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**WINDY CITY
TIMES**

Gay and Lesbian

Wedding Guide

Frank Andonoplas: An elite wedding planner

BY ROSS FORMAN

Frank J. Andonoplas is convinced that when, not if, same-sex marriage becomes legal in Illinois, his wedding consulting business will spike dramatically within the LGBT community, perhaps by 50 percent.

Andonoplas' clientele now includes about 20 percent same-sex couples. After all, Andonoplas isn't just one of the best, most respected wedding planners locally, but worldwide. He is one of only 71 master bridal consultants in the world, an honor presented by the Association of Bridal Consultants—and he's the first male to achieve the title. He has won Special Event Magazine's coveted Gala Award and last year won the Spotlight Award and was named Event Planner of the Year by Event Solutions Magazine.

"A wedding is a wedding, period, Andonoplas said. "I'm [hired] because most clientele are working professionals who like things done correctly and don't have time to manage an event [as large as a wedding.] They are hiring me for my expertise and my creativity."

With 20 years of experience, Andonoplas offers a meticulous, unmatched attention to detail, with an amazing personal touch to reflect the couple's style.

"I sit down with the couple after being hired for a getting-to-know-you meeting, and ask them a lot of personal questions to truly know and understand their style" he said.

Andonoplas wants to know such details about his clients as where they like to go on vacations, their favorite colors, what they like to eat, what they do in their spare time, their hobbies, and more—all to prepare the perfect wedding.

"From there, I pick out things that will work

within the details of the event to really showcase their personalities and style," said Andonoplas who, for instance, worked with a couple that really enjoyed wine. So he suggested a wine bar instead of the traditional open bar. "It worked out perfectly," he said. And at that wedding, he heard an attendee say, "Oh my God, this is so them."

Andonoplas was all smiles.

"One thing I really pride myself on is, none of the weddings that I design and coordinate look or feel the same; each is based on that couple's originality, personality and style," he said.

Andonoplas lives in the Edgewater neighborhood with his partner of 24 years, Shawn, and Fenwick, their Bichon Frise. His studio also is located in Edgewater, in the arcade of the Edgewater Beach Apartments. They had a commitment ceremony, commonplace years ago, to celebrate their 10-year anniversary with family and friends. They also had a private civil union ceremony in 2011.

"As soon as [same-sex] marriage [becomes legal] in Illinois, this [industry] is going to go through the roof," said Andonoplas, who admits he is constantly monitoring the legal updates.

Andonoplas, the owner of Frank Event Design, accepts only one wedding per weekend, a long-standing policy of his to guarantee full support and dedication to the couple.

"I never envisioned, way back when, doing this for 20 years. I thought I would be a [life-long] banker as I was in the banking industry for almost 16 years before starting this," he said. "I've put a lot of work into this job, a lot of heart, soul and passion, too."

And he has plenty of memories to reflect upon. Such as the 2012 wedding he coordinated for



Andonoplas helps a flower girl get ready. Photo by Aaron Fortin

two women at the Adler Planetarium "that was off the hook," and even featured in CS Brides Magazine. "It was amazing. We branded the wedding with a custom logo, and [that logo] appeared on everything from the invitation to the stamp to the pillows in the lounge to the dome of the Planetarium when you were leaving [the building.]"

Andonoplas acknowledged that his own wedding ceremony certainly has helped him professionally. "You have a completely different experience from that perspective as opposed to just planning," he said. "It was very emotional. To say those [commitment] words in front of all our family and friends meant so much to us.

"I got a better sense of how the couple feels during the day, and truly understood and appreciated how I make it easy, special and memorable in all the right ways."

And yes, Andonoplas did hire a wedding consultant to be there the day of his wedding, "to make sure everything ran smoothly," he said. "It

was an awesome day, so special and meaningful."

The same feeling Andonoplas has helped literally hundreds of other couples enjoy.

Andonoplas can be reached at 773-275-6804 or frank@frankeventdesign.com.



Andonoplas works with a make-up artist. Photo courtesy of Wedding Day Art

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Gay man continues tradition with jewelry store

BY ROSS FORMAN

When Don Strzepek applied for a job at The Tucker Company, one of Chicago's most prestigious jewelry stores, he envisioned only working there for three months. He had been a school teacher locally and was applying for teaching jobs in San Diego—the Tucker gig was just to bring in a few bucks before he went west.

