

# FAMILY TIES

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Lofton, 44, and Croteau, 46, are raising three Florida foster children: Frank and Tracy, both 14, and Bert, 10. Unlike the other kids, Bert is HIV-negative and younger than 14, so he is deemed "adoptable." Every few weeks, the state sends the couple a letter updating them on the status of finding him another family.

Lofton and Croteau moved to Oregon in June 1998 in part because they wanted to be closer to Lofton's parents. They also think the Portland area is a better place to raise kids.

"Coming from Miami, it's like living in Mayberry," says Lofton, who also has taken in two Oregon children, 8-year-old Wayne and 5-year-old Ernie. "When you call City Hall they answer the phone...the schools are great, the parks are clean."

His kids attend Metropolitan Learning Center, which Lofton says is gay-friendly, progressive and understanding. He especially appreciates the school's monthly potluck for sexual minority parents and their children.

At the most recent gathering, Lofton says MLC's principal, counselor and psychologist pledged their devotion to his family. "They all said that they were there to support the kids in anything that might happen."

Meanwhile, the ACLU is mounting a solid case against Florida's gay adoption ban. It also has released a comprehensive paperback book, *Too High a Price: The Case Against Restricting Gay Parenting*, with an introduction by O'Donnell. Anita Bryant's anti-gay crusade—which pro-

duced some of the most notorious homophobia in U.S. history—was at its peak when the Legislature voted on the ban in 1977. "The hysteria of the times led us to do the wrong thing," said Elaine Bloom, one of nine former members of the state House and Senate who since have undergone a change of heart.

Lawyers also have released sworn depositions for the case in which Carol Hutchison, the state's leading official overseeing adoption policy, was asked, "Do you know of any child welfare reason at all for excluding gay people from adopting children?" She answered, "No."

Hutchison then was asked if she thinks children's best interests would be served if lesbians and gay men were allowed to adopt. "As I previously stated, I think it's contraindicated to rule out such a large population of people who quite possibly could meet the needs [of] awaiting children," she said.

The ACLU told the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit in Atlanta on Feb. 14 that it's unconstitutional for the state to have a law with no basis other than expressing disapproval toward gay people. "There's no question that's what Florida is doing—and it's exactly what the Constitution meant to prevent," said Matt Coles, ACLU Lesbian & Gay Rights Project director.

O'Donnell also makes a strong argument against the law in the latest issue of her



Steve Lofton (left) and Roger Croteau relax at home with (clockwise from top left) Bert, Frank, Wayne, Tracy and Ernie

magazine, *Rosie*. "I don't believe there's a real debate to be had over whether gay people can be good parents—the only debate is whether to put bias before children's future," she writes.

Lofton says: "The fact that she's standing behind us really lends a lot of support, because she's an übercelebrity and people really respect her.... Her support is very incredible, and I'm flattered by it."

O'Donnell also has been directing viewers to a Web site, LetHimStay.com, which explains the entire case. "You're gonna get sick of hearing it, but we're gonna say it every day until May 22," when her final live episode airs. LetHimStay.com received more than 4.7 mil-

lion hits in its first three days. According to the ACLU, more than 83,000 letters already have been sent via the site to Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Department of Children and Families Secretary Kathleen Kearney.

"It's going to bring this issue up front to a lot of people who have never considered it and have no idea it existed," Lofton says. "Hopefully it'll sway public opinion and help legislation to fight laws like the one in Florida and others around the country."

But does Lofton think the lawsuit will succeed? What about the possibility that Bert actually could be taken away from the family?

"Not over my dead body," he laughs. "No, I feel really confident in his being here. I do. I think that there are enough pro-

gressive and forward-thinking people that are helping to support him that something like that wouldn't happen."

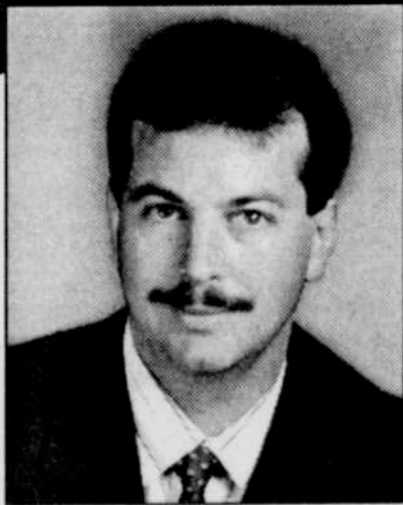
Lofton especially gives credit to his supportive attorneys and child welfare workers. "I trust in a lot of people."

He says the ongoing lawsuit doesn't really affect the kids' sense of security at home. "To Roger and I it's stressful, but it doesn't affect our family life."

So what keeps the couple going through all of this? It's simple: the children.

"Our kids...strengthen our relationship and our devotion and advocacy," he says. "There's so much reward and there're so many positive moments that really outweigh the challenge and the chore." □

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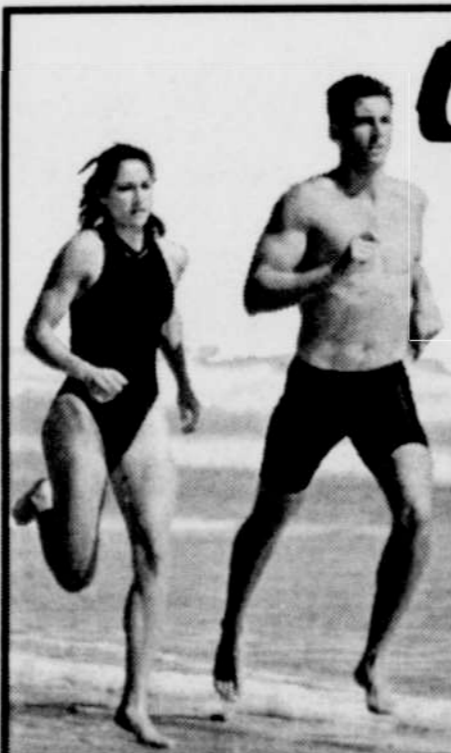
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