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Immigrant and LGBT: when identities intersect

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Last month, several immigrants marched in the Denver Pride parade to celebrate the LGBT community, holding signs that read, "Colorado Love Knows No Borders." It was not unlike 2006 when millions of us nationally marched for immigration reform. But this time around, we were celebrating the pride we felt marching alongside our brothers and sisters in a parallel struggle.

Some might wonder about the intersections between the LGBT and immigrant communities — but for us, it's a part of our everyday lives. We are both first-generation LGBT immigrants who have lived without legal documentation in this country — and who know firsthand what it's like to have a foot in multiple worlds.

And we are not alone.

It is estimated more than 267,000 people in our country live at the intersection of being undocumented and LGBT. People like our gay undocumented friend Cesar, who was put in deportation proceedings simply because he tried to comfort his crying nephew during a traffic stop of Cesar's brother. For trying to help this frightened child, Cesar was accused of interfering with the police.

Cesar's partner, Freddy, is a U.S. citizen. Within the LGBT community, we know that love knows no gender — and in the case of Cesar and Freddy, their love knows no borders.

For Cesar and Freddy, the protections that straight binational couples currently enjoy — like the right of the citizen partner to petition for their partner from another country — are not available due to existing laws. And the consequences are devastating.

When Cesar fell into deportation proceedings, he and Freddy both felt hopeless — just like so many other couples whose relationships are not recognized by the government. Their lawyer told them there was no way for Cesar to stay in Colorado.

But they were determined — and when Cesar came out publicly as gay and undocumented, they found support from advocacy groups and hundreds of Coloradans willing to help. Today, we are proud to say that Cesar's case was recently closed, allowing him and Freddy to remain together in Colorado.

Cesar's story illustrates the power we can build when we come out to the people in our lives and are honest about sexual orientation and immigration status.

Some would argue that LGBT organizations would be best left focusing only on LGBT rights and vice-versa for immigrant rights organizations. But our experience here in Colorado tells us something vastly different. It tells us that as we all work toward building a world we believe in — a world free of discrimination and hate.

After years of public education, alliance building and sharing stories like Cesar's, we are seeing the transformation of hearts and minds convert into real change. Last November, Coloradans elected many legislators who support both LGBT and immigrant equality. The result was a landmark 2013 legislative session in which we won both civil unions and the Trust Act to improve trust between law enforcement and immigrant communities. Such historic progress shows what can happen when diverse communities work together toward a common vision.

We know our struggle is not over for the hundreds of thousands of undocumented LGBT people waiting for a path to citizenship, and it's not over for thousands of LGBT families who face the daily fear of being torn apart through deportation. As the U.S. House currently considers an immigration reform bill to repair our badly broken system, we know that now is the time to urge our elected officials to move this critical legislation forward.

The road ahead will not be easy. Each step of the way, the LGBT and immigrant communities have had to work tirelessly for every inch of progress we've achieved. As we march toward this vision of the world we hope to one day live in, we walk together — and we will always be stronger for it.

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