

Waltham native, former priest, to marry his life partner of 50 years

By Jeff Gilbride/Daily News staff

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WALTHAM —

When Richard Nolan and Robert Pingpank attend their 50th college reunion they will do so as a married couple.

"Bob and I have said we've been on the cutting edge for all these years and we'd like to stop that," said Nolan, a retired Episcopal priest and Waltham native. "We've had to invent our life together from the start and it would have been easier if we had some agencies or people to learn from."

On June 4, Nolan and his longtime partner Pingpank of Waterbury, Conn., both 72, will tie the knot at the Trinity College chapel in Hartford, Conn., where they first met in the 1950s.

It's the first legal same-sex wedding ceremony at the chapel since Connecticut lawmakers legalized same-sex marriage on April 23.

"It is exciting and also gratifying to go this route, from the closet to being legally married on the campus where we first met," Nolan said. "It's a real sentimental journey."

But for a couple that's been together for over 50 years, the marriage is also a bit of a formality.

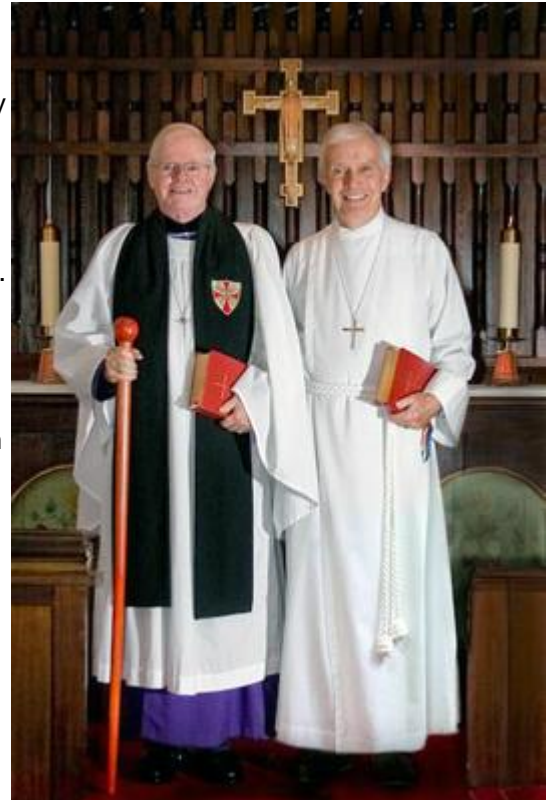
"For me the significance of it is the legal part, but I do believe marriage should be a civil issue and religion should be left out of it," Pingpank, a former math teacher, said. "For me it's something we should formalize because we can."

Nolan grew up in Waltham. He was confirmed at Christ Episcopal Church on Main Street. In his teenage years, Nolan helped out at Gene's Restaurant, his father's Moody Street business.

At 18, after graduating from Boston Latin School, Nolan went to Trinity College where he met Pingpank during his freshman year in 1955.

"It was confusing. We didn't even have the vocabulary. I don't think I even knew the word homosexual," Nolan said. "The 1950s, in a way, was a very innocent time and a very closeted time. It was don't ask, don't tell."

Nolan said keeping quiet about his homosexuality was an unspoken rule in the Episcopalian Church. In 1958 while still a college student, Nolan said he was examined by a church psychologist in Boston.



contributed
Waltham native and retired priest Richard Nolan, left, will legally marry Robert Pingpank, right, his partner of over 50 years. The couple will be married at Trinity College chapel in Hartford, Conn., where they first met.

"He said to me, 'You know there are traces of homosexuality, but we don't tell the bishops about that,'" he said. "They tend to get upset."

In 1963 Nolan became a deacon at Christ Episcopal Church and in 1965 he was ordained as a priest at St. John's Episcopal Church in Arlington.

After years of service in churches mostly in Connecticut and New York, Nolan retired in 1992 and two years later, he and Pingpank moved to West Palm Beach, Fla.

Nolan spends his spare time editing his two Web sites, philosophy-religion.org and nolan-pingpank.com. He also serves as the retired priest in residence at St. Andrew's Church in Lake Worth, Fla.

When the couple were making plans to attend their upcoming 50th college reunion, their lawyer Mark Grieco suggested they get married.

His reasoning was to help ensure the two men are able to be with each other in case of a medical emergency.

"The big thing for us would be hospital access. The worst thing that could happen to us is to be kept apart in a medical crisis when it is family only who can be there," he said. "I had a heart attack (in 2002) and major surgery. There were periods of time when there are family-only visitors and Bob is it when it comes to family."

Nolan said the upcoming ceremony will be a no-frills "guy thing" with no gifts, cake, rice or rehearsal. The Rev. David T. Taylor, minister from the United Church of Christ and fellow alum, will perform the ceremony.

"It was a men's college in those days and people will be there for the three-day reunion. Nobody has to bother with gifts," Nolan said. "We really want this as simple and dignified as possible but without the crud that puts people on edge, runs into a lot of money and obligates people to buy presents."

Despite the wedding, the couple says the country has a long way to go before homosexuality is accepted, noting their marriage certificate will not be recognized in the state where they live.

"I didn't think this would happen in my lifetime and it's still very limited. Our marriage will only be legal in Iowa, Vermont, Connecticut and Massachusetts and maybe New York," Pingpank said. "I hope to live long enough to see it recognized by the federal government."

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