

# Marriage & Family Life

## Gateways helps Tier couple overcome adversity

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ELMIRA — No story is exactly the same when couples are asked to recount the circumstances and events leading up to their marriage.

And without question, the saga of Eddie and Misty Griffin has involved some twists and turns that depart from the usual course of events.

On the surface, the Griffins' history could have been lifted from the pages of a typical romance novel. For their first date, they viewed a fireworks display in downtown Elmira on July 4, 1992. Their own "fireworks" continued from there, and they got married on April 24, 1993, followed by a honeymoon in the Pocono Mountains. Then, in November, the couple discovered they were expectant parents of twins.

Yet when you add one key detail, the Griffins' story becomes not only one of romance, but also a tale of triumphing over some difficult circumstances.

Both Eddie and Misty Griffin have a longstanding history of mental illness.

In fact, the Griffins met each other through a program attempting to help people with mental disabilities. Known as the Gateways Community Residence Program, this service is operated by the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry.

Eddie Griffin, 30, endured a series of hospital stays in his early 20s due to depression and alcohol abuse. The Elmira native attributes these problems to family abuse he incurred as a child. However, he has not required hospital treatment for five years.

Misty Griffin, 24, a Mississippi native, relocated to Chemung County when she was 19. She had suffered two nervous breakdowns in high school and was diagnosed at the time as paranoid-schizophrenic. She said, however, that after moving to Elmira she was re-diagnosed — this time correctly — as manic-depressive, and, with proper medication, has been able to control her condition.

Both Eddie and Misty Griffin were involved in the Gateways Supported Housing Program when they began dating. At the time they had reached the program's second level, which provides apartment living with occasional supervision. Misty had previously participated in Gateways' group-home process which involves 24-hour supervision.

Now the Griffins have reached the third level, in which they're living on their own in a Bly Street apartment house. Other than keeping in touch with Gateway counselors on a monthly basis, they have achieved complete independence.

"The fact that we got married and be-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Misty and Eddie Griffin enjoy a laugh together in their Elmira apartment. The couple met through the Gateways Community Residence Program operated by the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry.

came independent — it's kind of like a success story," said Misty.

Both hold full-time janitorial positions. Because they operate on a tight budget, Misty acknowledged, the Griffins rely on bus transportation to avoid car-maintenance expenses.

Their successful efforts at independent living have armed Eddie and Misty with sufficient confidence to welcome the challenge of becoming the parents of twins.

"If somebody had told me two years ago that this (marriage and fatherhood) was going to happen, I would have told them they were crazy," Eddie remarked. "But I'm glad she's pregnant, I really am. I've always wanted to be a father."

Misty, also, has been equally amazed and pleased at the quick turn of events in her life.

"When I had my first ultrasound done and it showed two babies, we just freaked out. We were shocked, of course," she recalled. "There's excitement, but also nervousness."

Dan Clarke, who serves as the Griffins' case worker for Gateways, views their situation as one where "everything will work out happily ever after."

Clarke noted that Gateways will continue to provide assistance, such as helping the Griffins find a larger apartment

for their growing family, after Misty gives birth.

Clarke said the Gateways staff has been "very supportive and very confident" of the Griffins. He added that the couple's mental illness should not be perceived as the determining factor in assessing their

ability to be good parents.

"You're dealing with people who have handicaps, but we're all deficient in certain ways," Clarke stated. "You and I may not have a mental illness, but we may also not necessarily be qualified to raise children."

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