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RIGHTS

A MATTER OF RIGHTS



[x]

Meagan, left, and Natalie Metz talk about the day they got married in Seattle. The Flagstaff couple are plaintiffs in a lawsuit that led to marriage equality for same sex couples in Arizona. (Jake Bacon/Arizona Daily Sun)

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There were soft smiles on Meagan and Natalie Metz's faces as they sat next to each other outside the Coconino County Courthouse the morning after a U.S. District Court judge struck down Arizona's ban on same-sex marriage. Meagan could hardly take her eyes off Natalie as the two of them reflected on the ruling.

"I can't help it," Meagan said with a laugh. "She always gets my attention."

The couple met in Flagstaff about eight years ago and became friends while they were both dating other women. After both women's relationships ended, their friendship quickly turned into something more.

"The minute I got to know Natalie, I knew she was the one," Meagan said.

Meagan loved Natalie's smile, her dimples and the way Natalie could always make her laugh. Natalie loved the way Meagan knew her in a way nobody else could.

"She just understands me," Natalie said. "We have had completely opposite upbringings, truly

How to help:

Meagan and Natalie Metz have set up a GoFundMe account to raise money for Meagan's medical bills. Donations can be made by searching for "Meagan Metz" on the GoFundMe website or by going to www.gofundme.com/bjvc3w.

opposite lives up until we met, but there is just something about her that understands me and supports me and loves me better than anybody I have ever met or could have ever imagined."

Six months in, they knew they wanted to get married. But they resigned themselves to the fact that it would probably be a long time before they would be able to get married in Arizona.

Then, about two years into their relationship, they went back to visit Meagan's family in Seattle. As they were riding the ferry to Bainbridge Island, something changed.

"All of a sudden, I was like, 'Oh my God, I have to propose on this ferry,'" Natalie said.

Natalie somehow managed to keep her plan secret until three or four years later, when they returned to Seattle. They got on the same ferry to Bainbridge Island and as they stood on the edge of the boat staring out at the water with the Seattle skyline in the background, Natalie proposed.

Last May, Natalie and Meagan walked back to the ferry, this time dressed in white, to exchange vows before a small group of close friends, family and cheering passengers on the top deck of the boat.

"It was perfect," Meagan said. "The marriage ceremony was literally the most incredible experience of my life. I felt like we were floating."

At that moment, Meagan and Natalie both felt how important the right to marry really was.

"I really feel like people take marriage for granted a lot," Meagan said. "But there is something that is so remarkable about walking into the courthouse and getting the marriage license."

Back in Flagstaff, all the friends and family members who could not be with them at their Seattle wedding joined them at a reception to celebrate their nuptials.

But their lives were about to take a terrifying turn.

Within months of tying the knot, Meagan became severely ill with a rare and aggressive form of lupus. The autoimmune disease wreaked havoc on her body. A year ago, Meagan was working at the hospital and taking classes full time to earn her physician assistant degree. Now, both their lives revolve around her medical care.

Meagan sees about a dozen doctors in Flagstaff and Phoenix, takes 12 to 15 medications every day and has been undergoing chemotherapy for the past six months. When her hair started falling out from the chemo, Natalie was right by her side, shaving her head in solidarity. But every month seems to bring new health problems.

Before their marriage was legally recognized in Arizona, Meagan said she was terrified every time she had to see a new doctor because she did not know if they would allow Natalie to be with her to hold her hand during her appointments. For the most part, the Metzes have been lucky, but this month's same-sex marriage ruling still came as a relief.

Natalie, who is an oncology nurse, said it has been horrible to watch the woman she loves become so sick and not be able to help. But she said they get up every morning and make it through together the best they can.

Meagan and Natalie would like to start a family one day. Meagan said she wants her babies to have Natalie's dimples.

"We would love to have kids," Natalie said. "But getting Meagan healthy first is the plan. Then I would love to carry, start our family."

