

Coast Plaza Hotel & Suites



JEFF HEDGEPEETH & JOHN MEDLIN

THEY COULDN'T WAIT.

Jeff Hedgepeth and John Medlin didn't want to wait any longer to make the most traditional of commitments. And they wouldn't wait for Americans to legalize marriage equality as a capstone to their 27-year "engagement." In 2003, Hedgepeth and Medlin drove three hours north and seized the opportunity to get married in Canada. They made the front page of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. They were one of the first U.S. same-sex couples to take advantage of British Columbia's trailblazing stance on marriage equality—which would influence the U.S. in time. Their noon ceremony in Vancouver's Stanley Park was witnessed by their good friends, Brad and Dennis. It was pure coincidence, Hedgepeth says, that the two couples wore summery white shirts and trousers. Three of the four had shaved heads. "It looked like John had been captured by bald space aliens," he jokes.

In Seattle, John worked in Special Collections for the University of Washington Libraries; Jeff was an administrator at the UW Business School until he left in 2000 for the Pride Foundation. As Pride's grants coordinator, Jeff often acted as an ambassador—a recurring role for him—in the five states where he doled out funds to LGBTQ groups. Much of the money was available because of a record-bequest from one of Microsoft's first employees, Ric Weiland, and it fed the grassroots on the path to Washington marriage equality in 2012.

Jeff and John seem a case of opposites attracting. Jeff is a New York City native, African American and an extrovert who often rode with the painted, naked bicyclists in Seattle's quirky Solstice Parade. John hails from Georgia. He grew up in whites-only public schools, segregated by state law. In a sly drawl, he identifies as a "practicing introvert."

A week before the couple celebrated 46 years together, their devotion was

Facing page: Jeff Hedgepeth and John Medlin, with Fudge, back at the Vancouver Hotel where they stayed for their historic 2003 wedding. *Jeff Hedgepeth*



Marriages like Jeff and John's panicked U.S. conservatives. The next year GOP strategist Karl Rove orchestrated state constitutional bans on same-sex marriage in 11 states. *MOHAI, Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection*

obvious as they sat on the patio of their Seattle high-rise, where Jeff expertly tends to the community garden and befriends blue jays. John keeps a watchful eye on Fudge, their dachshund-terrier mix—20 muscular pounds of squirrel-obsession.

Jeff says care and respect are key to the couple's longevity. He's not a churchgoer; but John is. So, Jeff fashions cuts from his garden for Sunday floral arrangements in John's church. He feels "very much a part of that community because they have welcomed me."

"And they leave him alone," John deadpans. "They don't nag him, 'Why don't you ever come to church?'"

In the give-and-take that sustains couples, Jeff notes that he used to run marathons and John "hates running." But John would soldier on for Jeff's marathons and wait at assigned corners to take the sweaty clothing Jeff wanted to shed. "When the soggy T-shirt fell in my face, I knew my duty was over," John says.

He once went above and beyond. He stood near the finish line and handed Jeff a cigarette and a plastic martini glass filled with paper olives.

HEDGEPEETH AND MEDLIN met just after America celebrated its 200th birthday in 1976, and just before Jeff's 24th birthday. It was seven years after the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village birthed the gay liberation movement. Both Jeff and John lived in Manhattan's Upper West Side. On a Sunday at the start of August they both went to nearby Central Park, and an area popular for sunbath-



Jeff's mother was a trained beautician but his father was opposed to her working outside the house. *Jeff Hedgepeth*

teacher's assistant and school-bus driver when they moved back to North Carolina in 1974.

Many of his Brooklyn school friends were Jewish and he recalls his mother telling him to be extra careful at their homes because they had "really expensive lamps and if you break one, we'll never be able to afford a replacement."

Hedgepeth saw the country's stark divide growing up. When a school year ended in Brooklyn—where his grades would propel him to advanced classes—he spent summers at his grandparents' farm in North Carolina, close to where the coastal sandy soil meets the Piedmont red clay. He learned to fish, pick cotton and tobacco, make lye soap, and wring a chicken's neck for dinner. He also learned that Southern whites treated Black people differently.

