Having Their Day in Court

Mom faced custody battle because her partner has HIV.

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When Henry Calderon met Donna Branom online, he was living in Minnesota and she was the mother of two in Kansas. That didn't stop them from falling in love. And neither did his HIV-positive status (she's negative). Soon Calderon uprooted to Kansas and the two got engaged. But when her ex-husband found out, he went to court to gain full custody of their kids, ages 8 and 16. Due to a mix-up in schedules, Branom missed her court date and the judge ruled in the father's favor—despite a letter from an HIV expert stating that Calderon posed no risk to the children.

"I was in shock," Calderon recalls. "It made me feel horrible, distraught and stigmatized, like I was a danger to anyone around me." As their plight made national news, Branom went into a deep depression and couldn't sleep or eat. But, she says, "our children got hurt the most." Their youngest child was confused after being told not to hug Calderon or kiss him on the cheek because of his HIV, and their teenage son resented his mom for allowing the media to invade their lives.

Calderon offered to end the relationship so that the kids could see their mother, but Branom would not allow it. "She said that if we let her ex win, we would also be giving in to the stigma of HIV," Calderon says. Good thing he listened to her: Another hearing was scheduled, and the judge ruled in Branom's favor.

Nowadays, the two are planning their upcoming wedding—and hoping to eventually grow their family with a child of their own. Calderon's HIV specialist said that because he's undetectable, there is little risk of Branom or the baby contracting the virus. "We can't wait," Calderon says, "to bring our new bundle of joy into the world to share our love."

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