For now, they are taking life one day at a time, walking their dogs through the neighborhood, taking drives and sipping tea together in the afternoon. And, of course, they still love to make each other laugh.

"Life's down to the really simple things," Meagan said.

RENEE AND ROBIN REECE

Most people in Flagstaff know Robin and Renee Reece as the dynamic duo behind the wedding photography business R2 Studio. They have shot hundreds of same-sex and opposite-sex couples tying the knot. But the love story behind the camera is just as powerful as the ones they capture on film.

"We met in church of all places," Robin said.

Robin led a music program at a church in Flagstaff. Renee had the same position at another church. Fate brought them together when a worship leader at a third church asked them to help put together a Thanksgiving service, but they did not really get to know each other until six months later, when Renee contacted Robin about starting a new music-based worship team for kids.

"We bonded over music," Renee said.

Renee was married with three daughters, but by the time she met Robin, she and her husband had decided to get a divorce. She needed a friend.

"We hung out a lot together and really developed a strong friendship that then turned into a relationship," Robin said.

Renee had never been attracted to a woman before, but she fell in love with Robin.

"When I met Robin, I was more in the thought process of, I'm going to fall in love with who I fall in love with," she said.

Robin, on the other hand, was desperately trying to be straight.

"My struggle was that I had these feelings for her that were developing and I didn't want her to hate me," Robin said. "She was my best friend."

Robin finally told Renee how she felt and was surprised to learn that Renee felt the same way.

Their relationship came with many struggles. Both women were forced out of their church, and while Renee's family eventually grew to accept them, many of Robin's deeply religious family members cut ties with her.

Despite it all, Robin and Renee have built a happy life together.

"She is the one person who really gets me and I'm tough to get," Robin said. "There are very few people in my life that I feel like have ever been able to love me unconditionally and tolerate the rough edges that I have."

Renee admitted Robin can be opinionated and stubborn, but said that's part of why she loves her.

They have been together for around seven years now.

Robin told Renee she wanted to marry her early in their relationship, so they had a quiet commitment ceremony on the beach in Maui and waited for the day when they would be allowed to legally wed.

In the meantime, life went on. Robin, who never thought she would want children, grew to love Renee's girls so much that the couple decided to have a baby together. After several unsuccessful attempts at in vitro fertilization, Robin finally got the positive pregnancy test she had been waiting for.

"It was a moment of feeling excited and tearful and like our life is changing," Renee said.

Robin wanted to have a natural home birth. Everything seemed to be going well until the baby's heart rate stopped recovering after contractions. Robin was rushed to Flagstaff Medical Center to have an emergency caesarean section.

Within three hours of his birth, Austin was air lifted to Phoenix Children's Hospital, where he underwent an experimental procedure to prevent brain damage. As soon as Robin was released from FMC, the couple went to Phoenix to be with their newborn son. There was just one problem.

"When we got there, it was outside of their visiting hours," Renee said. "Because I wasn't a biological parent, I was considered a visitor and was not welcome there."

Renee called her mother, a Flagstaff nurse, in tears. She was allowed to see Austin only after her mother called the hospital director and demanded they let Renee in the room.

Now, nearly four years later, Austin is a happy, healthy little boy who loves to play. He was with his parents and his sisters in August when Robin and Renee returned to Maui to get married.

But despite their marriage now being legally recognized in Arizona because of the lawsuit they joined as plaintiffs, only Robin can have custody of their son. Renee still has not been legally allowed to adopt him. If anything happened to Robin, her wife would have no legal right to continue raising him.

"What's next for us is legal adoption, for me to have rights to Austin," Renee said.


Robin and Renee are now gearing up for another possible legal battle, one that would grant same-sex couples the same adoption rights as any other couple.

"I asked our lawyers the same day the marriage ruling came through," Renee said. "I emailed them and said, 'What's next for adoption?' We came into this with everyone knowing that was our next step."


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