

His Mothers' Son

When **Zach Wahls**, 19, pleaded with Iowa lawmakers to preserve marriage equality, his testimony drew 2 million YouTube viewers. Wahls spoke to *Impact* about growing up the son of two moms and about his newfound activism.



I WAS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WHEN A FRIEND TOLD ME, "WE CAN'T BE FRIENDS ANYMORE."

best man at my moms' wedding turned out to be a really cool experience.

No one has a "normal" childhood or adolescence. But the things that made my childhood and adolescence challenging were not that I had gay parents. It was that I broke my leg when I was three and I spent two years re-learning how to walk. It was that my mom Terry was diagnosed with secondary MS when I was 14 and I spent most of high school watching her go from a former world-class athlete to wheelchair dependence. It

WE ALL EXPERIENCE HOMOPHOBIA DIRECTLY EVERY DAY.

There are a lot of very homophobic parts of American culture that are ingrained with this sense of fear about what's different from what is "normal." My moms won't always hold hands out in public, even in Iowa City which is a pretty tolerant place. And that's not right. That's why it's important to stand up and speak out.

When I was growing up, we used to do family values every night. My moms instilled in me a very strong sense of what is right and what is important and what you have to do when what you believe is right is under attack.

I was in elementary school, first or second grade, when a friend told me, "My dad says we can't be friends anymore." And it was just because my parents were gay. It wasn't even the kid's idea. His parents called my parents and said, "Johnny's not coming over anymore." It sucked. It's not very much fun when you're young to lose a friend, let alone to lose one because of who your parents are.

It's hard to tell a kid that his family is different, because you don't really have anything to compare it to. It's just a fact of life. It seemed natural to all the kids I knew, unless they had been very specifically instructed that there was something wrong and abhorrent about a gay couple.

My moms have been together 15 years. They had a commitment ceremony in 1996. Then in 2009, after the Iowa Supreme Court decision in Lambda Legal's case *Varnum v. Brien*, they were able to get legally married. Being the

was that my family was not legally recognized by the government. The sexual orientation of my parents was certainly a part of that, but the thing that stung was that government had labeled us as a bad family unworthy of any support or recognition, and this meant that other people also felt justified in treating us as though we were not a real family and as though we deserved no respect. I understood that we weren't alone in feeling this way—for a long time there were a lot of families that weren't recognized by the government: interracial marriages, interfaith marriages and many others. Those things are not isolated to gay people. But it still hurts when it's your own family.

My moms taught me how to overcome adversity. My mom Terry almost died giving birth to my sister, a month and a half early. She had to have a C-section with no anesthesia. I'd just turned three. I actually remember comforting my mom, telling her it was all right, she was going to die, and I was going to live with my friend Casey and things were going to be okay. But she made it.

It was hard because at the time I was re-learning to walk, so I was way behind my peers. She always stressed how important it was to be physically active and pushed us since we were kids. It was my other mom, Jackie, who helped me with my rehab and made sure I was running every day and get back on course and she worked with me really closely to make sure I was going to be a healthy teenage boy. So I certainly get that work ethic and that athleticism from them and their encouragement.

THEN WE MOVED TO IOWA CITY WHEN I WAS NINE.

I lost all my friends. I was an outsider. That's when my mom Terry was diagnosed with progressive primary MS, but then later she was diagnosed with progressive secondary, which basically means there's one road and it's downhill. By late 2004, she was in a wheelchair.

Because of my mom's illness, I did all the laundry for everyone starting when I was 10. I made dinner. I was responsible for picking my sister up from her various activities once I started driving. But in retrospect, I'm extraordinarily thankful that I had those responsibilities, because responsibility forces you to grow and in some senses mature. I matured prematurely. In high school I didn't laugh as much as other guys, I was always more serious about things, just because you go home and there's not a whole lot to smile about. I'd come home from my sports practice early so I could start making dinner. She'd stagger through the door, using two canes, and walk to her zero-gravity chair. She couldn't even sit in a regular chair because it was too much work for her back. Even sitting in a wheelchair was really difficult for her. She was at the point where her calves were completely atrophied.

Dealing with something like multiple sclerosis and facing the challenges that our family faced, one of two things is going to happen. The bonds are just going to completely fall apart or they're going to become solid. And we're lucky, the latter is what ultimately happened with us. For a while it seemed like we were going to fall apart just because we had all these things not working in our favor.

At the end of 2009, my mom Terry, despite her illness, adopted some rather radical interventions that she herself designed and researched—she's an internal medicine physician. I was really nervous when she said, a year and a half later, that she was going to attempt to ride her bike. I spent the last eight years of my life making sure she didn't get in situations where she could fall over, and here she was, on a *bicycle*. I ran alongside her so that if she was going to fall over, I'd be able to catch her. She just kept going. We both cried so hard, it was embarrassing. In three years, she mounted the most *miraculous* recovery—and I don't use that



Clockwise from top: Jackie, Terry and Zach clowning in the photo booth at Lambda Legal's Bon Foster gala, May 2011; Zach and Terry; Zach, bottom right, with fellow cub scouts.

word lightly.

THE DAY THE VARNUM RULING CAME DOWN WAS A HELL OF A DAY.

I was listening to "Beautiful Day" by U2, on repeat, the whole day. I ran into my high school debate coach, who's gay, and I just wrapped her in a huge hug. I sat down and wrote a column, originally for my high school newspaper, but then on a whim I submitted it to the *Des Moines Register*. People at One Iowa and Lambda Legal read it and reached out to me and invited me to attend the Family Summit. Then last January I got an email saying this hearing was coming up

in the Iowa Legislature. I knew I had to be there.

When I stepped up to the podium, my heart was racing. I've never spoken in front of so many people—so many powerful people—in my life. The gallery was full, the legislative chairs were full. The chairman, a Republican from a very conservative district, was glaring at me. My voice shook for the first 30 seconds. Then I realized I was not going to die. I took a deep breath and I hit my stride.

Iowa House Democrats posted the video online, and next thing I know, I'm getting calls from the Ellen DeGeneres show and *The Last Word* and *The Early Show* and *ABC World News*, and Perez Hilton is talking about me, and Ashton Kutcher is tweeting about me. Oh my God. Most stressful snow day of my life!

I got thousands of messages on Facebook, hundreds of emails, reaction from family, from friends, people I've never met before in my life. Everyone's been incredibly supportive. To know that I can share my story and that it has the power to change minds by showing how boring and how completely average my family is—to know that people can relate to that—is extraordinary.

People call me an inspiration, but no people I've ever met are more inspiring than my moms. To watch my mom Terry literally will herself out of a wheelchair to overcome one of the most debilitating diseases there is, it just proves:

Impossible is nothing. **WAHLS' VIDEO:**
www.lambdalegal.org/vid_wahls

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): STARBELLY STUDIOS PHOTOGRAPHY (BON FOSTER), COURTESY ZACH WAHLS (OTHERS)