

Fight For Daughter Reveals Plight Of Unwed Dads

By Grant Clark
Urban News Service

Christopher Emanuel puts his heart into the role of do-it-all dad with his active, 2-year-old daughter, Skylar.

As a 26-year-old single father, raising a toddler can sometimes be a heavy lift. But the customer-relations specialist from Aiken, S.C., claims to take his paternal duties in stride

— from cooking meals to arranging play dates.

All except one, which stereotypically challenges all dads of little girls of color. “The hardest thing for me is doing her hair,” Emanuel said.

But it’s a tough task he is happy to handle ... given how hard he fought for the right to do so.

Emanuel was one of countless young,

unmarried fathers who are denied the right to raise their biological children, by laws that seem stacked against them.

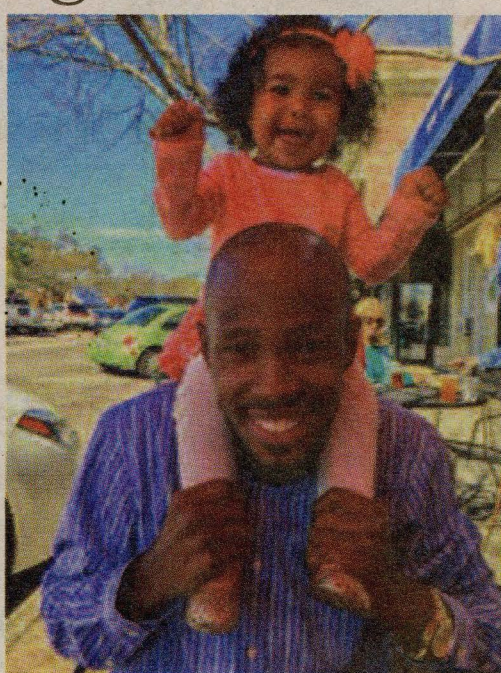
Only a tenacious legal battle ultimately let him care for Skylar.

Emanuel met Alecia Phillips in 2012 at a Trenton, S.C., warehouse where they both drove forklifts. They began dating and, the following year,

Phillips discovered she was pregnant. The news thrilled Emanuel. “I thought we would raise the child together,” he said.

Emanuel swiftly stepped up to the plate and helped finance pregnancy-related expenses.

But things took a turn a few months later, he said, when Phillips, who is white, disclosed her pregnancy to her



Single dad Christopher Emmanuel with his daughter, Skylar

mother. The mom’s response shocked him. Emanuel claims the mother feared the news that their daughter had an interracial pregnancy would “drive her husband to drink.”

Undeterred, Emanuel pushed ahead with plans to move in with Phillips — the woman he now calls the “egg donor” — to support her pregnancy and be an active father.

Still, he felt something was amiss when Phillips prevented him from attending her medical appointments, as they had done at first.

So, Emanuel signed a Responsible Father’s Registry — a notice of paternity that secured his right to be notified of any legal proceedings involving the child in South Carolina.

But shortly after Phillips sent him a text message saying the pregnancy was advancing well, he learned he had missed his baby’s birth. In fact, the news came when he was served with a court notice that his days-old daughter had been placed for adoption.

Aiken County Family Court records show that the birth mother and adoptive parents did not name him as the biological father in an ensuing adoption case, even though a mandatory registry search listed Emanuel as Skylar’s natural dad.

After a DNA test confirmed his paternity, both Phillips and the adoptive parents agreed to halt the adoption and hand the infant over to her ecstatic dad.

“Feeling my daughter for the first time — that was the best day of my life,” Emanuel said.

A judge also agreed to terminate his ex-girlfriend’s parental rights and to remove her name from Skylar’s birth certificate.

Phillips could not be reached for comment.

Emanuel’s custody battle might be over, but his experience with legal adoption policy, and its impact on unmarried fathers, has spurred him to fight for change.

Putative father registries were established in the 1970s as a way to link

unmarried men to women with whom they have, or may have, fathered children.

“Of the two-thirds of states that have registries, most do not have useful information online about them,” said Brad Reid, a professor of law and ethics at Tennessee’s Lipscomb University. The often-missing details include how to register and search them. Some documents are not even online.

And fathers usually have little time to sign up — from no more than 30 days after a birth in Illinois to as few as 72 hours in Montana.

To secure his paternal rights, a father must complete documents in every state where his child may be born. This is a big problem for dads who, like Emanuel, have no idea where birth mothers are or will go.

One solution, Reid said, is a federal registry.

“With the mobility of people and infant children nowadays, if you really wanted to be fair to fathers, you would really have to have a national registry that fathers would sign onto,” Reid said.

Right now, single fathers in about 18 states have no such recourse.

That’s something Emanuel hopes to help change as he visits schools and speaks to young men about paternity and the law.

“The fight for my daughter was the hardest time of my life,” he said. “It became my calling, making sure fathers get their parental rights.”

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