Jim Crow laws were in his face. Blacks were not allowed to drink from white

ing and gay meetups called The Ramble. John was "just plain" struck by Jeff's looks. But he couldn't catch his eye. Finally, the introvert walked over and asked to borrow a section of Jeff's *New York Times*. Over the crossword puzzle, a life together started.

Jeffrey Donald Hedgepeth was born in New York's Brooklyn Jewish Hospital. "And yes, I am cut," he says, laughing. He was raised in what he calls a "slum" building in a "Jewish-Italian-Caribbean-Southern Black-Puerto Rican neighborhood." When he was 10, a fire gutted the building and his family moved to a nicer apartment nearby. His parents' roots were in North Carolina. His father worked in New York's garment district and seemed, in his son's recollection, well-liked at his job. His mom was a beautician who later worked as a



Jeff visited his grandparents' farm near Rocky Mount, North Carolina every summer. He learned how to fish and wring a chicken's neck for dinner. *Jeff Hedgepeth*



John's childhood with his parents was like a "domestic sitcom" written by Tennessee Williams. *John Medlin*

fountains, or use the same restrooms as whites.

John McRae Medlin was born in Rome, Georgia, about an hour's drive northwest of Atlanta nowadays. It was a two-hour car trip back when his father made the daily commute to his job at as a state teacher certification specialist. His mother was a housewife, occasionally a secretary. When John was seven, the family moved to Atlanta. He doesn't recall seeing or hearing racial hostility when young, only being told to be nice to "colored people."

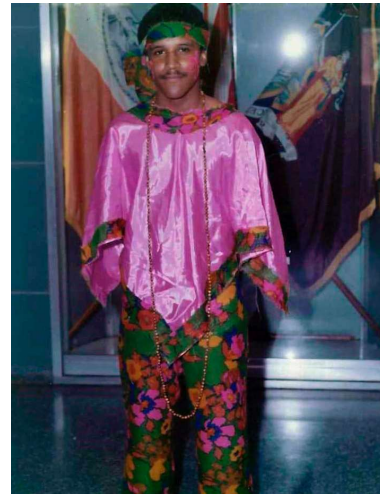
"I just grew up, I guess, thinking Black people were some kind of lesser category of people we had very little to do with."

Life in Atlanta was sort of like a sitcom, he says, "although my parents' marriage was not that happy. More like a domestic sitcom by Tennessee Williams."

MEDLIN SAYS he first felt an inkling he was gay at 13 or 14. While other boys would get excited if a girl's skirt blew up in the breeze, "it just occurred to me that I kind of feel that way when some football player takes his shirt off." His public school of 2,500 students was friendly, he says, and he doesn't recall any bullying. But he became an introvert around that time. He didn't want people to find out he was gay and "the best way was just to be quiet."

In New York, meanwhile, Hedgepeth who had been a sickly child with asthma, grew into a healthy teen "with a vengeance," jumping into sports and adventure, including sexual discoveries.

He also showed flashes of activism at Wingate High School. When the school prohibited girls from wearing pants, Hedgepeth and a few



Jeff played a "hippie" in his senior-class production. Other alumni of Brooklyn's Wingate High School include: U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer, Studio 54 owner Steve Rubell, and pioneering female rapper MC Lyte. *Jeff Hedgepeth*



Although an introvert, John (center) was the editor of his high-school yearbook. He later edited a business magazine, *Administrative Management*. *John Medlin*

“And bringing them all together was a hooker, because she got them both,” he recalls. “The whole production was about this!”

Graduating near the top of his class, Hedgepeth was accepted at Harvard and other Ivy League universities. He let his younger brother, then six years old, pick the winner out of a hat. He chose Princeton. He majored in political science and joined the Gay Alliance of Princeton. He wrote his senior thesis on repression of homosexuality.

He wasn't sure what to do upon graduating in 1973. He wasn't really aware of the possibilities, but had to work. He was accepted in a corporate training program at Sears, Roebuck, the nation's largest retailer. But wearing a suit and tie to scale a corporate ladder “wasn't the true me.”

Medlin, after high school, went to the University of North Carolina, where he majored in English. He and two of his friends “were doing a lot of gay stuff without admitting we were gay—even to each other,” he recalls. Students on the sec-

boys donned skirts in a demonstration of solidarity.

