

Outright Radio
Series 2004
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DG: From PRI, Public Radio International, it's Outright Radio, I'm David Gilmore. Today on Outright Radio: stories of being both gay and Latino in the US.

First up the story of Jorge (pronounced in the Anglo style of "George") Del Rio, who left Cuba with his partner on a raft bound for freedom... "I think sometimes that it's just a dream, that tomorrow I'm going to get up and I'm going to find all my friends and all my family together here in this country..."

Clip from Jorge Delrio

Later on, lesbian activist Marta Donayre (Do-nayh-ray) goes to Washington on a bus as part of the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride...

Clip from Marta Donayre

"Throughout the 3,000 miles of the trip, all I heard were words of support for my cause from both participants and organizers. I was pleasantly surprised that my fellow riders were incredibly accepting of me. All but one."

And finally, writer Javier Sanchez reconciles his Central American heritage with his North American gay identity...

Clip from Javier Sanchez:

"...and as I opened the door to my apartment the sun brightened my face as if the Virgin of Guadalupe herself opened the skies and appeared before me. Heralded by a choir of cherubs in a cascade of roses, there it was: My identity. I was now a gay American man."

We hope you'll join us for the next hour as we present these extraordinary stories from the heart of gay America.

Theme Music

To start off our show on Gay Hispanics in the US, here are a few statistics: according to the US Census Bureau, one out of every eight Americans is Latino: that's over 37 million people of Hispanic origin – a figure which doesn't include undocumented immigrants. And two-thirds of that 37 million is of Mexican origin, primarily living in large cities in the west and the south. Assuming that roughly 10% of these folks are gay, whether or not they identify as such or are documented, leaves us with nearly 4 million gay Latinos in the US.

While many of us gay folks in the US fight for our Constitutional rights for equality, we recognize that in our neighboring nations in Latin America and the Caribbean that choice is almost entirely non-existent. Intense police harassment, street violence and religious oppression have led many gay Hispanics to America's borders seeking asylum. Asylum is granted based on the criterion of: "membership to a social group" IF that country is deemed by the US Government to be homophobic. But **fleeing** the homeland is the challenge - as you'll soon hear.

Cuban Music here

Homophobia is rampant in nearly all of Latin American. But in Cuba, after the revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power, life for many gay men became particularly difficult. More than just dealing with harassment...the revolutionary Super Macho dictator **hated** gay men. They were considered to be counter revolutionaries simply because of their sexuality. As a result gay men were treated much as Jews were in pre-world war II Germany. They were fired from their jobs, expelled from universities and quarantined for HIV. Public displays of affection were risky. This was the Cuban life of Jorge (pronounced George) Del Rio who, at 29, boarded a homemade raft and paddled toward Key West.

Producer Daniel Kraker has George's story of the life he left behind, his journey across the Straits of Florida, and the life he found when he finally arrived...

Daniel: The first thing that strikes you about George Del Rio is his infectious laugh. But then when you hear his story, you realize that to survive what he's gone through, and still to achieve what he has, had to require one hell of a sense of humor. Take this story, for example, when George was a star student at the University of Havana.

George: "I was the first or the second grade in my class, that means by law the Cuba law I supposed to get one of the best jobs when we finish university, you know, I remember that somebody in a classroom just say, George Del Rio cannot graduate from the university because he's gay.

And then I say well if you can prove it, you know, could be, probably I could be gay, but you have to prove it in order to kick me out of the university. They did like probably twenty different meetings between people from the government, people from the university. I remember the last meeting it was the entire class, probably 500 people or so, they never get enough people to say, ok, he has to be out.

At that time I just talked to myself, and I say, I have to be strong, I have to be brave, because it was a really rough time for me, definitely they put your private life in the mouths of every other person in the university, and you know they were talking about me, like they were talking about a dog, not a person, like an object..."

MUSIC BREAK: "Veinte Anos," Buena Vista Social Club

Daniel It was certainly not easy for gay people in Cuba when George came of age in the 80s. But it was nothing compared to what it was like in the sixties and seventies after the Cuban Revolution. Thousands of gay men, and others labeled "nonrevolutionary," were sent to hard labor camps to harvest sugar cane to finance the new government. They were fired from their jobs in the arts and in education. Things got better in the late 70s and 80s—at least discriminatory laws were taken off the books. But everyday life still could be extraordinarily difficult. George says the hardest part was trying to maintain a relationship. Most people lived with their parents, so it was hard to bring a partner home. And in public you had to be very discreet. But George did manage to maintain three long relationships, the first lasting three years, the second seven. Then he met Robert. They've been together twelve years now. For Robert, George was his first gay lover.

George: "He was afraid, I'd go to his home, I'd call him, he always was lying on the phone, talking with me with an old name or something like that, he'd start calling me Maria or somebody else, I always laugh about it because at least in my family, one day I said ok I am gay, nobody was happy about it, but they have to love me anyway, laugh, I bring my friend to my home, because I don't want to be in the street, I want to have my own life..."

