

# Siblings sue own parents

Two kids tired  
of constant  
custody battles

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A brother and sister whose divorced parents have spent years fighting over custody in court say a decision allowing them to hire their own lawyer may bring the fight to an end and advance the cause of children's rights.

"We weren't really being represented by anybody. We sit on benches outside the courtroom and wait," 17-year-old Christine Ryan said Wednesday.

"We don't even get to go inside and watch. It's a waste of time, it's a hassle and it's just not getting anywhere."

So Miss Ryan and her 12-year-old brother Eric approached family law attorney J. Michael Kelly after reading an article about his practice. Last week the Los Angeles County Superior Court granted Kelly's motion to represent the Ryan children in the custody dispute between their parents.

The parents were divorced in Arizona in 1976 and the mother received custody. But Richard Ryan took the children to Mexico and kept their whereabouts secret until three years ago, when the mother, Patricia Donaldson of Phoenix, found them in Malibu, said her attorney.

Mrs. Donaldson insisted that the children be returned to her. Ryan filed in California for a modification of the original custody decision.

"We know where we want to be," Miss Ryan said. "I'm not against either parent...The only people the judge listens to are the attorneys and my parents and they don't really take into consideration our personal feelings."

She and Eric want to terminate the lengthy court proceedings, she said,



**Catherine Ryan, 17, and brother Eric, 12, go over legal papers in office of their**

**attorney, J. Michael Kelly in Santa Monica. The pair are taking own parents to court.**

AP Wirephoto

adding that the matter now has "gotten bigger than that. I see it as a whole children's rights issue.

"Children aren't given any respect in a custody situation. They are the custody — that's what it's all about. They're just pushed around as baggage," she said in an interview from Kelly's Santa Monica office.

As demonstrated by their unorthodox action, the Ryan children were not at all the "baggage" type.

Neither went to high school, because both were able to pass California's high-school equivalency test at a young age, Miss Ryan said. She said she went to public schools for only a couple of years and her brother never enrolled in school.

They were educated by their father, who is a retired management consultant, his daughter said.

Miss Ryan this spring completed her associate of arts degree in journalism at Santa Monica College, where she was editor of the school news-

paper. She hopes to transfer to a four-year college and then pursue a career either as editor and publisher of her own paper or as an investigative reporter.

She called her brother a "whiz," who has already audited Santa Monica College courses for a year and has enrolled for credit in the coming term.

"He's going for a computer major. He's already up there in their computer lab tutoring people," she said.

She added that Eric has had most of the dealings with their attorney while she has been busy with finals.

Miss Ryan said Kelly agreed to take their case for the \$600 she and Eric had saved up. She has worked as a horse trainer at a stable, and Eric is a "handyman" who has earned money fixing people's cars.

Kelly said he'll set up a meeting in a week or so with the children, Mrs. Donaldson of Phoenix, and her

attorney, Larry Burge of Redondo Beach.

He said his goal will be "to try and end the case completely in a very rapid fashion, probably by negotiation."

Burge said he is willing to have such a meeting, but was dubious about an out-of-court settlement because, he charged, the children have been "brainwashed" against their mother.

Miss Ryan denied that was the case, saying Burge was "grabbing at straws."

Burge also contended that Ryan "programmed" the children to hate their mother. The charge was backed up, he said, by independent psychological analysis of "embittered" letters they wrote Mrs. Donaldson about wanting to stay with their father.

"They're just avoiding the issue," Miss Ryan said. "I really don't hold grudges with anybody and I'm perfectly open about the situation. I'm not hating anybody."