

POTUS Calling

Losing a lawsuit can be tragic, but can sometimes lead to greater good. Just ask Lambda Legal plaintiff **Janice Langbehn**, who got a phone call from Air Force One—and reassurance that hospital visitation policies for LGBT families would change for the better.

It's a familiar joke from the days of the TV show *The West Wing*: If POTUS calls, you take it.

Fortunately I had a heads up from Lambda Legal. Sure enough at 4:32 Pacific time on April 15, 2010, my cell rang. The caller ID said, "Unknown." I was briefed to expect that. What does the phone number from Air Force One actually come up as? Then a gentleman introduced himself and asked if I had time to speak with the President. I had been coached not to assume this was a crank call or a telemarketer.

The next voice I heard was that of President Barack Obama himself.

A feeling of humility surrounded me and filled the next three minutes of my life. He knew Lisa's name and our story. Our President understood that what had happened to Lisa, the kids and me was wrong on many levels, but especially on the human level. He offered the long awaited apology (that Jackson Memorial still refuses to give—why is that?) for the agony we experienced. I thanked him for his efforts. He said, "Have a good night."

I hung up and sat in shocked silence.

Just before calling me, President Obama had signed a memo directing the Secretary of Health and Human Services to take steps to address hospital visitation and other health care issues affecting LGBT families. I reflected on the meaning of the memo and the timing of its release. Despite what the kids and I went through, I felt very fortunate. So many people and activists



Langbehn with her children at home in Lacey, Washington.

"A gentleman introduced himself and asked if I had time to speak with the President"

work their entire lives for change at the national level and never see it.

A whirlwind of press interviews ensued. I got ready and headed to a TV satellite truck that came to my house near Olympia, Washington. The kids set the Tivo and came in from their basketball game with friends to watch me. Anderson Cooper talked to me first, on a live feed to both coasts. The following morning the story was on the front page of *The New York Times*, and I was taken to Seattle for interviews with MSNBC, CNN and ABC.

None of this—the call, the memo, the coverage—will bring back Lisa, with whom I was going to celebrate eighteen years together. But what all of this did, hopefully, for the next gay couple is that

if your partner is dying, you won't be locked behind a door for eight hours as your beloved slips from this earth, and not be allowed to say goodbye.

I'm grateful to Lambda Legal for so bravely taking our case. Although we lost the suit—the court ruled that hospitals in Florida do not have an obligation to provide visitation—so much more has come than if we'd won. With the stroke of a pen, the coroner erased our eighteen years together by listing Lisa as "single, never married." But with the stroke of a different pen, the President recognized that we were a couple deserving of the same rights as any other American couple.

Thank you Mr. President. I would gladly take your call any day. **L**