

On Keeping Faith and Letting Go: A Talk with Susan Bellemare

Sage Russell

When the custody case she's been fighting for two and a half years finally ended, Susan Bellemare decided to break her silence and talk about her life then and now. She spoke to Out in the Mountains so that she could reach the gay and lesbian community in Vermont directly, and because she feels the mainstream press, on the whole, has not presented the issues involved in the case fairly. The meeting took place in the office of her attorney, Susan Murray, who was present for the interview.

OITM: How do you feel about the settlement?

Susan Bellemare: I feel very good about the settlement. It would have been nice if the case could have set some precedents, but I also am really glad that it's over, because the fight has been very emotionally draining for me. But I've also been able to develop a relationship with Susan's mother and her sister again, mind you not her dad, somewhat on the level that we had before. To the point where they're very much involved in Collin's life, and they're beginning to be more involved in my life. Things are working out nicely. We're able to communicate. They're starting to settle in and be his grandparents and not act like his parents. For a long period of time that's what I felt they were trying to do; they were trying to take over for Susan and be pseudo-parents and that I was not going to be his mother. And I feel that now they've given that up and they've acknowledged the fact that I am now Collin's mom. And I do, I really feel that.

OITM: And do you think that's going to continue at this point?

SB: I hope so. I don't know what it's going to be like, because of course, I'm going to adopt Collin. That's the final clincher to this whole thing. In the stipulation all the standards have been set. Collin's name will remain Hamilton, but I don't want just to have the overhang of guardian over him. We have bonded together, and he's now my son and I am his mother. I hope that I can just continue to have them create a trusting relationship, which I've really been trying to do. That they know that I'm not going to take Collin and run away with him. I'm not going to do anything. I just want him to know that I have adopted him, I love him, and I'm now his mother.

OITM: How has Collin been through all of this?

SB: I go back to the day that we went to court and I picked him up after he had been away for six weeks. I can remember going back to the house with him. He was only 15 months old, and I was unsure of what his memory would be of what was going on. He was very comfortable going with me, and we went back to the house. We kept all his toys in the living room. He ran in and grabbed his toys, and he came back out on the porch. And he grabbed my hand, and he said, "Come with me, Mommy." It just grabbed my heart because I realized that I was now his only mother, not just a co-parent. He has done very well. I have to admit the first year was difficult. I was recovering from the death of my partner and I had gone back to work. I was going through my grieving process, I had just finished school, and now I had this child by myself. And plus, I was in a high-stress job. So the first year was horrible for me emotionally. I was trying to be there for him in all aspects and then to get through this custody thing at the same time. But we learned about each other, and we grew together, and we bonded very closely. And now we have a wonderful relationship. I don't know what his memories are of Susan. From the time of her death I talked to him about her all the time. There are pictures around. We go over videos together. We go through pictures together. So he knows that Susan gave birth to him, that he was in her stomach, and that he has two mothers. And he acknowledges her death, for what he understands of death. And he's a well developed little boy. He's well adjusted. Matter of fact, I just had a parent-teacher conference last week. The teacher said, "I read the newspaper article. My God, this kid should be in therapy, and I've never met a more well adjusted little guy."

OITM: What's it been like for you to have been dragged out of the closet? It didn't seem like this was your choice, coming out this way.

SB: I was actually afraid. I didn't know what to expect. I was recuperating in Bennington, my home town, after the accident, and was there for six weeks. It was printed all over the state, and I was reading it in my home town. My parents were exposed. It's amazing the support that came out of it. I cannot think of one

negative tone that I got except from the Burlington Free Press. The people I worked with, my family, all of my friends, people in the community, from Canada all the way out to California, were writing to me and supporting me. And after that point it was like it didn't matter any more. I actually felt comfortable about it. I felt proud to be who I was and be able to be strong and go through what I was going through, because I had the support of everybody around me. And that was really important.

OITM: What made you decide to break your silence and talk to *Out in the Mountains*?

SB: This has been ongoing. When this all transpired, being a very private person, I felt so vulnerable and exposed. As time has gone on and I've learned more about myself and the legal part of the custody thing, I guess I just wanted for the first time to be able to share with people emotionally what it's felt like and the legal implications of what's gone on, so we can put this to rest. Now I just want to be able to say, "This is what it was like. This is what Susan (Murray) did for me, and it's over with."

OITM: Tell me a little bit about what Susan Murray has done for you.

SB: I'd never had any kind of dealings with attorneys before in my life. Russ (the original attorney on the case) needed to step down because he ended up being a witness on the signature page for the will. I didn't know what was going to happen. He said, "I have a person in mind, who has sought me out because of her interest in this case, that I'd like you to talk to." And at that point he made mention of Susan's sexuality and the fact that she was a woman. I thought, hopefully this is going to be good for me. She called me, and we talked on the phone for a long time, and then we met. The most important thing for me at that point — I wasn't thinking about Susan's credentials or her law experience — was that she was a woman, and she was able to relate to me about what was actually going on. I mean, I could cry with her. She supported me. When I needed to be strong, she told me to stand up and keep my chin up. And over this period of time, we've developed a friendship that has been very beneficial. I told her a little while ago that I felt like I was drowning in this massive pool of water, and she's been like a life preserver for me. She really kept me afloat, I mean pro-