

Opponent Testimony to HB 262 “Designate Natural Family Month”

Submitted by the Grote/Neal Family: Tom Grote, Rick Neal, Amoret Grote, and Sophia Grote

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We are two dads – Tom and Rick – here with our daughters, Amoret and Sophia. We live here in Columbus; we got married in 2007, adopted our girls at birth in 2009 and 2011, and achieved legal recognition of our marriage by the state of Ohio when the US Supreme Court ruled for marriage equality in 2015. We are here to speak in opposition to the designation of the time between Mother’s Day and Father’s Day as “Natural Family Month.”

As we discovered, the bill doesn’t provide any information or reasoning behind it, and especially no definition of what a “natural family” is. In their press release announcing the bill, sponsoring representatives Lear and Williams mentioned concerns over stable families, declining birthrates, and marriage and families as the cornerstone of society. If the designation were “Strong Families Month,” that would fit - but it’s not, and it doesn’t.

In a conservative context such as the Republican-controlled Ohio House of Representatives, we assume that the label “natural families” does not include us. Obviously, we disagree, and urge you to reject this distracting and divisive legislation in favor of policy that will actually help families and Ohio generally.

People come together and form families in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reasons, and most do everything they can to take care of their kids and elders, and vow to protect their families above all else. Efforts like this, especially coming from our statehouse, chip away at that common thread that brings so many of us together - it divides, trying to set some up as better and more deserving, at the expense of others.

As mentioned, it seems that we wouldn’t fit the idea of “natural” here. So what is it? What’s unnatural about us? That we’re two guys? That we’re white and our kids are Black? That we adopted? That we were older when we had kids? What is it?

The truth is: nothing is more natural than how we became a family. We each knew, long before we met, that we wanted kids, and that was something that drew us together when we did meet, in April 2006. After we got married in 2007, we jumped through all the hoops required of us as a couple whose marriage was not recognized by the state: Tom had to represent us as the sole adoptive parent, Rick was “Household Member Number 1,” and we had to go to court to establish co-custody agreements to protect our family. Once we achieved marriage equality, we went back to court to complete the co-adoption process. We fought for our family, and we have dedicated our lives and our love to each other. We have that in common with millions of families across Ohio and with, we imagine, many of you on this committee.

So what are we doing here? Why are we forced to come in here and defend our family? Again, the legislation gives no indication of the sponsors’ motivation, but it bears all the hallmarks of the kind of political games that the Republican majority here at the statehouse has been playing these past few years. And you know better – in fact, one of the bill’s co-sponsors, Representative McClain, knows this directly as a distant member – our nephew’s wife’s brother-in-law - of our very own family.

The truth is, the word “natural” here is a code for “better.” And the fact that the chosen time period coincides with Pride Month - a celebration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, two-spirit, and allied identities and orientations - is just insulting, and belies an intention to hurt, demean, and degrade families like ours. Shamefully, this continues a trend by the Republican majority here at the statehouse of attacking Ohioans by banning proven medical care for transgender kids, attempting to curtail the First Amendment rights of drag performers and the wider public, and wasting time on political stunts rather than working together on serious issues related to our economy, technological change, public education, healthcare, the environment, and civil and human rights.

Stop attacking us, reject this bill, and get to work.