Vigil held on Oxford Square in support of marriage equality

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A group of supporters gathered in front of Oxford’s courthouse Monday evening to bring attention to the marriage equality cases being heard today in the U.S. Supreme Court.

The crowd consisted of Oxford citizens, university students and professors and people who helped organize the vigil, holding signs in support of same-sex marriage.

An alliance of organizations, local groups and institutes, such as The William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, the Campaign for Southern Equality and many more worked in coordination with United for Marriage (#UNITE4MARRIAGE) to make the event happen.

Resident Stacey Harkins worked with the Campaign for Southern Equality, an organization based in Asheville, NC, to help coordinate the vigil. She was inspired to bring Oxford’s attention to the rulings today. Harkins’ marriage is recognized by the federal government, but not by the

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Gail Stratton reads a letter written by her son during the vigil in support of marriage equality on the Courthouse lawn Monday afternoon.
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state government in Mississippi. Her story is similar to many others in states where same-sex marriage is not yet legal.

“We’re getting together tonight to spend a few minutes to send our thoughts towards the Supreme Court,” said Harkins. “We’ll have a moment of silence just to send them prayers and good thoughts that they’ll rule in our favor so that we’ll get out of this limbo that those of us who have left the state to get married exist in every day.”

As the nationwide issue of same-sex marriage reaches a climax in the U.S. Supreme Court, groups are holding localized rallies and vigils to bring attention to mass support for marriage equality.

The Supreme Court will hear arguments regarding renewal of current bans on gay marriage in Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio and Tennessee today.

Obergefell v. Hodges, linked with the other cases from these states, brings up two issues. The court must decide if gay marriage is constitutional, and they must establish whether states will be required to recognize same-sex couples’ marriages if they were lawfully wed out-of-state. The ruling is expected to be announced in June or July.

Reverend Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, executive director of the Campaign for Southern Equality said that of the vigils happening all over the country, 19 are happening in the South.

“Part of this is about making sure we’re starting conversations in as many towns as we can and starting conversations about the lives of real same-sex couples,” said Beach-Ferrara.

She said events like the Unite for Marriage vigil are especially necessary in small towns like Oxford, where the support for LGBT equality may not be as vocal.

“It’s important that people are standing up and saying, ‘This is my home. Oxford is my home, and I am an equal human being, and I ought to have the freedom to love who I want to love,’” said Beach-Ferrara.

Two speakers at the vigil, Pat Miller and Gail Stratton, have been married for six years and together for 25. Though they were married legally in Connecticut, their marriage is not legally recognized in Mississippi, where they chose to live and raise their son.

“People often ask me, ‘why don’t you go live somewhere else where it’s more progressive?’” And I said, ‘I have work to do here,’” said Miller. “At first it was a little scary, but there’s a lot at stake.”

Miller said she hopes she will one day be able to have the same rights as those who enjoy legal marriage.

Jaime Harker, interim director of the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies, said there are a number of opportunities people in same-sex marriages cannot hold because they reside in a state with a marriage ban.

“We talk about marriage and most people think of it as a religious ceremony - it’s also a legal entity,” Harker said. “There’s a lot of legal benefits... that you take for granted when you’re married that those who don’t have access are constantly having to work with, like healthcare, visas, right to visit in the hospital, right to have a legal will and not have it be taxed. This is a legal institution that brings a lot of benefits that you’re excluding an entire class of people from.”

Until June, Miller said, “Keep your fingers crossed.”

Supporters stand in front of the Courthouse on the Square Monday to emphasize the importance of same-sex marriage.

Gail Stratton (left) and spouse Pat Miller (right) stand with a supporter at the vigil Monday.