

WEST PALM STARTS DOMESTIC REGISTRY

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The Rev. Canon Richard T. Nolan and Bob Pingpank will celebrate their Golden Anniversary this year, but until Friday had nothing to show for it legally. Nolan, a retired Episcopal priest, and Pingpank, a retired high school teacher, were the first couple to register with the city's domestic partners registry that gives people in long-term relationships legal rights including hospital visitation and decision-making capabilities in emergencies. The ordinance applies to same-sex couples and other domestic partners.

But the registry has even greater meaning for the couple who met and fell in love 49 years ago as freshmen at Trinity College in Connecticut but can't get married.

"We've had nothing legal that says we're anything more than strangers, no legal document that says we're a family," said Nolan, 67, who wore his clergy's collar to city hall.

Unmarried couples who file with the city will have the legal right to visit hospitalized partners, be named as each other's pre-need guardians and make treatment and funeral decisions.

When Nolan had an heart attack three years ago, Pingpank frantically had to grab a stack of legal documents to prove he had a right to visit Nolan's room.

Those over the age of 18, mentally competent and not in another civil or legal union can register their domestic relationship at city hall. The declaration also works in reverse: An individual can declare the union dissolved, too.