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“What took them so long?” was the typical Mission reaction today to a federal appeals court’s 2-1 decision that Proposition 8?s ban on same-sex marriage is unconstitutional.

“It’s about time,” said Kira Thompson as she ate lunch outside Herbivore.

“I can’t believe it took so much time,” said Raphael Shanmugan as he fixed a bike. “It’s ridiculous it hasn’t come sooner,” said Courtland Donaldson.

Missionites said they were hopeful as they waited for today’s decision. “I knew it would happen eventually,” said Mark Hallenbart, a Castro resident who works in the Mission. “It’s a victory.”

Rebecca Isaacs, executive director of Equality Federation, an alliance working to achieve LGBT equality nationwide, echoed that sentiment. “We are incredibly, incredibly excited.”

But it wasn’t always like this.

In 2004 Gavin Newsom, then mayor of San Francisco, decided that the city could issue same-sex marriage licenses, opening up the possibility of legal marriage for gay and lesbian couples. One month after Newsom’s move, the state Supreme Court annulled those licenses. But in May of 2008, the California Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage was a fundamental right.

Religious groups reacted quickly, collecting enough signatures to put Proposition 8, a state constitutional ban on gay marriage, on the ballot. The proposition lost in the Mission but won statewide, with 52 percent of the vote. Again it became illegal for same-sex couples to wed in California.

In August 2010, Chief District Judge Vaughn Walker overturned Proposition 8. Today, the Ninth

U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld that decision, but the case is likely to go to the Supreme Court.

Hallenbart said that he and his partner have been eagerly anticipating the decision, but the couple is in no rush to get married. Hallenbart said he simply wants same-sex couples to have the same rights as heterosexual couples.

Others agreed. “Finally they can be entitled to some of the benefits that other couples are entitled to,” said Shanmugan. Those benefits include hospital and prison visitations, rights to pension benefits, and breaks on taxes and insurance, to name a few.

“It’s only just for them to have the same rights,” said Luisa, a married heterosexual woman.

“Yeah, if they don’t have the same rights,” said Luisa’s husband, Diego, “then marriage is just a social concept.”

That concept is something that Jim Haynes and his girlfriend of 14 years are grappling with. “She says she won’t get married until everyone has the right to get married,” said Haynes, 40. “Prop. 8 got overturned, but we shouldn’t look for a courthouse yet,” his girlfriend said.

“This panel — these people are on our side,” said Hallenbart. It helps, he said, that they didn’t view the decision from a religious standpoint.

Some, like Haynes, can only see it from a religious perspective.

“I’m a Christian myself,” he said. “Socially, the American creed for all to get married should persist.” He believes that many people turn to transcendental experiences to heal.

“But old rules can trip up the progress of humanity,” he said.

It’s those old, traditional rules that drive Prop. 8 backers. “The backers are relentless,” said Thompson. “They need to just chill.”

Thompson added that Prop. 8 supporters should stop their tireless efforts against same-sex marriage, which, she believes, doesn’t harm anyone. “Live your life, and let everyone do what they want,” she said.
The idea of making personal decisions is forward-thinking, said Shanmugan.

Thompson believes California is a progressive state, but, “We’re behind the times on that one,” she said, referring to same-sex marriage. “It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“I know couples who would get married right now,” said Sarah Engelman, a clothing sales associate, “but they don’t want to leave San Francisco to do it.”

But the Equality Federation’s Isaacs said that the California decision can bolster the efforts of same-sex marriage proponents in other states, like New Jersey, Maine, Minnesota and Washington, that are fighting their own marriage battles.

Although California is known as a progressive state, homophobia still exists here, and LGBT youth in middle and high schools must often deal with bullying. But students are making important strides in creating safer schools, said Jill Marcellus, communications coordinator for the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a network that empowers students to fight homophobia.

Today's ruling sets an example for them. "It's empowering to see LGBT youth to see and respond to the value around the decision," Marcellus said. "It positively impacts them."

That value offers momentum, residents said. "It's looking good," said Zee, a Mission resident who declined to giver her last name. She believes it's important to stay motivated. "This will pave the way for everyone in the future."

"But it's not enough yet," said Thompson. "There's a bigger hurdle coming," Diego added. Backers of Prop. 8 could appeal the ruling. In fact, Isaacs expects it.

Like Zee, others acknowledge that achieving legal same-sex marriage will be a drawn-out process. Missionites don't expect the legal battle to stop here. "It looks inevitable that it'll go to the Supreme Court," said Haynes.

"This will be a test of views of equality for the Supreme Court," said Isaacs. "They're more conservatively bent," added Haynes.

"We'll keep fighting all the way," said Hallenbart. "Ultimately, it will be legal." And then, if he and his partner decide to get married, they'll have that choice.

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