DEMANDING EQUAL BENEFITS AND DIGNITY

With Lambda Legal’s help, Michael Ely is fighting for the spousal survivor checks he’s entitled to—and the full promise of marriage equality.

Ely poses with a picture of his late spouse, James “Spider” Taylor.

“I knew I’d met my soulmate.” That’s how Michael Ely, 66, describes that night in 1971 he met aviation mechanic and fellow rock musician James “Spider” Taylor in a gay bar in Long Beach, California. “It was something about his essence, his mystique,” remembers Ely. Amid the fog, they kissed goodbye before Spider hitchhiked off down the Pacific Coast Highway. And thus began a four-decade-plus relationship that ended when Spider died in May 2015 after a battle with cancer.

“We were probably the closest couple of all our straight and gay friends,” says Michael. “We were in an all-gay band in L.A. called Red Wedding—and this was long before Game of Thrones!” They had a commitment ceremony and bought each other rings that read “Don’t Forget”—short for “Don’t Forget I Love You.” For years, when they were in places where they could not say “I love you” aloud, they would simply say to each other, “Don’t Forget.”

In 1994, after the grief of burying so many L.A. friends who had died of AIDS, the couple moved to Tucson for a fresh start. “We both loved the desert and those Arizona years were wonderful,” says Michael. But in 2013, Spider was diagnosed with cancer. The couple desperately wanted to marry—but could not until a court decision made that possible in Arizona late the following year. They wed...
almost immediately, Spider frail
but joyous as they stood before
close friends in Tucson’s beautiful,
historic courthouse. Spider died six
months later.

Now, with Lambda Legal’s help,
Michael is going before a federal
court to fight a law that is discrim-
inatory to gay couples who were
denied the legal right of marriage
for so many years: Federal law
says that couples must be married
at least nine months before one
person can receive the other’s
Social Security money. I’m worried about what’s going
to happen to me. It just seems so fundamentally unfair.”

Peter Renn, Lambda Legal
counsel on the case, agrees. “The
government is robbing people of
their money in retirement because
they’re gay,” he says. “Social
Security is meant to protect not
only ourselves but the loved ones
we leave behind. Michael and the
other people in this class action
have been denied that security.
So when it comes to full marriage
equality, we have unfinished
business here.” Michael’s case is
one of four that Lambda Legal has
filed in the last half year as part of
that effort to resolve that “unfin-
ished business.”

The case will likely be decided
in the coming months. Michael
is anxious about its outcome.
Meanwhile, he keeps busy with
a large circle of friends, daily
workouts—and plenty of quality
time with Frappy (short for Frappuc-
cino), the terrier-mix rescue that he
and Spider had adopted together.
“For two weeks after Spider died,
Frappy sat by the door waiting for
him. I’m glad I had him around,
because all those mornings when
I didn’t want to get out of bed,
Frappy made me.”

—Tim Murphy

They had a commitment
ceremony and
bought each other rings that read
“Don’t Forget”—short for “Don’t Forget I
Love You.”

PHOTO COURTESY MICHAEL ELY

Ely and Taylor in 1976.
10 Reasons to Support Lambda Legal

1. **LGBT people** and everyone living with HIV face an unprecedented threat to our civil rights under the current administration, often under the guise of promoting “religious liberty.” Lambda Legal’s team knows how to fend off these attacks and we have strategies to continue breaking new ground, because we’ve done it before.

2. **Speaking of new ground,** our team just won a huge victory and has halted a Trump-implemented policy to discharge servicemembers who are living with HIV. We expect the government to appeal and will need your support so we can keep fighting.

3. **On the military front,** Lambda Legal has been fighting Trump’s attempt to discharge brave transgender servicemembers since it was formalized as policy. Our case is making its way through the courts and we need continued support so we can keep fighting this all the way to victory.