"I applied sort of on a whim, and by the time I got home, while living with my parents [at the time], they had already called three times [to further discuss the job because the company] needed someone immediately because [their staff] was short-handed."

Two months into the job, Strzepek was sent to his first diamond course, "and I was immediately hooked," he said. "The fascination with gem stones and the variety of people that you meet [attracted me, along with] the diversity and just making people happy. Every ring and every necklace [is enjoyable, plus the] custom designing appeals to my artistic side. Every day was different, and still is; and the fast-pace of the industry is enjoyable. It's just extremely fascinating to me."

Thirty years after first walking into The Tucker Company store in downtown Chicago, a store founded in 1935, Strzepek is still there. In fact, the openly gay 51-year-old is now the owner.

"I never envisioned it; I never thought this would happen," Strzepek said. "When Sherman Tucker was 90, he decided that it probably was time to sell the company. I eventually put together a business plan, ultimately got the loan [needed] and, in November 2006, signed the check and bought the company."

Former owner Sherman Tucker, the son of the founder, died April 12, 2012, at age 95.

"It was a little overwhelming the day [I bought the company]. My boss became my employee,"



Don Strzepek of The Tucker Company. Photo courtesy of Strzepek

he added with a laugh. "Now, it's challenging, but fun. Shortly after taking over, the economy struggled and I've seen major technological advances in the industry over the years, including Internet shopping, and new designing, etc. That's not all a bad thing, but challenges."

Is it a fun job?

You bet, he said. "Every day is a challenge; you never know what it's going to bring," he said. "I still love the inter-personal contact when people come in [to the store]."

Strzepek has quick ability to put customers at ease, especially since "buying jewelry can

be overwhelming," he said, "but it doesn't have to be. Buying jewelry should be enjoyable. I'm a believer that every single person who comes through the door is my first customer—and that's how I treat them."

"Jewelry is a lifetime expression, and I'm here for you."

Strzepek, who lives in Lakeview and is dating a culinary chef, hasn't forgotten his teaching roots. He is now a part-time educator for the Citywide Colleges of Chicago, teaching English-as-a-second language, which is fun and fascinating, he said.

The Tucker Company is a full-service jeweler—from watch repairs to custom designing jewelry, and everything in between, including diamonds, semi-precious gemstones, creating men's bracelets, women's earrings and more.

"I never do a hard sell; that's not my style," Strzepek said. "I'd rather a person sleep on the decision [to buy or not,] and be secure in what they're purchasing, knowing what they're purchasing is being made in the U.S., made properly and with integrity."

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Steve Nasshan's passion shows on the dance floor

BY ROSS FORMAN

Steve Nasshan celebrated in April the one-year anniversary of Get on the Floor (GTF) Dance Company, which he owns and operates in Chicago's North Center neighborhood—and more than a decade in the ballroom dance industry.

"I got my start with the Arthur Murray franchise, then taught for the Fred Astaire franchise, and finally ended up at a privately-owned studio in Chicago," Nasshan said. "A few years ago, I went through the process of opening a branch of the Fred Astaire franchise, but unfortunately finances fell through at the last minute and it forced me back to square one."

"I grew up with parents who were teachers, studied education through college, but always had a little performance bug inside of me. The ballroom dance industry fulfills my need to teach and my need to perform. It was time to see the vision in my head about a studio that could be my own finally come into reality."

Get on the Floor Dance Company meshes Nasshan's knowledge of the industry, with what he's learned as a professional competitive ballroom dancer, and his own creative vision.

"The goal upon opening was to not close," Nasshan joked.

"Ballroom dance is a hidden community in Chicago, so part of the [company] philosophy is to just bring ballroom dance into the community. We do this by partnering with other businesses, hosting events, and donating our time to give back to the community," such as teaching free classes at the Center on Halsted, which he has done.

Nasshan, 29, lives in Edgewater and is openly gay. He was born and raised in Chicago, graduated from Niles West High School in suburban

Skokie, then attended Augustana College in Rock Island before completing most of his studies at Northeastern Illinois University.

His dance company has been fantastic in year one, he said.

"Ballroom dance is a great way to meet new people, stay in shape, and try something out of the ordinary," Nasshan said. "Our [company] instructors are trained in how to make our private lessons as fun and easy as possible. We are confident that we can teach anybody how to 'get on the floor.' In addition to private lessons, we also provide many ways for our students to apply what they're learning to real-life settings," through events, social dance parties, competitions and, most recently, road trips.

