran, had adorable children. He helped legislators “take the

A DECADE AFTER Washington legalized same-sex marriage, Chris Gregoire



“I’m so thankful my childhood upbringing was robust conversations around the dinner table,” says Courtney Gregoire. “Man, I brought that to my kiddos, too. And that differences of opinion are to be respected, and we are all growing and learning from others.” *Christine Gregoire*

has four grandchildren; Courtney’s two girls and Michelle’s two boys. And support for marriage equality was up to 84 percent among Americans, 18 to 34.

Michelle Gregoire Garrison, a senior deputy prosecuting attorney for King County, is trying to instill in her boys the values she learned at home: the importance of standing up for what you believe in, the importance of equality and fairness, and embracing individual’s differences. But also reminding them that progress took time, journeys and struggles. And they should protect what’s been achieved.

“It’s important for my sons that they hear from their parents,” she says, “and that conversations are welcome, they’re open to share. I want to hear about what the issues are going on with them.”

Something similar is happening in Courtney Gregoire’s home. One of her daughters wanted to arrive early at school one day for the raising of a Pride flag. Her trans friend was going to be making some remarks and she wanted to show her support.

In her job as Microsoft’s Chief Digital Safety Officer, Courtney has handled illegal and harmful content and conduct. She sees levels of harassment and intolerance that make her nervous.

But she sees hope in her daughters’ generation and what they can teach us: “I’m there to take care of my friend. My friends might be different than me in many, many ways. But that’s what makes friendship meaningful and blossom throughout life. That’s the full-circle side. Now as a parent.”

Bob Young