When the Class of '69 put on a production for parents called “Sing,” they chose a musical with a heavy message. (*Hair* was nearing the end of its four-year Broadway run.) On one side of the stage were hippies, including Jeff, and all they wanted was love. On the other side were businessmen who just wanted money.



Jeff's Princeton thesis on repression of homosexuality was hardly ground-breaking research, but he was proud he was bold enough to write about it. *Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice*

ond floor of his dorm, Joyner, tended to stay there for all their undergraduate years at UNC, making it a family-like place. “And the other guys in the dorm seemed to think we were just sort of clownish and silly.”

John and his friends went to a bar, the Tempo Room, in Chapel Hill which was known for being half-and-half. “You went to the bar, but you always knew which half of the bar you preferred—the straight or the queer side,” he says.

After college, he lived in New York City with one of his best college friends. John became an associate editor at a business magazine, *Administrative Management*.

Then his father died, and John went back to Atlanta to stay with his grandfather. He got a master’s degree in education and a teaching certificate. He was hired by a local school, which he soon realized was a “seg academy,” a private school intended to skirt racial integration laws. He left to work for an adult literacy program.

One of his most memorable students was Jack, a towering Black welder who wanted to learn to read for his church. Jack and his wife had seven children, and Jack’s job, along with his family duties, and need to sleep made it hard for him to study. But he persevered. And he eventually did his reading at church. Slight, white Medlin attended, alongside Jack’s wife and kids. “And the congregation of people sort of stared at me because we looked so different. I just said, ‘Actually we’re twins.’”

MEDLIN HEADED back to New York. After meeting Hedgepeth, the two reveled in the camp and louche spirit of the late 1970s, hauling friends to see an off-Broadway version of “Women Behind Bars,” starring Divine, the cult drag queen. But the city that never sleeps was losing its sparkle, if not puking on its shoes. The treasury of America’s greatest metropolis teetered on bankruptcy; it was as much a spiritual crisis as a fiscal one.

The whole city seemed to be wobbling on a skyscraper ledge. The subways were dirty and untrustworthy. “You’d go to the post office to get a package and if they couldn’t find it, they’d come back and yell at you,” Hedgepeth recalls.

He and John were ready for a new adventure. They made a scouting trip to



The mix of gays and straights in Chapel Hill’s Tempo Room provided a space for curious or uncertain people to “experience a gay environment without necessarily claiming a gay identity.” *Digital North Carolina*



Jeff and John made their first trip to Key West on Air Sunshine, which delivered on its name. Stepping on to the tarmac, they could smell frangipani blossoms in the warm breeze. *Airhistory.net*

had rarely, if ever, seen out-of-towners have such good fortune with civil service jobs, which tended to be held by longtime Cuban residents. Jeff and John quickly found themselves in the midst of Cuban culture, embraced by grannies at work who took them to restaurants, and gave them recipes for *ropa vieja*.

They bought a little house. But it wasn't long before they were staring at the prospects for sustainable living in Key West: open a business catering to tourists—which they didn't want to do—or be artists, which they lacked the talent for.

Key West had its charms. And they occasionally saw Tennessee Williams in a supermarket. But they were bored. And Jeff was wary of becoming a lifer there, like some former New York friends. "I'd go for a walk in the morning and it would be 11 o'clock and they'd be mixing Martinis. And I was, 'God, we've got to get out of here.'"

THEY SET OUT to see America in what John calls the "Better Homes and Gardens" version of a van. Jeff had built a sleeping pad and places to store coolers and a hibachi, on which he grilled duck and other dinner treats. After getting drenched by "freakish" summer rain in Seattle, they drove south. While crossing the Columbia River, the sun came out. "And everything felt good," Jeff says. "We got great hotels. People were wonderful." They settled in Northeast Portland's Hollywood neighborhood, and then at the base of the West Hills. John taught adult basic education. Jeff studied a passion, landscaping (his gardening talents would later be spotlighted in *The*

Key West. They stepped off an Air Sunshine flight ("The Florida Keys' Own Airline") directly on to the tarmac. "And we could smell frangipani blossoms," Jeff says, "and in New York it was so cold and nasty."

