

COUNTY CLERK
CLELA ROREX, 71, TALKS WITH
HER FRIEND SUE LARSON, 57.

Clela Rorex: In 1974 there was a county clerk election here in Boulder. There had been no woman in that office for over thirty years, and it pissed me off. And so my friend said, "Well, why don't you run for office?" So I did.

I was thirty-one years old, and the campaign was pretty difficult for me. I don't know how I made it, because I was just an anomaly: I looked young, I had long hair, and I wore mini-skirts; a local paper characterized me as a Barbie doll. *[Laughs.]* But much to my surprise, I won, and I was sworn in on January 14th of '75.

On the surface the county clerk has a very boring job. *[Laughs.]* It varies some by state, but in Colorado the clerk is charged with issuing marriage licenses and license plates, with recording documents, and with managing the voting. But in

'74 Boulder passed the first ordinance of any municipality in the country to try to protect the rights of gays and lesbians, and it created a furor.

In March 1975, a gay couple came to my door to get a marriage license; it was the first time I met openly gay people. They lived in Colorado Springs, and when they went to the clerk there, she said, "We don't do that here. Go to Boulder."

But when they came in I said, "I don't know if I can do this either. I need a couple of days to find out." I was told that the Colorado marriage code did not specify that marriage had to be between a man and a woman. So when they came back I said, "You're on legal grounds if you want to do this. It's your decision."

I was very naive politically, so I felt like it was simply a matter of fairness and equity and right and wrong. It wasn't forbidden by law, and therefore I did it. But I had absolutely no real comprehension of the kind of wrath that I would bring down on myself.

Sue Larson: Yeah, Boulder was a different place than it is now. I'm sure you got plenty of hate mail.

Clela: I had entire church congregations writing me, saying I was creating Sodom and Gomorrah in the area; that all the gays in the world would migrate to Boulder and that it would ruin everybody's property values.

One day I was in my office looking out my window, and this horse trailer drives up with some media vans. Then this

cowboy gets out with his horse. And all of a sudden it just dawned on me: *He's going to ask for a marriage license for his horse.* And so my deputy and I started flipping through the marriage code like crazy. You know, *What are we going to do?!*

So he comes in, asks for a marriage license, and I went to the counter and started taking his information. I ask him his name and his horse's name, which was Dolly. And I said, "How old is Dolly?" He said, "Eight, I think." And I put my pen down, just calm as could be—how, I don't know. And I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but that's too young to get a license without parental approval." That story hit the world, and my actions made me a laughingstock for many people.

Sue: So how many couples came to Boulder and were married by you?

Clela: After the first couple from Colorado Springs, I issued five more licenses. But it was really hard on me. I honestly did not anticipate the degree of hate. It was threats. I mean, people wanted to kill me for doing this. I had a small son and people would call on the phone and if he answered they would spiel their hatred to him. And I was scared. So I didn't see through my term in office. I was disappointed, because I wanted to.

Sue: Well, there are some people out here who know what a big deal that was and what a stand you took. I mean, I remember being in high school then, hearing about this new county clerk we had elected who came along and started marrying gay people. I was sixteen or seventeen and was too young

to vote, but in my gut I knew, *This is something that affects you.* I didn't know what I was yet, but I knew what I wasn't.

I remember just watching and being surprised that teachers I really respected had started talking about gay people in not a very nice way. I'm like, *Why would you say that about these people?* Not knowing I was one of those people. And then, oh, ten years later, I figured it out. *[Laughter.]*

In Boulder at that time, no one was coming out—or even hardly talking about it—even through the eighties. And so to offer support for anything even remotely gay-oriented—it just blew me away. And years ago didn't you go down to Denver and presided over dozens of same-sex couples who had a symbolic marriage ceremony?

Clela: They couldn't get an elected official to say the vows, so they called me. That was actually one of the most emotional moments that I've had through all of this. The couples were there in droves—every stripe and color. Every type of dress you can imagine. Some in very formal wedding gowns and others not. They said their vows to each other, and they would always say how long they'd been together. I mean, many of them had been together for decades—they had lived their entire lives together.

Sue: Well, we have some pretty incredible allies in this town, and you're one of them. You're certainly one of my heroes.

Clela: *[Laughs.]* Thanks, Sue, but I don't feel like a hero. I

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just was a young woman who tried to do the right thing. And given the same circumstances, I would do it again. I feel like that decision changed my life in many ways, and thank good-

ness I made it, because it would be so hard for me to look myself in the mirror today if I hadn't.



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Sue Larson (*left*) and Clela Rorex.