"Our customers are anyone and everyone who has the desire to learn how to dance. Even the ones who don't, we'll give them the desire to learn. We are confident that we can add joy and excitement to anyone's life."

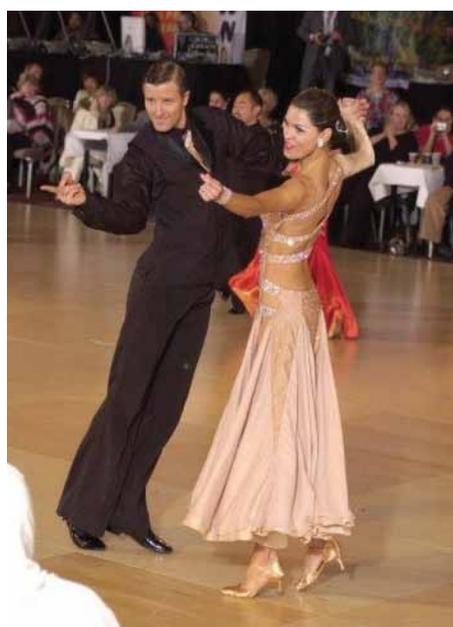
Nasshan said Get on the Floor offers a unique and personalized experience for all customers, with programs personalized around the customer's dance goals, dreams and desires. Some simply join for the fun, others are interested in losing weight, and others are truly hoping to learn a first-dance for their wedding, among other reasons.

And those who claim they have two left-feet, Nasshan smiles—and certainly welcomes them.

"I explain [to those customers] that Get on the Floor Dance Company instructors have the training and ability to teach anyone how to dance, even someone with eight left feet," he said. "There is not a large market of people who know they want to learn ballroom dancing, but there is a larger market of people that know they want to add joy to their lives. It is up to us to



Above: Nasshan (on the mic) leads an event at Get on the Floor Dance Company. Left: Nasshan and partner. Photos from Nasshan



show them that Get on the Floor Dance Company is the place to do it.

"All you need to be successful at ballroom dancing is the desire and the commitment to learn."

But how do you run a successful business, especially one that is out of the norm?

"One of the most important things to me as a business owner is philanthropy," Nasshan said. "I believe that giving-back is the quickest way to receive and GTF Dance Company has many ideas for the future. I have been in the process of planning a charity event that would mimic Dancing With The Stars, except that the stars

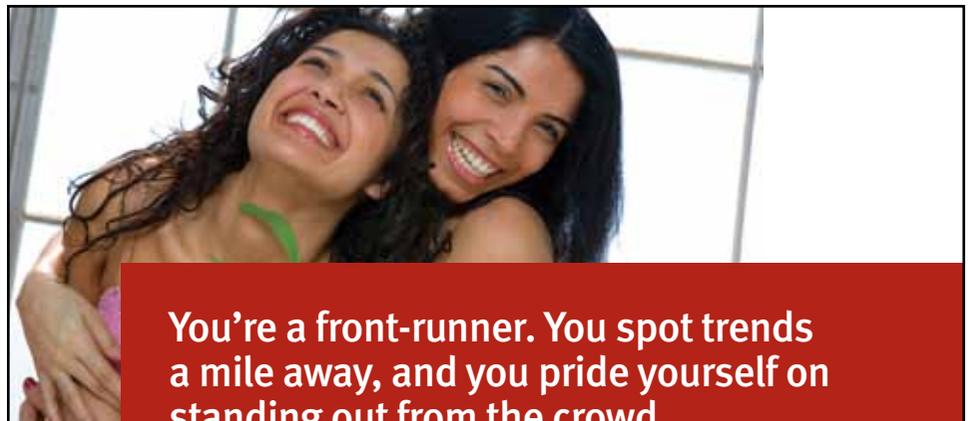
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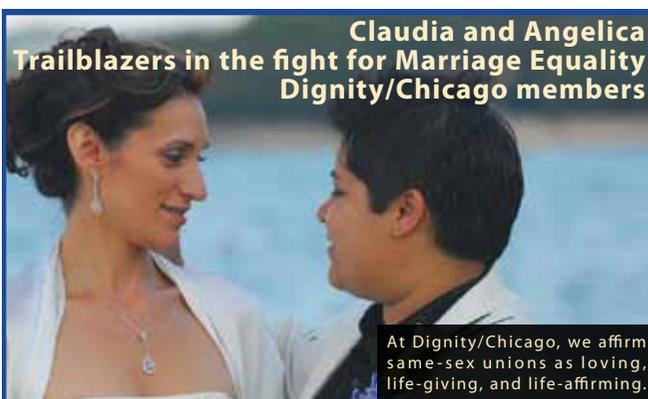
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Don Strzepek of The Tucker Company. Photo courtesy of Strzepek

