

Oologah Grad Becomes Reluctant Gay-Rights Champion

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DALLAS - Spring has come to northern Oklahoma. The cardinals and chickadees are busily working the bird feeder outside Kay England's picture window.

But she hasn't noticed them. For these few moments, sitting amid boxes of old photos of her children, she is lost in her memories, gazing outside to see her daughter as she used to be - the 8-year-old Mica running across the far meadow, the 12-year-old Mica riding bareback on her chestnut colt, the young woman prom-dressed and radiant.

Through this looking glass of a window, on this perfect spring afternoon, the doubt and confusion about her daughter fall away.

But only for a moment. The questions nag; the hurt persists.

"When we first heard about Mica being gay and all, it was like a death in the family," Kay England says. "And every time she crops up on the news, it's that same feeling."

The feeling comes often these days because Michaela Marie England, Mica, the former Basketball Queen of Oologah High School, has now become a symbol, a crusader, an activist.

"I'm just standing up for myself, for what's right," she says. "Nobody, nobody, is going to tell me I'm not good enough to be a police officer."

In 1989, the Dallas Police Department refused to hire her because she said she engaged in homosexual sex, which the Texas Penal Code says is "deviant" and a misdemeanor.

She sued the state, the city and then-Chief Mack Vines.

Attorneys expect the case to conclude this summer.

Her life changed forever when she made her first appeal, to the Dallas City Council. Her plea culminated with her ripping a poster off the wall, one explaining about equal opportunity in the Dallas Police Department.

In that moment of anger, "bawling and upset," Mica England would let slip her innocence, her privacy, her parents and perhaps any chance of ever being a cop on the beat in Dallas.

The three years since then have not been pleasant for her.

The lawsuit has worn on her energy and torn at her emotions.

She continues to endure the anonymous hate mail, the bolt-upright nightmares, the maddening drip-drip of the legal process.

"I've gone through hell," England says. "I know I'm doing a lot of good for others, but for myself I feel like I've wasted some years. I need to get on with my life."

She remains estranged from her parents. Her older brother, Guy, who she says was unable to come to grips with a drug problem and his own homosexuality, committed suicide in 1988. Her long relationship with a prominent Dallas lawyer recently ended. Her car was repossessed and her morality

attacked.

"A woman actually called me a pervert! To compare me to a child molester!

"I ride along Turtle Creek, and I see the boys in the bushes.

It's obscene. I want to say to them: `Do you know what I am having to go through because of you? You make me ashamed!' "

And shame is the subtext when City Council member Glenn Box talks about Mica England.

"Anybody who believes this is just a poor little girl from Oklahoma must have just fallen off the turnip truck themselves," Box says. "I question anything she says. The national homosexual-sodomy community is clearly using her as their poster child."

As a cop-in-waiting, England struggles financially. She says she barely scrapes by on her wages from the Mansion on Turtle Creek restaurant in Dallas, where she is Promenade chef.

"That's a very important, high-profile position for us," says Kent Rathbun, the Mansion's senior sous-chef. "It takes real ingenuity and self-motivation. When Ms. England came to the Mansion, she was somewhat inexperienced, but she had the desire.

"She pushed herself to be better. She had a vision."

Why is she putting herself through all this?

"I like Dallas, the city, the gay community," she says.

"My brother lived here. This is where I want to do my public service."

Mica England has talked about being a police officer since high school, her mother says, and she took college courses in sociology and psychology to bolster her major in criminal justice.

She sold her horse to pay the tuition at Rogers State College in Claremore, then transferred to Northeastern State University in Tahlequah. She worked her way through school. When she was 20 she applied to join the police force in Muskogee.

The minimum age was 21.

She then failed the written exam for the Broken Arrow Police Department. And when she applied to the Tulsa police, she was told she didn't have enough college credits.

Then in 1987, she tried Dallas.

The female recruiting officer asked her Question 14: "Have you ever engaged in deviant sex?" Mica England said no.

Even though she believed that being a lesbian was not "deviant," on some level she knew she was lying. The operator of a follow-up lie-detector test thought so, too. She was rejected.