They eased right in to Key West's lifestyle. Jeff got a job at the county assessor's office converting paper archives to computer records. The manager doing the hiring was impressed by his Princeton degree. He got John hired on to the same project. Locals were astonished. They told the couple they



After Key West, John and Jeff spent the 1980s living in Portland, which they found a bit uncultured for their tastes. *Jeff Hedgepeth*

Seattle Times and a national publication), before landing at Lewis & Clark College as an assistant director for career planning. He stayed for 10 years, becoming the assistant dean of students.

But Portland in the 1980s was hardly a billboard for big-city culture. Jeff and John missed a good symphony and diversity. "I'm not a person who needs to be surrounded by Black people," Jeff says of Portland. "But we'd go downtown some days and we'd sit in a restaurant and look out the window and just wait to count the number of people of color we saw go by."

They had great friends, and were involved in the Rose City's LGBTQ community, through pride marches, and organizations such as Brother to Brother, the Gay Games, and Front Runners, a walking and running group. "And it seems we were always volunteering for something," Jeff says. "At work, I was one of the faculty advisers for the queer student group."

But they found themselves traveling to Seattle and Vancouver, B.C., for amenities Portland was then lacking. "Vancouver was always attractive to us," John says.

THEY RELOCATED to Seattle in 1990 and found more cosmopolitan culture, cuisine and gardening centers. They were quickly immersed in the community, joining a gay reading group, volunteering at theaters, and more. Jeff pitched in on the campaign for Cal Anderson, the state's first openly gay legislator. John worked the next 17 years for UW Libraries. Jeff spent a decade at the UW, most of it as associate director of the undergraduate program at the School of Business Administration. He also ran a program geared at attracting and graduating students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Jeff, then 48, took a leap from the comfortable college environment for a job at Pride Foundation. The Seattle-based philanthropic nonprofit supported the LGBTQ community with grants, scholarships, and leadership programs. Founded amid the AIDs crisis in 1985, Pride had originally focused on grants in Seattle with a smattering in Portland and Anchorage. By the time Jeff arrived, assistance and networks had expanded to Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington, funding both urban and rural groups. Regional outreach coordinator, Kevan Gardner, was based in Spokane.

"I land in this job," Jeff says, "and lo and behold, I start traveling to all these places running local grant reviews and supporting Kevan in his organizing work."

He had gotten involved with Pride through donor events. "I was just impressed by the breadth of what they were doing. I was completely impressed by

Audrey Haberman,” he says of the foundation’s former executive director.

Soon, he made national news. Walmart, then the nation’s largest private employer, expanded its anti-discrimination policy to protect gay and lesbian employees. It was July 2, 2003. The Walmart news was broken by the Pride Foundation, which had invested in the company for two years so it could challenge its workplace policy as shareholders. As investors, Pride had already successfully pressured General Electric and McDonald’s to offer protections for gays and lesbians.

Hedgepeth went to the office on the day of the Walmart news, sensing it would be hectic and likely historic. “We did our best to field the telephone calls and answer questions from media all over the country,” he says. “It was wild.”

AP photographer Elaine Thompson stopped by and snapped a picture of Hedgepeth, his Pride colleague Sara Elward, and board member Marsha Botzer. The trio were memorialized coast-to-coast in an image of Botzer displaying Walmart’s letter. It even appeared in Medlin’s hometown newspaper, the *Rome News-Tribune*.

Hedgepeth played a small role in Pride’s “shareholder activism push.” It was led by board members Botzer and Ric Weiland and Executive Director Audrey Haberman, he says.



When Paul Allen and Bill Gates started Microsoft in New Mexico, Ric Weiland, center, joined them as the company’s general manager. He drove a red Corvette around Albuquerque with the license plate, “Yes I am.” *Lakeside School*



Audrey Haberman, center, together with Marsha Botzer and Ric Weiland, were leaders of the Pride Foundation’s “shareholder activism” that pressured major corporations to adopt discrimination protections for gay and lesbian employees. *Philanthropy NW*

Weiland helped pioneer the strategy in the LGTBQ community. Employee number-two at Microsoft, he was high school chums with Bill Gates and Paul Allen. When the duo started Microsoft a few years later in New Mexico, Weiland joined them as the company’s general manager.

