

# Family Ties

Lambda Legal client Rita Goodman talks about her battle to regain custody of her children.

**It's a possibility most parents dread:** After their 10-year relationship ended, Rita Goodman's ex-partner, Siobhan LaPiana, began to restrict Goodman's access to their two sons. Despite the couple signing a parenting agreement, LaPiana's lawyers argued that shared custody would violate Ohio's antigay constitutional amendment. With Lambda Legal's help, Goodman fought back.

It started in Paris. We were both there on scholarships. Siobhan was in comparative literature and I was in art history. Eventually, I got a job in Cleveland, where I continue to work now. She came to Cleveland, and that's when we decided to have our first child, Solomon. Jack was born three years later. Siobhan carried the children and we used an anonymous donor we selected to match my background and characteristics.

Solomon was four and a half and Jack one and a half when we split up. I continued to see my boys and we were pretty much splitting the time. But then there came an email indicating that things would need to change. It was really scary.

I knew the law made things challenging for me as a parent in Ohio because I had no genetic connection to my children. A second parent adoption wasn't an option for me.

I cried the day I went into court and had to put my family and my friends on the stand.

You don't want to feel the anger and the frustration and the sorrow. It's such a mishmash of emotions. But I couldn't give up, because I love these kids and they matter to me and I know that I matter to them. I simply was not willing to say I'm no longer a parent. I wasn't going to just turn my back on my kids.

In 2008, the trial court ordered shared custody, but Siobhan decided to appeal. By the time they were going to file, I was pretty tapped out in terms of

funds. It cost me a small fortune to bring the case that far. With the money we both spent on lawyers, we could have sent our kids—at least one of them—to college. Sad fact.

I also started to feel like, whatever happens, let this benefit somebody else besides myself. Let this be a case that can help some other people in my situation in the future. And for all those reasons it seemed logical to approach Lambda Legal with my case.

The day the appeals court decision came down this past August, I was at the pool with the boys. My mother was visiting. We came back and there was a message on my answering machine saying that the appeals court had upheld the order of shared custody. I was just stunned.

I can't say I felt exhilarated, because I never felt this was something to be won. It's more like I was fighting just to barely hold on. Even to this day, I feel like there's a sword of Damocles dangling over my head. She didn't appeal the case any further, and it's too late to appeal anymore. But every now and then I feel like I have to look over my shoulder.

I don't understand why the laws are not changing more quickly to protect children and children's relationships with their parents. When it comes right down to it, when you're taking care of a child all the time, you have a bond with that child regardless of whether you have a blood tie or not. Love is love. They get loved just the same, get raised and taught how to ride a bike and read to and tucked in just the same.

We need to get the word out that until the laws change, you need to protect yourself. Even if you think you're in a long-term relationship and it's great, you have to be realistic. You have to get your head out of la-la land and realize that things can happen and relationships can change. Everybody who is a non-biological parent and loves their kids needs to protect that relationship by going to a lawyer and doing the maximum you can do where you live. **L**



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Rita Goodman at home in Cleveland