Two years later, on a recruiting trip, the same Dallas recruiter interviewed England in Tulsa. And even though England told her she was a lesbian and wouldn't lie about it again, the recruiter encouraged her to come to Dallas for a formal

interview.

But three months later, when England walked into the police building, the recruiter was waiting with a copy of the departmental hiring policy: Sorry, no gays or lesbians need apply.

Enraged, frightened, humiliated, she went through the phone book and eventually got connected to the Dallas Gay Alliance.

William Waybourn, then the executive director, quickly got her a spot on the City Council agenda.

"She is hardly some vicious bitch who is looking to sue the city for a lot of money," he says. "I told the City Council that we had waited eight years for a Mica England to walk through the door. This was hardly orchestrated.

You don't go out and invent someone like Mica."

She was on the agenda, presumably to speak about "The Failure of Democracy in Tiananmen Square." But when England got up to speak, she never mentioned China. She did talk about failure - what she saw as the failure of justice in Dallas.

"I cried for probably 2 1/2 of the three minutes I'd been given to speak. I held up the equal opportunity poster and said: `This is not right. You do discriminate. Please do something. Please help me.' "

They did not help her. They kept the hiring policy in place.

So England got a lawyer, packed her stuff into a U-Haul and moved to Dallas.

That her daughter is gay still confounds Kay England. It intrudes; it worries; it is there when she feeds the horses and when she cooks Bill's supper.

Kay England always wondered if she let her daughter be too much of a tomboy. She tried to coax her down from her tree forts. She enrolled Mica and younger daughter Denita in ballet, tap and baton classes.

"Mother had us in all those girlie things," Mica says,

"but I never stuck with them. I liked playing Army."

She liked playing sports, too - soccer, basketball and softball for the Oologah Mustangs. She had lots of friends, even a steady boyfriend for a while.

"But we'd go to dances," she recalls, "and all my friends would be looking at boys. I'd be looking at the girls."

Those feelings blossomed fully during her junior year in high school. "But it was very hard not having anyone to talk to about being gay," England says. "I had lots of confusion, guilt, self-hate, destructive thoughts."

Kay England lives with all those emotions every day, and it's as if the experiences of the daughter have now been visited upon the mother. In rural Oklahoma, in farm towns of 1,000 or so sheltered souls, people talk. "But not to my face," she says.

"People think you must have done something wrong to your

kids - that you beat them or raised them wrong or something.

But I don't think so."

The distance between Mica England and her family is far greater than the 400 miles from Dallas to Oologah. She has not been home in a year and a half, nor have her parents visited her in Dallas in more than two years. The tension and silence continue.

"She probably does need our support," Kay England says quietly. "Everybody needs their family when they go through something hard. But I don't want to help her in this. She has been real insensitive to the family, getting us in the public eye."

Kay England is not so sure about all the lawyers and advisers surrounding her daughter. Nor is she sure about all the hoopla, the talk shows, the upcoming segment on "60 Minutes."

"I kind of think they're all exploiting her, especially this Gay Alliance," she says. "She's lost her car. She could be going to school or making money. This is mostly for their benefit."

Everyone agrees, especially John Thomas, Waybourn's successor at the Dallas Gay and Lesbian Alliance. "Mica never expected all this, and she certainly never wanted it," says Thomas.

"All of this pain and trauma and visibility and publicity, she hasn't gotten anything out of it."

Meanwhile, Kay England worries about Mica's "getting in too deep," and Mica England knows her struggles are hardly over. If she ever does make it to the police force, her reputation won't make being a cop any easier. She doesn't expect much backing from the blue.

"I'd be ignorant not to expect some harassment," she says.

"On the force, I'll need to keep speaking out. If I get quiet, it will make the harassment that much worse."

Waybourn, who has moved to Washington but remains one of England's closest advisers, has no illusions about her future:

"She will never be a Dallas police officer. If she wins the case, she would never be able to serve effectively because of the scrutiny from her peers, the command staff and the media. No human being could withstand that sort of pressure. It will be awful. She could very well come out of this with no money and no job."

Which is exactly what Kay England fears. But under the worry, behind the anguish, she knows her daughter has grown into an extraordinary woman.

"I'm real proud," she says, "that she can stand up for herself. I just wish it was about something else."