4. **Support for Lambda Legal’s mission** is at our highest levels. Our community values and believes in our work. In 2018, we received an overwhelming response to a challenge grant issued by our Board of Directors—surpassing a goal of raising $250,000 to continue the fight. Your continued giving adds to this momentum.

5. **Richard Burns,** our interim CEO, is a proven leader in the LGBTQ movement. In the last six months, we’ve hired new attorneys, promoted skilled leaders from within and recruited top talent who join us with diverse backgrounds. The Lambda Legal team is strong, dynamic and runs on the financial support of donors like you.

6. **Many of our new attorneys** are in our new D.C. office—the first time we’ve had boots on the ground in the nation’s capital. This team strengthens our relationships with sibling organizations so that together, we can serve as a unified front against anti-LGBT policies and judicial nominees. We need your support so we can safeguard our victories and keep up the fight for fair courts.

7. **Lambda Legal’s collaboration** with sibling organizations helps lift up intersectional issues. Thanks to a grant from the Gilead Foundation, we’re partnering with the Black AIDS Institute on “Cut the Stigma,” a campaign to educate on issues of HIV. Supporting Lambda Legal allows us to collaborate on issues impacting a broad range of communities, especially those disproportionately affected by stigma and discrimination.

8. **LGBTQ young people** are among the most vulnerable, and especially those living in foster or juvenile justice systems. Lambda Legal’s Youth In-Out-of-Home Care program continually advocates for just policies, educates providers and works with legislators to ensure that the safety and rights of youth are protected—wherever they live. This is where your donation goes.

9. **Lambda Legal’s workplace employment cases** have established new precedents, and a victory last year established that Title VII should be interpreted to prevent LGBT seniors from experiencing housing discrimination. Your donation supports Lambda Legal’s pursuit of real, lived equality in every aspect of our lives.

10. **Equality at work,** at home and for our families is critical. Lambda Legal’s decades of work won the freedom to marry and we’re committed to ensuring our marriages are respected to the fullest extent of the law. Our attorneys and policy experts work tirelessly to protect the marriage victory and defeat state bills that would harm our families. Lambda Legal needs your support as these bad bills continue to be proposed across the country.

**WE’RE HERE TO STAY**

For 46 years, Lambda Legal has fought against discrimination, stigma, and hostile governments. We’ve survived the darkest days of the HIV/AIDS crisis. We challenged Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and took down sodomy laws nationwide. The legal teams on those cases and the leadership of the organization may have changed with time, but our commitment to fight for true, lived equality for LGBTQ people and those living with HIV has never wavered.
Sunday, March 31 | Ft. Lauderdale, FL
Our annual Lambda Legal in FTL event! An evening of cocktails and hors d’oeuvres at the historic Bonnet House Museum & Gardens.
RSVP: 312-663-4413

Thursday, April 4 | San Francisco, CA
Lambda Legal and the San Francisco Leadership Council greet you at The Pearl for cocktails, hors d’oeuvres and a full dessert reception.
RSVP: 213-382-7600

Thursday, April 18 | Chicago, IL
Robert Bonvouloir “Bon” Foster was a powerful force in Chicago against HIV/AIDS. This event honors him for bequeathing his estate to found Lambda Legal’s Midwest Regional Office.
RSVP: 312-663-4413

Thursday, April 18 | Phoenix, AZ
The lovely home of Jon and Carrie Hulburd will host an evening dedicated to bringing our community closer to full equality than ever before.
RSVP: 212-809-8585, ext. 259

Thursday, May 9 | New York, NY
Our biggest annual event, the Liberty Awards National Dinner! Lambda Legal staff, board, leadership council and supporters from nationwide gather to celebrate our victories, brace for the fights ahead and honor our heroes.
RSVP: 212-249-6188

Thursday, May 30 | Los Angeles, CA
It’s our West Coast Liberty Awards! Join us in the heart of Hollywood for an exquisite cocktail event with a red carpet, silent auction, and dessert reception.
RSVP: 213-382-7600

For more info and to RSVP online, you can also visit lambdalegal.org/events