

# How We Got to the White House To See the President Sign the Respect for Marriage Act



**One day, I saw an article that the Senate had just passed the Respect for Marriage Act, meaning it had to go back to the U.S. House of Representatives before the President could sign the bill into law. Since the leadership in the House was set to change on January 3, I knew that the President would have to sign before the New Year. This bill was momentous to my family because we had skin in this game on a few levels:**

1. My wife Maggie and I are a same sex couple in an interracial marriage.
2. After a Justice of the Supreme Court suggested that the Dobbs decision may be applied to other cases that guarantee rights for the communities that I am part of (same sex marriage protected via *Obergefell* and *Windsor*, interracial marriage via *Loving v. Virginia*), getting this bill signed into law was a relief that even if the Court decided to change those decisions, the law would still stand.
3. We sued the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in 2012 to have Maggie recognized as my dependent and eligible for benefits – just like other spouses married to disabled veterans. As a veteran with MS – a disease that the VA determined was connected to service in the Army – I wanted to make sure Maggie had all the assistance to help me should my MS progress. It would also ensure Maggie could apply and receive widow's

benefits should I die from any medical conditions related to my service.

4. We provided written testimony that was included in a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing of the Respect for Marriage in July 2011.



My wife Maggie and me.

## **How We Got to the White House**

I reached out to the sponsors of the bill and my representative for assistance to be included on the list of attendees. Unfortunately, the list of attendees would be limited to guests of those members of Congress who sponsored the bill, past members of Congress who originally were on board when this legislation was introduced around 2011 and guests of the White House. Since neither my representative nor the office of the representative I work for sponsored the original bill, I would have to work another angle for the invite.

I then emailed the president and vice president a request to attend the event and reached out to the White House operator. As I explained the situation and asked to at least have our names considered for the guest list, he looked up my name, our lawsuit against the Department of Veterans Affairs and the legal team who represented us on our case, the Southern Poverty Law Center. He couldn't promise anything, but said that if anything came

up, someone would contact either Maggie or me with an invitation.

A couple of days after, news came out that the Respect for Marriage Act bill passed in the House and was scheduled to be signed into law. We knew it was crunch time at this point, so I reached out to the veteran community to see if any of the organizations I was a member of/volunteered with had any connections. I was told that our names were put on the list of contenders through two organizations, but it would be up to the White House for the invite.



With our Representative Judy Chu.

It looked like a long shot, since the bill was going to be signed into law on Tuesday, December 13. We hadn't heard anything on Thursday the 8 or Friday the 9, so I was preparing myself to enjoy the event on TV. We gave it a good try, but it looked like it just wasn't going to happen.

On Monday afternoon around 3:40 p.m., I got an email invite from the White House. After immediately calling Maggie and letting my supervisor and colleagues know I needed 2 days of leave, we hopped on a red-eye flight out of LAX on Monday night and arrived in D.C.

## The Experience

One word sums up the experience: **surreal**. Witnessing this meant that all the struggles

those trailblazers who stood up for marriage equality dealt with would not be experienced by couples coming after them. And we understood that we were witnessing history.



Getting a hug from President Biden!

The White House lawn was a celebration. I couldn't stop smiling and was just so grateful to have this opportunity to see families like mine in attendance and have this moment to show that our persistence and fight to show love wins was worth it. Whoever the DJ was knew the audience from the songs that they played – hits like “Return of the Mack,” “Faith” by George Michael and “Love on Top” by Beyonce, along with who performed, Cyndi Lauper and Sam Smith. The White House was lit in rainbow again as it became dark, and it was energetic.

This isn't a silver bullet to fix discrimination against the communities I belong to, but it's a start. In this nation, people are still discriminated against due to their appearance, perceived disability, sex/gender presentation, race/ethnicity and who they love. And for this moment, our family and other families like ours were part of the American dream. We were just like everybody else, and we were celebrating that night. We continue to work towards a more perfect union, and this bill signed into law is a start.





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Editor's Note: Read what the passage of the Respect for Marriage Act [means for the MS community.](#)