



I HAVE TO START SAVING FOR MY KID'S COLLEGE
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NEWS COLUMNISTS



Helen Ubiñas

Family Suing For Its Identity

August 29, 2004

The threats to the institution of marriage are making a bowl of popcorn. And putting on the animated movie "The Secret of NIMH" for their three boys.

And now they're sneaking a peek at my feet.

Usually, shoes are left at the door of the Artis' Middletown home, a symbol of leaving the outside stresses behind. But there I was, superior heterosexual that I am, cluelessly traipsing along their lush scarlet carpet in sandals.

"Really, it's no problem," they tell me when I finally notice my faux pas.

Pretty mellow for people supposedly engineering the downfall of civilization.

The couple want to get married, so last week they and six other same-sex couples filed a lawsuit for the right to marry in Connecticut. Suzanne Artis gets giddy imagining her wedding. Definitely, they will release butterflies.

"It's such a symbol of transformation and growth and freedom," she says, breathlessly.

But the truth is, even if the courts don't recognize Geraldine and Suzanne Artis' union in their lifetime, the couple already consider themselves a family.

Eight years ago, they exchanged rings that Suzanne designed. Since then, they've gone about the business of building the very type of traditional married life that same-sex unions are supposedly endangering: a home with Geraldine's vision, and Suzanne's handiwork, including a beautifully crafted cabinet to hide the air conditioner in the living room.

A home they share with their three precocious children, 6-year-old Geras and 4-year-old twins Gezani and Zanagee, whom they home school. And a pretty typical dream of growing old together; Suzanne's shooting for 100, Geraldine, 80; so they've compromised at hanging in until each reaches 90.

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The pair have always been politically active; they met at a Gay Pride event. But for a couple who pride themselves on teaching their children about equality and respect, who display a picture right inside their front door with Rosa Parks' famous quote: "The only tired I was, was tired of giving in," they thought it was time to step up their activism.

They've heard all the arguments about civil unions not being a civil right, heard all the folks screaming about what an insult it is to compare the struggles. But as a black lesbian in an inter-racial gay relationship, Geraldine just may be in a better position to make that call.

"Separate is never equal," she says. It's an old saying, and not hers. But it fits. It fit during the civil rights struggles. And it fits now, she says.

What is equal, Geraldine asks, about Suzanne going around with a cavity for a year even though her longtime partner had full dental insurance? Or having to threaten to rip out her IV and walk out of a hospital before Suzanne was allowed into her room before surgery. Spouses only, they were told.

Or their love being considered detrimental to their children?

And what of these children, the ones who will forever be scarred because they are being raised by two mommies? Well, they whisper, Geras - who is reading three grade levels above his age - may be too smart for their own good. He's planted spy-kit mics around the living room in hopes of finding out what he's getting for his birthday. It isn't for a month, but already the plans are underway. "Birthdays are a big deal around here," Suzanne says.

When they decided to join the lawsuit, they told the kids they'd be going to court. With Judge Hatchett, the TV judge? Geras asked. No, Suzanne said, amused at his innocence. "We're going to court to fight for our rights," she told him. That he understood.

"Oh, like Rosa Parks."

"Yes," she told him.

He wished them luck. So do I.

Helen Ubiñas' column appears Thursdays and Sundays. She can be reached at Ubinas@courant.com.

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