

In Anita's Wake: The Irrational War on Florida's Gay Families

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Written by Gideon Grudo



ACLU presents stories of gay couples who've adopted in effort to educate

Martin Gill's usual morning concern these days is getting his kids ready to go to school — no longer worried and wrapped up in legal battles over whether they'll be coming back home.

But while Gill's battle was fought and won, overturning in September 2010 a ban on gay adoption in Florida, the ACLU's director in the state, Howard Simon, foresaw that the issues themselves "are not resolved when the verdict is given."

"We're not out of the woods until the legislature bangs the gavel and goes home," Simon said.

Along with Gill, Simon was on a panel that also included Elizabeth Schwartz, a Miami-based adoption attorney. It was part of a training event put on by the ACLU on Feb. 2 at University of Miami's Law School. The Aqua Foundation for Women and multiple other co-sponsors helped put things together.

First item on the bill was the screening of *In Anita's Wake: The Irrational War on Florida's Gay Families*. It told Gill's story and two other same-sex couples' adoptive stories, as they were affected by the adoption ban imposed in part by the efforts of Anita Bryant's — the 1970s orange juice spokesperson turned anti-gay evangelist.

Then the three panelists got together to explain what hardships lay ahead, after which they took questions. Schwartz was the first to speak, and summarized the film in a sentence.

"Now it's the law of the land in Florida that this ban can't be approved," she said, adding that judges have loved the slew of adoptions, over a hundred of them, since the ban was overturned.

Since Gill's kids were given permanency in his home, various claims of their undoing have been debunked.

"When we get home, my 11-year-old son helps me cook. His favorite foods to cook are macaroni and cheese, hamburger helper (we use ground turkey), and pizza," Gill said. "Once they are done [with homework], they like to play YouTube videos and make up dances. They are both talented hip-hop dancers. They like Justin Bieber, Usher, and the Black Eyed Peas."

The kids are asleep by 9 p.m. Weekends include bike-riding at Oleta Park, kayaking or maybe a relaxing stay at the pool they have at home. Regardless, Gill said, the kids play "basketball daily in the front driveway. They are both gifted athletes."

"They know well what the difference is between foster care and being adopted as they have seen many kids come and go," Gill summarized, adding that he's had by now 25 foster kids. "They have the security of knowing they are part of a forever family."

Leah Weston, 26, a first year law school student at UM, attended the session because "this is a very important civil rights issue."

"The tide of public opinion on this is really changing," she said about her intentions to go into law school in the first place. "It's timely."

While Schwartz agreed that the gay community has seen "incredible progress" in this regard, she said the road ahead is still uncertain.

"We need to talk to lawmakers about our families and the harmful effects of bigotry and short-sighted partisanship," she said. "We also need to be informed about the state of the law and make sure we're ready for any sort of attack our families may face, either at the ballot box or in Tallahassee."

That's why the ACLU is running these training sessions, as Simon carefully explained.

"It's urgent that people become informed on this because in the climate in which we live, none of our rights are secure," he said. "If we relax and are not vigilant, we might not notice that a movement gets started aimed at taking away our rights."

That's where organizations like the ACLU and Aqua Foundation step in, trying to put a dent in mass unawareness.

"This training is essential because we cannot get complacent in thinking the adoption issue is resolved," Schwartz said. "There are those who want to ignore all of the experts, all of the credible science, and what's truly in the best interests of children and deny gays and lesbians parental rights. It's asinine but true."

Get educated

What: Screening of *In Anita's Wake* and panel discussion with various same-sex adoptive couples — includes dinner

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When: Feb. 11, 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Where: Administrative Offices for Planned Parenthood, 2300 North Florida Mango Road, West Palm Beach, Florida 33408

How much: Free, RSVP at www.acluf.org/training

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