Haberman recalled how Weiland challenged a corporate giant in 1999. Weiland, “who was not a big public speaker,” traveled to General Electric’s corporate headquarters and stood up in front of some 2,000 people gathered for a shareholders’ meeting. “He ex-

plained how adding sexual orientation to the company's anti-discrimination policy would help GE retain employees."

Weiland contrasted the values of GE and Microsoft. "From the beginning there was no secret about my sexual orientation, because Bill Gates and Paul Allen had known me for a number of years already," he said. "Luckily for me, I knew what they were interested in was the quality of my work, not whether I dated someone of the same sex."

WEILAND WENT ON to make what was then the single largest donation to the LGBTQ community—a \$65 million bequest after his death in 2006. Of that, \$19 million went to the Pride Foundation, increasing its endowment from \$3 million to \$22 million. It was a transformative boost for the nonprofit. It helped stretch Pride's work in five states, seeding and nurturing local groups and leaders. Weiland gave to 10 other LGBTQ groups, including Lambda Legal, a leader in courtroom battles for marriage equality. A Lambda executive called Weiland the most consequential donor in the organization's history.



Known as "Grumpy Santa" and "The governor of Capitol Hill," George Bakan ran the *Seattle Gay News* from 1982 until he died at his desk in 2020. He was one of the most influential gay people in Seattle's history. *Flickr.com/sea_turtle*

Weiland gave to 10 other LGBTQ groups, including Lambda Legal, a leader in courtroom battles for marriage equality. A Lambda executive called Weiland the most consequential donor in the organization's history.

"Ric was just a wonderful person. I still mourn him every time I drive by his old house," Hedgepeth says. Weiland's gift lifted the very idea of LGBTQ philanthropy. "Ric's imprimatur was a beacon to others that these organizations were top notch. So much publicity enhanced the concept of LGBTQ philanthropy in general."

In Hedgepeth's recollection, his work coordinating grants was not directly related to marriage equality. George Bakan, the famously blunt *Seattle Gay News* editor, used to yell about the foundation sprinkling money around to PFLAG chapters and lesbian drum corps "so they can order cookies." But when it was time for the marriage campaign, Hedgepeth realized Pride had helped build networks that came into play. "We knew who to go to in the community, who to talk to, to phone bank."

LONG BEFORE that, Hedgepeth and Medlin had married in Canada. They were on the leading edge of an emerging population that saw merit in a June 2003 ruling

by Ontario's highest court. It said same-sex couples were discriminated against by "traditional" laws. The British Columbia provincial government followed suit in July. On the 27th anniversary of their meeting in Central Park, Hedgepeth and Medlin planned to marry at noon in Vancouver.

Mike Frederickson, a close friend and former director of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association, thought their wedding was newsworthy. He asked if he could recommend it to Seattle media. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* sent reporter Mike Lewis and photographer Gilbert Arias to cover the ceremony. Jeff and John figured their wedding story would be stuck somewhere inside the next day's edition of the *P-I*. They were wrong. It was on the front page above the fold. Friends could see their photo dominating newspaper boxes around Seattle. In keeping with the good vibes that seemed to follow the couple, they didn't hear any negative feedback.

They had a big party at their house the next week. The Very Reverend Robert Taylor, the openly gay dean of St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, blessed their rings. They were happy to see Ric Weiland among their guests.

At the time of their ceremony, it was unclear to Canadian officials how many Americans had made a similar trip. But it was apparent that U.S. leaders lagged behind their counterparts to the north. "I believe marriage is between a man and a woman," President George W. Bush insisted at a news conference the week that Hedgepeth and Medlin were married. Bush's political guru, Karl Rove, would launch an offensive in 2004, supporting constitutional bans on same-sex marriage in 11 states that year.

Canada had set off a panic among conservatives. Some believed when gay couples married in Canada and returned to the U.S. their legal unions would have to be accepted. Legal analysis wasn't so clear, but the U.S. Supreme Court's leading conservative jurist, Antonin Scalia, perceived a threat. "The court today pretends ... that we need not fear judicial imposition of homosexual marriage, as has recently occurred in Canada," Scalia wrote. "Do not believe it."