JEWELRY from page 27

Strzepek has designed jewelry for same-sex couples for years, if not decades, he said. If and when same-sex marriage is passed in Illinois, Strzepek is convinced his business within the LGBT community will spike.

But a ring from The Tucker Company is more than just any ring.

"I often tell my employees, 'Would you let your mother or father wear this?'" he said. "I want my employees to make an item as if they're making it for a close, dear family member—because that's how important it is to our customers."

Strzepek has worn a gold cuff bracelet daily for years; it was one of his first designs he made when he started at the company.

He also has his favorite lion's-head cuff links. "I really wish there was a resurgence of cuff links," Strzepek said. "The one thing I hear from men is, 'Cuff links are such a pain in the neck to put on.' I laugh, because it's very easy to put cuff links on."

"The trick is simple, and it makes your life so much easier. All you have to do is leave the shirt on the hanger, fold the cuff, put the cuff link in, and then put your arm straight through. That's all it takes."

"They are quite enjoyable."

Tucker Company is located at 5 S. Wabash Ave., Suite 507; the phone number is 312-263-3315 and the website is www.tuckercompany.net.



NASSHAN from page 27

would be Chicago's very own drag stars. We are in the early stages [of planning,] but hope to bring this event to Chicago's LGBT community in the very near future, in hopes of raising money for one of the many LGBT charities."

In addition, a portion of all wedding programs sold goes to the Human Rights Campaign. "My platform as a business owner [includes giving] back to the causes that have shaped who I am today; that is extremely important to me," Nasshan said.

Nasshan never had a formal coming-out. Rather, "my coming-out was a result of bullying," he said. While at Augustana College in the fall of 2001, he was outed by males in his dorm.

"My instinct at the time was to run from confrontation, as I wasn't quite ready to conform to a sexual identity I had not yet explored," he said. "After a brief stint of vagabond-like moves, I eventually returned home to Chicago and evolved into the proud and comfortable gay man that I am today. It wasn't an easy experience, but it has shaped who I am today in a lot of ways. I have a soft spot in my heart for the victims of bullying and people who are struggling with their sexual identity. My business hopes to target those two issues and help bridge the gap from the ballroom community to the LGBT community."

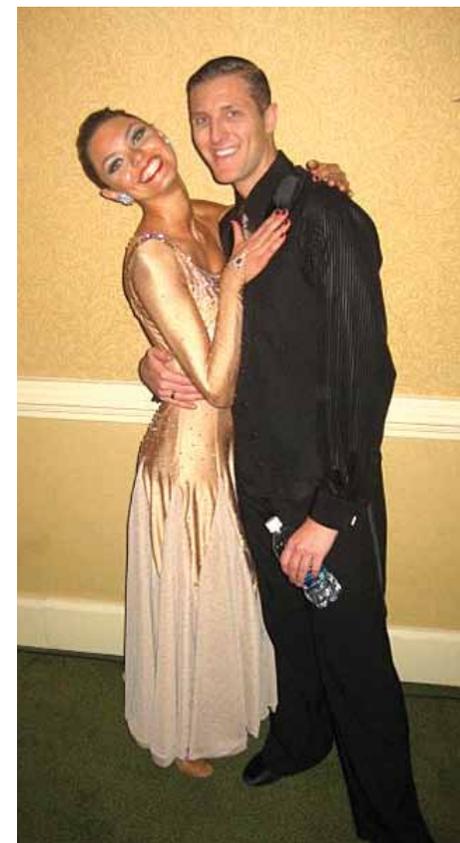
However, GTF Dance Company has not taken off in the LGBT community as much as he would have liked or hoped, at least not yet. "There are some societal norms and standards that have been set by the ballroom dance community that have, over the years, kept the LGBT community away," Nasshan said. "We are hoping to open that door and bring the joy and excitement of ballroom dance into the LGBT community."

