



Book Review: *My Two Moms* (by Zach Wahls)
By Terri Graves, Practice Administrator

CRG became interested in Zach Wahls from his appearances on national television. He has been a guest of such talk show hosts as Ellen DeGeneres and Jon Stewart. This spotlight on Zach and his family resulted from his testimony before the Iowa House Judiciary Committee on January 31, 2011 regarding a proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage in Iowa. A video of his testimony went viral on YouTube nearly immediately. Zach summed up his position by stating, “Because the sexual orientation of my parents has had zero effect on the content of my character.” He seemed like a natural keynote speaker for the CRG/MCCOY symposium, *Bullying Prevention: Creating a Culture of Acceptance* slated for November 3, 2012 at the Indianapolis Convention Center.

Zach recently co-authored a book with Bruce Littlefield entitled, *My Two Moms - Lessons of Love, Strength, and What Makes a Family* (Gotham Books, 2012). This is an autobiographical account of a male child being raised by female gay parents. But more importantly, it is a young adult’s story of being reared by extraordinary parents. Through Zach’s telling, the reader comes to understand that the only difference between his family and a “traditional” family is that his does not have the same rights or protections in most states or with the federal government.

The book, written in a creative nonfiction structure, organizes itself around the character-building traits of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). Each chapter has a title and theme from one of the twelve BSA laws, motto or slogan. Chapter 1, for example, is entitled “Be Prepared.” The BSA had a tremendous influence on Zach, who became an Eagle Scout with the support of both his parents. In fact, one of his moms was the troop’s pack leader. In addition, each chapter was influenced by Linda and Richard Eyre’s book, *Teaching Your Children Values*. Terry Wahls and Jackie Reger, Zach’s parents, used lesson plans from this book during their “sit-down-and-have dinner kind of ” (p.1) family dinners to teach good values to Zach and his biological sister, Zebby. The book’s resulting chapters can stand alone but also support the frame of the larger story. Overall, the book depicts Zach’s journey of growing up to young adulthood and standing before the Iowa House Judiciary Committee last year in defense of his parents’ right to be legally married. The book does not follow the chronological order of Zach’s life. Rather, each chapter contains poignant stories from Zach’s life that pertain to that chapter’s theme. For example, in the chapter, “Kind,” Zach discusses questions he fields about his childhood during speaking engagements today. Then he discusses being bullied (name calling) in the 4th grade. He explains how his mom, Terry, taught him to use “fogging” (p. 43) to diffuse the situation. He then recants a story from his high school days and ties these anecdotes together under the chapter’s theme,

“The Merits of Kindness”(p. 51). The book addresses the broad view of how his family *is a family* and should be recognized as such legally and socially.

Surprisingly, neither family structure nor family life difficulties are the major challenge in the lives of Zach and his family. Instead, it is how their family is viewed legally. This challenge manifested in several ways, with Zach being verbally bullied and by his fear once he changed elementary schools of being bullied again if anyone would find out he has two moms. Additionally, his family faced tremendous challenges as a result of not being legally recognized as a family. The most compelling example was when his mom, Terry Wahls, dealt with the debilitating effects of her multiple sclerosis. Her partner of 16 years, Jackie, has no rights to the children should Terry lose her ability to care for them. Nor does Jackie have any rights within the medical community to direct Terry’s care. She has no rights to shared property or taxing rights like a heterosexual couple enjoys who have been legally married. Finally, Zach points out that Jackie cannot be added to Terry’s health insurance plan. He draws parallels to other periods in American history when understanding was lacking and equality laws needed to change for women, blacks, and other marginalized groups. Zach argues that each person should be treated equally as a human being.

Zach was a champion debater in high school and is skilled in making his points. There were times while reading the book, however, that I was disappointed by some of his choices. He often called out or criticized individuals or groups on the opposing side of the argument. This could potentially alienate the readers who could benefit most from this book. Being a member of one of the groups he called out, Catholics, I was disappointed about being lumped in without regard to my individual thoughts on the matter. At times I felt the chapters got a bit preachy in their delivery. Through the last couple of chapters, I was mentally saying, “Okay Zach, I get it!” This was a shame because one of his best chapters, “Brave,” is second to last. By the time I got there I was worn out by the arguments. I would have hated missing the Voltaire observation, “It is dangerous to be right when those in power are wrong” (p. 193).

Do I believe this book is a worthwhile read? Absolutely. The call outs against individuals or groups should be overlooked so as to not miss the bigger point: There is an understanding that can be gained from reading *My Two Moms*, if only a reminder of how we should look at and treat each other. Love and good character are subjects Zach truly understands, which we can thank Terry and Jackie for having a hand in. He writes well about this throughout the book, especially in the chapter, “Do a Good Turn Daily.” In closing, do yourself a good turn by turning the pages of this thought-provoking book.