New York activists organized the "Civil Marriage Trail," an overnight bus caravan that brought couples to Toronto for ceremonies. "After hundreds of couples had married in Canada," wrote journalist Sasha Issen-



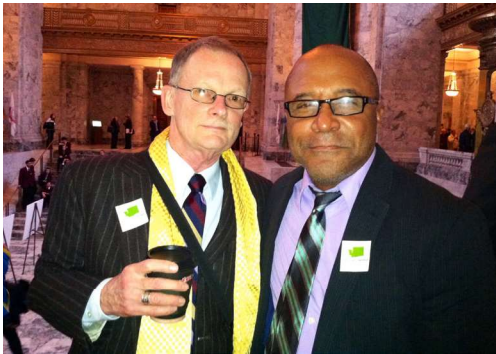
Edie Windsor, left, won a 2013 U.S. Supreme Court case that overturned the Defense of Marriage Act. Sally Jewell, then U.S. Secretary of the Interior, posed with Windsor outside the Stonewall Inn, the first LGBTQ national monument. *Department of Interior*

berg, “the New York State attorney-general at the time, Eliot Spitzer, issued an opinion declaring that the state would recognize same-sex marriages from other jurisdictions even though New York did not allow gay and lesbian people to marry there. Among the beneficiaries of the new policy were Manhattanites Edith “Edie” Windsor and Thea Spyer, an elderly couple who married in Toronto in 2007 under the auspices of the Civil Marriage Trail.”

Although New York considered Windsor and Spyer married, the federal government did not. Spyer died in 2009 and left her estate to her wife. But the IRS denied Windsor the spousal tax exemption that heterosexual couples enjoyed. Windsor “was hit with a \$350,000 estate-tax bill that would never have been levied, as she liked to say, ‘if Thea was Theo.’ ”

Windsor paid the IRS and sued the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2013 that her tax bill amounted to unconstitutional discrimination. The opinion struck down part of the Defense of Marriage Act and required the federal government to treat all couples equally without regard to sexual orientation, if their marriage was recognized in the states where they lived. Windsor’s case set the stage for the nation’s highest court to legalize same-sex marriage two years later.

MEANWHILE, LAWMAKERS in Washington state passed domestic partnership laws, from 2007 through 2009, that conferred many legal benefits of marriage



John and Jeff were at the Capitol in 2012 to cheer Gov. Gregoire’s signing of a marriage-equality law. *The Seattle Times* quoted Jeff saying, “I definitely see us as a ‘Till Death Do Us Part’ couple.” *Jeff Hedgepeth*

to same-sex couples. Until then, despite their Canadian ceremony, Hedgepeth and Medlin didn’t have the same rights as married heterosexuals, such as hospital visitations and care decisions in emergencies. Jeff and John were early to register as partners.

They were at the Capitol on February 13, 2012 to witness the next triumphant advance. The state’s lawmakers had passed a bill approving marriage equality. An overflow crowd packed into the bill-signing room and spilled into the hallway to see Governor Chris

Gregoire make it official. John and Jeff squeezed in to hear the chants of “Thank you! Thank you!” when Gregoire entered the room. Jeff was quoted in *The Seattle*

Times saying, "I definitely see us as a 'Till Death Do Us Part' couple."

Despite the celebration, Jeff and John knew Christian conservatives would likely file an initiative to overturn the law. And they did so within hours of Gregoire's bill-signing. With the marriage movement gaining momentum, LGBTQ activists had already begun using sophisticated research to craft new strategies, messages, and fundraising. Jeff was in meetings where activists planned the all-important pivot from talking about hospital visits and burial plots to campaigning on love and commitment. The debate was shifted from the head to the heart.

The new tactics helped defeat a statewide ballot measure by Christian conservatives. Hedgepeth and Medlin saw no need to get remarried in Washington when it legalized equality in 2012. "If you met a heterosexual couple married in B.C.," Hedgepeth says, "would you expect them to get married again if they moved to Washington?"

They had plenty of weddings to attend. Their friends were married at Buddhist weddings, country club weddings, drag-queen dominated weddings, and more. They were also happy to get on a contact list to witness, and take pictures, for other couples who came from out-of-state to take advantage of Washington's law.

FOR ALL the joy that 2012 brought the LGBTQ community, Hedgepeth was struggling. Haberman, the Pride executive who helped make his time at the foundation "magical," left for another job in philanthropy. He didn't jell as well with new leaders. What's more, "my father was dying a really horrible, scary dementia death," he says, and he was shuttling across the country and on the phone constantly trying to help his family.

