

Horse in Wedding Dress Center of Pastor's Gay Marriage Protest

A Mississippi pastor brought a horse in a wedding dress to stand with him outside a federal courthouse on Friday in Jackson to protest a federal judge's ruling, currently on hold, to overturn the socially conservative state's ban on gay marriage.

The horse, complete with white flowers tucked into its harness and a bouquet at its feet, munched grass as the pastor, Edward James of Bertha Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, spoke and waved signs at passersby.

"Do you take this horse to be your unnatural wedded spouse to have and to hold?" one sign read.

U.S. District Judge Carlton Reeves struck down Mississippi's same-sex marriage ban in a ruling last month. Gay couples cannot yet marry in Mississippi pending the outcome of a state appeal to the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, which is hearing arguments in the case on Jan. 9.

Gay marriage is legal in 35 U.S. states, a trend that has accelerated since the Supreme Court ruled in June 2013 that legally married same-sex couples nationwide are eligible for federal benefits, striking down a key part of the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act.

While gay marriage advocates have enjoyed the upper hand in the courts since then, the Cincinnati-based 6th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in November became the first to rule the other way in upholding state bans on same-sex marriage.

That decision was seen as setting the stage for the Supreme Court to finally rule on the merits of gay marriage nationwide.

Mississippi is home to an estimated 3,484 same-sex couples, according to the most recent decennial census. About one quarter of the couples are raising children.

Speaking in a video-taped interview with the Clarion-Ledger newspaper, James acknowledged that his horse bride was absurd, but said the spectacle served a point.

“Although it’s ridiculous, so is the same-sex marriage status,” he said.