

We lost our daughter Kristin four years ago and have been fighting in mediation and court for four years. The father Ron Eckert, of Natasia Donalyn Eckert, name given at birth, received custody after our daughter passed. Ron at the time resided in Pennsylvania and at that time we saw a mediator and was immediately granted temporary custody every other weekend for six hours each time. We had a temporary order until Ron moved to Maryland. Ron was letting us see Natasia quite often and told us if we dropped the case that he would continue to let us see her without paying for lawyers and court expenses. Our mistake was trusting Ron for his word and we dropped our case.

After living in Maryland and after we dropped the case, within three months, the visits tapered off. Ron said Natasia was suffering from separation anxiety, which we believed to be so, as she would hide and cry when it was time for her to go back to Ron's home. This was understandable, considering all that this child had lost at such an early age and not receiving regular professional therapy. We recommended to Ron that all of us go to therapy with Natasia, so she could see that she was loved and cared for by all. During these times, Natasia needed everyone who had been actively involved in her care and support.

Before our daughter passed, Kristin had primary custody of Natasa, and Don and I would care for her and her cousin, Toby, who was 5 months older than Natasia, did so, from the time she was born until we lost Kristin in January of 2016.

When I retired in 2014, I moved in with Kristin to help her out with Natasia, because of Kristin's illness; however, Kristin was still able to carry out her parental duties, not all of the time on a daily basis while in her care. At that time, Ron had visitation rights. I was like a de-facto parent to Natasia, which made our relationship very close and strong.

After Ron was in Maryland and took up residency, within six months he officially changed Natasia's given middle name, from Donalyn, named after Don and I, her maternal grandparents, to Liliian. At that time, Natasia was seven years old. In addition, Ron sent a letter to us cutting off all relationship ties we had with Natasia. He made up lies, just like he did to persuade us to drop the case.

We fought for four years and then we were told that Maryland had no grandparent rights. We were also told that we could not fight the Supreme court for visitation rights if the father said it would not be in the best interest of the child. Upon spending thousands of dollars and trying to get visitation rights, we reached an agreement with both our attorney and Ron's, to put money in Natasia's 529 plan, as well as agree that Ron, Don and I would go to therapy to try and work things out, so we would be able to see Natasia on a regular basis and be part of her life as were, prior to Kristen's death. Ron agreed to do this only if we put 50k into Natasia's 529 plan within four years, including paying for the therapy. Ron's only intention was to hurt us financially and emotionally for his satisfaction with no regard for Natasia's well-being or best interest. We agreed with hopes that one day we could see Natasia with the therapist intervention. This agreement took place on November 8, 2019.

To date, Ron has not taken Natasia to therapy a regular basis, nor has he attended regular sessions with the intervening therapist, all of which he agreed to per the court document that he signed.

We continue to fight for grandparents' rights in hopes that this bill will be the first step in helping us, as well as other loving grandparents throughout Maryland, be able to see their grandchildren, who we all love and miss deeply.

Sincerely,

Don and Linda Stolkovich