

Recovering from a coma is hard enough. Now imagine waking up to the news that, while you were under, your homophobic mother tried to sabotage your relationship and move you out of state against your will.

For Marlene Booth, this scenario wasn't a nightmare—it was her reality. Today she and her partner of two years, Melissa Mills, are trying to put the pieces of their lives back together.

Booth has Wagner's disease, a terminal illness that affects the autoimmune system by attacking vital organs. It usually starts in the lungs, then moves to the kidneys, liver, eyes and ears.

Some patients will have an episode without a recurrence. Some will be dead three months after they're diagnosed.

Booth first was hospitalized on her 40th birthday Feb. 6; within three days she was on life support. Doctors diagnosed her a week later after performing a lung biopsy.

"I remember driving to the hospital and calling people and letting them know," Booth says. "The next thing I know they're taking the ventilator tube out of me."

Booth was in the hospital for almost a month. She was either in a coma or incoherent for about 15 days altogether.

During this time Mills says the mother "made a mess of our lives." The couple had been living apart—Mills in West Linn, Booth in Hillsboro—since a fire destroyed their home last year. They say they reluctantly separated afterward because the mother had offered financial assistance on the condition that they live apart.

Mills says Booth's mother hired an attorney to obtain temporary guardianship so she could move her daughter to a rest home in California. "They...feared that I would unplug her."

## A CAUTIONARY TALE

Lesbian couple learn the hard way why it pays to be prepared

by Jim Radosta

Booth adds: "She would've had complete control over all my medical directives. She would've been talking to the doctors. She could've instructed the doctors not to tell me anything, so I wouldn't know what my condition is and so then she could just totally manipulate things."

Mills says the mother also tried to restrict hospital visitation, claiming the couple weren't domestic partners; fortunately, they were registered in Multnomah County. "The hospital didn't have a problem, but her mom did."

And that's not all. Mills says the mother proceeded to put a restraining order on her, accused her of breaking into Booth's house and car, and called the postal inspector to allege mail fraud.

"She turned off all of our joint accounts—our credit cards, our cell phones, our car insurance," she adds. "She figured if my name was off that I'd go away."

Mills has a son, Aedan, who turned 2 in December. She says Booth's mother even contacted Child Protective Services and tried to have his name removed from a small life insurance policy.

"I could've technically been put in jail for this, until they figured out none of this was valid. It could've gotten really ugly," says Mills, 28. "I think if Marlene wouldn't have woke up when she did, this would be a disaster. Not that it isn't already."



Marlene Booth (left) and Melissa Mills enjoy a rare moment of peace with Aedan

PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

The nonprofit agency has been a "godsend," Mills says. "We would've been, quite frankly, ruined if it wasn't for them."

Somehow, the couple have managed to keep a sense of humor during the whole ordeal. Mills recalls the questions she asked Booth after she came out of the coma.

"I'm like: 'Did you see a white light? Were you going to the other side?'" she says. "She's like, 'No, the blue Intel men were there!'"

Even though Booth is out of the coma, she isn't out of the woods yet. She suspects her mother might pursue permanent guardianship depending on her health.

"They're probably going to wait and see how I do physically," Booth says. "If I get sick again, they're going to swoop down and try and get a permanent one stating that Melissa didn't take proper care of me.... So that threat is still out there."

The couple are working to set up medical directives in the event of further hospitalization. Their attorney also is trying to retrieve Booth's assets from her mother including her income tax return, furniture, documents and artwork.

The couple also have retained a family law attorney, Booth says. "We're going to adopt [Aedan] so that if anything happens and because of my disease that I have—I could have six months, I could have 20 years, who knows—but I want to make sure that she can't step in and try this again." ■

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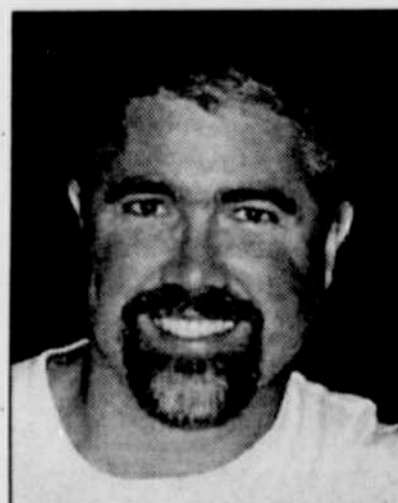
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