



## Kowalski, Sharon (b. 1956) and Karen Thompson (b. 1947)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson never considered themselves to be part of an extended lesbian community until a devastating automobile accident changed their lives forever. After Kowalski was seriously disabled, her conservative anti-gay birth family gained control over her life, and Thompson was forced to go to court to fight for her right to see and care for her lover.

Pushed out of the closet and into the public eye, Thompson found that it was support from the lesbian, gay, and disabled communities that enabled the couple to win their battle to reunite. In return, Thompson and Kowalski brought into sharp focus an issue that many able-bodied gay men and lesbians had never considered: the importance of giving legal status to their chosen families. Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson's persistence in pursuing their case forced both the courts and American society in general to consider an alternative definition of family.

Kowalski and Thompson first met in 1976 at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota when Kowalski enrolled in two physical education classes that Thompson taught there. A year later, they worked together coaching track. Neither woman had previously identified as a lesbian, and their romantic involvement developed slowly.

In 1983, they had been together for four years and had had a commitment ceremony, when, on November 3, a drunk driver hit the car in which Kowalski was driving with her niece. Her niece was killed, and Kowalski was left first comatose, then severely disabled from a head injury.

When Thompson told Kowalski's family, who lived in a very conservative part of northern Minnesota, that she and Sharon had been lovers, they reacted harshly and resolutely. In July 1985, Donald Kowalski, Sharon's father, acquired legal guardianship of his 27-year-old daughter without even a court hearing, then moved her to a nursing home almost 200 miles from her home with Thompson. He then left orders forbidding Thompson to see her lover, even though she had been working successfully to help Sharon regain some of her lost abilities.

Though Kowalski continually typed out messages (the only way she could communicate after the accident) saying she wished to live with Thompson, her parents and the court considered her incompetent to decide her own future.

Determined that her lover would not be left alone and poorly cared for in an institution, Thompson began a lengthy battle to bring Kowalski home. Her case cost over \$300,000 in legal fees, which she raised by speaking around the country at gay pride rallies and other events, not only to tell her own story, but also to raise awareness about the need for legal protection for gay and lesbian relationships.

Not only gay men and lesbians, but also disabled rights advocates as well, rose up in support of Thompson and Kowalski, rallying to slogans like "Free Sharon Kowalski" and "Bring Sharon Home." Along with offering



Sharon Kowalski (left) with Karen Thompson in a photograph provided by Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau. Courtesy Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau.

moral support and financial contributions, many also took Thompson's advice to draw up durable powers of attorney for health care and living wills, to protect them should the time come when they were unable to speak for themselves.

Thompson's perseverance paid off. In September, 1988, Kowalski was finally tested for competency, and the court found that she was capable of understanding and communicating her wishes.

In February, 1989, Karen Thompson was finally able to visit her lover for two weekends every month. Thompson continued to fight for guardianship of Kowalski, even though the courts tried to award guardianship to a supposed "neutral third party" with close ties to Sharon's parents. In 1991, Kowalski and Thompson finally won their case when the court allowed Thompson to bring Kowalski home.

Although she sustained permanent disabilities in the accident, Kowalski improved dramatically once she was allowed to return to her home and chosen family.

Thompson and Kowalski have both continued to speak out for gay rights and the rights of disabled people.

The two lesbians' experiences have been the subject of a film, *Lifetime Commitment: A Portrait of Karen Thompson* by Kiki Zeldes (1994). Rosemary McLaughlin's play *Standing in the Shadows* (2001) is loosely based on the Thompson/Kowalski story.

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**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.