

# Families forming a year after end of gay adoption ban

BY GEORGIA EAST | Staff writer

Like so many parents, Jessie and Cooper Odell spend their days helping their 8-year-old with homework, taking him to the park, playing football or attending church on Sundays.

But their journey to becoming a typical family was anything but routine.

"Until recently I always felt like I had to look over my back," said Jessie Odell, 39, a Palm Beach event planner who has cared for the boy since July and is finally able to adopt him. "God has finally given us what we've been fighting for."

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## ADOPT

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For 33 years, Florida barred gays and lesbians from adopting. That changed last October, when Florida's Third District Court of Appeal in Miami ruled the law unenforceable and the state declined to challenge it. Since then, family law attorneys estimate more than 100 men and women in South Florida's gay and lesbian community have pending adoption cases.

"The phones have been ringing off the hook," said family law attorney Elizabeth Schwartz, of Miami. "It's been 33 years of pent-up desire," she said.

After the October decision, the state removed the question of sexual orientation from its application form, although the ban remains on the books and could be challenged down the road.

At the Foster and Adoptive Parent Association of Palm Beach County, Executive Director Marie Bond said "we're definitely seeing more families" from the gay and lesbian community.

Victor Martin, 49, a single gay man, adopted his 21-month-old daughter in December and said he couldn't imagine what his life would be like without her.

"I was so attached to her that I was ready to do whatever it takes," said Martin, who lives in Palm Beach Gardens.

He said he had been a foster parent before but was ready for a permanent family. The day the adoption was finalized, he said he broke into tears when the judge declared, "She is now your daughter as if she was born to you."

Robert Lamarche, of Boca Raton, and his partner finalized their adoption of a boy, now 16, last year and are now in the process of adopting a 3-year-old girl who was placed with them last year.

He said his first adoption involved nasty court battles.

"This time around we get to go about it like everybody else," Lamarche said.

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*Robert Lamarche, of Boca Raton, who is adopting a girl, 3, after finalizing adoption of a boy last year*

Still, it's going to take time for some to move forward on adoptions, given the years of discrimination in the law, experts say.

Jennifer Digilio, 38, and her partner wanted to adopt in Florida but because of the ban they packed up and moved to California. There, they adopted their now-11-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter and later returned to Lake Worth.

"We took two children out of foster care in California who could have been taken out of foster care in Florida," said Digilio. "It seemed pretty strange that the state was saying it's OK to be a foster parent but you can't adopt."

In the town of Palm Beach, the Odells are gearing up for November, when possibly on National Adoption Day, they will finalize the adoption of their son.

Jessie Odell, who had signed up to adopt through Children's Home Society, said he fell in love with his son's picture before he even knew his story.

They were initially told the boy was troubled, but Jessie Odell said he simply needed stability and a loving home. Since being placed with them, they say his grades have improved and his behavior is typical of a child his age.

Their son calls Cooper Odell "dad" and Jessie Odell "daddy."

Once, he asked them why he has two dads. Jessie Odell responded: "because you're very lucky."

"I think he agrees," said Jessie Odell, adding he believes they're just as fortunate.

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