The tail end of the year was rewarding "because suddenly there was marriage, and all the work we had done had come to fruition, and we had been through this long campaign."

But he felt exhausted. Burned out. "My father died about a week and a half before election day. So, I ran home for the funeral." The reverend for the service in North Carolina saw in Thurman Hedgepeth's biography that he had a son in Seat-



Jeff and John didn't see a need to get hitched again after Washington legalized marriage equality in 2012. They had so many weddings of friends to attend that Jeff sharpened his "Rainbow Cake" baking. *Jeff Hedgepeth*

tle with a husband. He took the opportunity to launch an “anti-homosexual 101 through 501” screed. Jeff was tempted to drop a New York City tirade on the guy. “But I just stared a hole into that man’s head until he couldn’t look at me.”

He hurried back to Seattle for election day. “And I just never recovered,” he says. In early 2013, John told him, “I’d rather be a little more poor than for you to come home in a body bag.”

Jeff chokes up at the memory.

“And that’s what my relationship with this man is. We support each other. Sometimes—the really hard times—you say, ‘Oh my god, I’ve got this person in my life who’s amazing.’”

He decided to take a step back for his health. He left Pride. He mainly joined John in retirement. He took a short post with the Gay City Health Project, helping introduce Obamacare to the LGBTQ community in King County. He also did some seasonal work at his favorite garden center, and for the last five years, has been a freshman application reviewer for the UW.

Jeff sees his legacy as that of an ambassador, going back to Princeton, and how he’d visit nearby high schools to talk about sexual orientation. “This whole ambassadorial thing really kind of revved up,” he says, when he was at Pride Foundation, which did not believe it could accomplish all its goals in a big city. “I often found myself out in rural Idaho talking to people that were not expecting a Black gay man to come to Idaho to talk about queer rights.”

Jeff and John also put themselves out there at events such as the 50th reunion of John’s all-white high school class. They were the only openly gay people there. And Jeff was the only Black person except for servers and bartenders at the



Jeff on his role as a gay-ambassador: “I do have an open personality. I don’t threaten people. And I’m curious about people.” *Jeff Hedgepeth*



The opposites began merging over time. Jeff used to listen to only rock music; John was all-classical. Jeff came to love opera. John developed a taste for classic rock. They both love watching football. *Jeff Hedgepeth*



Even if they'd be poorer, John wanted Jeff to retire from Pride Foundation for his health. "And that's what my relationship with his man is," Jeff says, choking up. "We support each other." *Jeff Hedgepeth*

event. Although a recluse in high school, John had been the editor of the student newspaper, and had produced a 50th anniversary yearbook. "He was the most popular guy there," Jeff says, giving the couple ample opportunity to spread their good-vibe diplomacy.

"Even at the gym," Jeff says, "I think about the 60-year-old straight white guys that would stand around naked and talk to me about marriage and my husband. I think it's because I do have an open personality. I don't threaten people. And I'm curious about people.

"If there's some way that who I am, the real me, can be out there and help somebody else get used to being around the real me, then that's kind of what my goal is in life."

THROUGH THE years, the opposites began merging. Musically, John used to be all classical; Jeff, all rock and roll. Jeff came to like opera as much as John. John developed a taste for classic rock. They both love football.

For their 46th anniversary on August 1st, 2022, they planned an evening with old friends at a spendy Capitol Hill restaurant. They didn't like the table they got. They left and went across the street to a gay bar. "We had a blast sitting

outside yakking, drinking and eating burgers and fried food,” Jeff says. “The night couldn’t have been better.”

Two days later they celebrated his 70th birthday. They went to the very up-scale Canlis “for an astoundingly wonderful and expensive dinner,” Jeff says. “A very young man was seated mid-meal alone next to us. We started a conversation. He asked me if John and I were more than friends. I said for way longer than he had been alive.”

It turned out it was also the young man’s birthday, his 26th, and his boyfriend had to work. He had decided to treat himself anyway.

“We wished him and his boyfriend a happy, long life together,” Hedgepeth says. “He seemed pleased to meet two old, married geezers.”

Bob Young