To that, GTF Dance Company has hosted such events as "Salsa at the Salon" at Restoration Salon in Lakeview, and also recently participated in an LGBT wedding expo in downtown Chicago.

Same-sex dancing is offered at GTF Dance Company. "It just takes one dance studio to bridge the gap from the ballroom world to the LGBT world. We're hoping to be that dance company," Nasshan said.

The GTF Dance Company features a main ballroom and several smaller, private rooms that can accommodate private lessons. However, the main feature of GTF Dance Company, "is that we host lessons, events, and programs throughout the city and suburbs," Nasshan said.

"Every day at GTF Dance Company is a highlight and a memory. I ballroom dance for a living, after all," Nasshan said.



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Beautiful Music: Singer James Gavin on marriage, family and stardom

BY ROSS FORMAN

When James Gavin steps up to the microphone, singing in the annual Windy City Gay Idol competition, which he has for six years running, the ring on his finger tells a tale—and the adoring fan/cheerleader of his in the front-row completes the picture.

Gavin sings, while his husband, Dustin Gavin, supports him, always, everywhere, every way possible.

Same-sex marriage (in Iowa) made this a dynamic duo, that's for sure.

"It's amazing," James said. "He's been an amazing influence and changed my life in ways that I never thought possible. It means more than words I can say to have that person who loves me unconditionally be there, showing his support."

"It's so exciting for me to see him in the crowd smiling at me, or singing along, or dancing—maybe even more than the performing part. That's so exciting for me."

James and Dustin have been side by side for

almost six years.

"We knew very early on that this relationship had very long-lasting potential. We each fell in love very early on [in the relationship,]" James said.

They got engaged, lived together for a few years, to make sure it was right—and then on Nov. 4, 2011, in Davenport, Iowa, they married in a courthouse ceremony.

"It's very important for us to have that marriage certificate," said James, whose parents at-

tended the Iowa affair.

The day after their Iowa marriage, they were back in Chicago for a ceremony and reception at Sidetrack with family and friends. "That was very, very special to us, with people [attending] from both sides of our families," he said.

Dustin, 28, is a director of research, and he adopted James' last name.

James is a musician and actor. He finished schooling at DePaul University in late-2012 and has been auditioning and more for musical the-



Left: Newlyweds James and Dustin Gavin share their first dance as singer Amy Armstrong serenades at Sidetrack.

Above: The happy couple, Dustin and James Gavin.

Below: Entertainment at the event also included Jess Godwin (on keyboards). Photos courtesy of Gavin



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atre this year. He also works part-time in apartment leasing.

"I realized very early on in my life that I was gay, and was out in high school," James said. "I didn't think in my lifetime I would have that opportunity to get married. As a young kid, I just thought I might have a long-lasting relationship, live with that person. I certainly didn't think I'd ever get to married, and I was very honest about that as a kid.

"So, when I got the marriage certificate in Iowa, it was so emotional. Seeing that piece of paper was so emotional. Seeing the word 'marriage' and my name, and my husband's name was so, so emotional. I was overcome by the feeling that I was able to marry the person I love, something I never thought would happen.

"It also carries the weight that so much of our country is not able to do that."

James is excited and optimistic Illinois, his native state, soon will join the states where same-sex marriage is legal.

"Times are changing; times are different than they were when I was a young kid," James said. "Today, I can sit here and say that, soon, I will see marriage in Illinois, and hopefully nationally—and that wasn't necessarily the case even a year ago. I'm now hopeful and optimistic in ways I wasn't before."

James also is optimistic that this will, finally, be his year to shine on Idol.

"I kind of accidentally stumbled across [Gay Idol] years ago, and it's something I look forward to every year. It's been a really fun event every year; I've made a lot of great friends through Idol," said James, a crooner-style singer a la Michael Buble.

"It's a tough competition every year."

Still, James has been a top 12 finalist every year he's participated, "which has been a privilege," he said.

"I hope I can make it to the finals for the sixth year in a row. I would love to win; it would be an honor."



Left: James and Dustin Gavin exchange rings during their Iowa marriage ceremony. Right: James' parents, the officiant and the new couple.



The Gavins at Sidetrack with Dustin's father (above) and mother (below).



The "handfasting" ritual during the Sidetrack ceremony.



James' parents and husband show support as he competes in Windy City Gay Idol at Joie De Vine wine bar. Photos by Kirk Williamson



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