MUSIC BREAK: "El Carretero," Buena Vista Social Club

Daniel: There were three big waves of Cuban immigrants to the United States, when the Cuban government basically opened its borders to the non-revolutionaries. George spoke of straight people who pretended to be gay in order to be allowed to leave the country. In the early 90s George began saving money—hoping someday to use it to finance an escape from the island nation. In 1994 he got his chance—a friend of his had gotten a raft and was preparing to leave. The day is still perfectly clear in George’s memory.

George: “That day at one o’clock, the Clinton administration said all the Cubans that are going to be found in the middle of the ocean are going to be for an indefinitely kind of time in Guantanamo Bay...”

“I remember at that time, we were seven people in the raft, and after everybody heard what Clinton say, a couple of persons say, I am not going to leave Cuba because we are going to be for who knows how much time in Guantanamo. And at that time I say, listen, I am going to leave because from Guantanamo we can go to some other place, but from Cuba, there is no place to go...”

Daniel: Five of them set off in the tiny raft that day...George, his partner Robert, and three straight friends.

George: “We were in the raft for three days, two nights, usually we paddle during the night because it’s really hard during the day and then at that time you’re not afraid, you just want to survive, you don’t feel any pain, you don’t feel hungry or tired, anything, it’s incredible, it’s an incredible feeling, you just want to survive.”

MUSIC BREAK: “Oro, Incienso y Mirra,” Dizzy Gillespie y Machito, Afro Cuban Jazz Moods

George: “The trip was incredible, everybody was so happy, actually, sometimes we were singing, sometimes we were really quiet, thinking about life, about family, about friends, and then if one of us get a little bit depressed or something, the others are going to see that situation right away, and we are going to give to that person some kind of energy, some kind of hope, and then we keep going.”

“One night we were in the middle of a big storm, it was really dangerous, actually, the raft is really small. At that time we decided to tie off with little ropes to someplace in the raft because the sea was so high and the waves were big and the wind was terrible, it was so cold, it was so cold at that time. That night was terrible, probably the tropical storm was for two hours or three hours or so, but we were able to sleep, we were so tired next morning that we cannot move, and then I remember that with the first light I saw something moving in the water around us, and, I find out they were sharks swimming around us...”

MUSIC BREAK, “Con Alma,” Dizzy Gillespie, Dizzy’s Diamonds: The Best of the Verve Years

Daniel: After three days in the raft, and some close encounters with sharks, they were tantalizingly close to the American shore. Then they saw a small airplane high in the sky, and they knew this part of their journey was over. They signaled the plane with white bedsheets, and the plane dropped a safety raft. Soon they were on a giant Coast Guard cutter, bound for Guantanamo Bay. All George remembers of those three days is exhaustion.

George: “As soon as you get to the ship, everybody just fell asleep. It’s incredible. The body was so tired that probably the adrenaline or something keeps you alive but as soon as you are in some place. I remember the only thing that I did was I want some water, I want to put some fresh water in my face, drink some fresh water and that was it, I hit the floor like a dead person for a day or so. Laugh.

“The American government was telling us every day probably for the first month or two that we are never going to get to the United States...It was a really difficult situation because at that time you lost your contact with your past, and you don’t know what is going to happen in the future, you were in the middle of nowhere. The Cuban government called us emigrants, the United States called us migrants, and we called ourselves baseros...baseros means rafters.”

Daniel: They were quarantined at the American Naval base in Guantanamo Bay. A ten-foot high fence surrounded the camp. They lived in big military tents, slept on cots. George calls it a concentration camp, and while in many ways it was like a prison, the difference was the baseros had HOPE.

George: “We were 30 thousand people who just want to have a space in a society, and if the American government at that time was not going to give us that opportunity, we are going to make it for ourselves. And then we build a little park, we build church, we build community facilities, school for children, and then even the gay people started building their own little world around, I remember, you know the military tents, are green, they painted in pink, laugh, and they put cartoons all around, and they make a little garden in front of the tent, everybody knew that they were gay, because the tent was pink... We were people who want to have a space in the society, and it doesn't matter if you were gay straight, black, tall, short, whatever, we just want to have a space in the society, we started making our own space.”

MUSIC BREAK, “Marieta,” Buena Vista Social Club Presents Ibrahim Ferrer

Daniel: A man named Omar was responsible for painting the tent pink. George remembers him being a big man, like six foot tall, and very openly gay. Omar also created of all things, a fashion show.

George: “They were trying to do like different kinds of design or something like that, in a concentration camp, laugh, There were like 12 or 20 models, dressing up in different kinds of clothes, straight people, gay people, everybody, women, men, everybody, it was a successful thing to do, because most of the time what they did they got the military fabric designs, stuff like that, and in place of that, they created hundreds of different things, and they did it, a fashion show, and even the general of the base were in the fashion show with his wife, laugh...”

Daniel: Just like in Cuba proper, it was difficult for George and Robert to maintain a relationship at Guantanamo. They slept next to each other, but they had to share a tent with twenty other people. George suspects most people in their tent knew they were lovers, but they never said anything. For a year their relationship consisted mainly of a few private conversations, dreaming about their life in the United States. Sex was almost impossible.

George: “I remember one night I decided to do it. We went to the beach at three o'clock in the morning or something like that. It was really romantic, you know, with the stars, with the sounds of the sea, it was very romantic. I always keep that moment very close in my heart.”

MUSIC BREAK, “Esclavo Triste,” Marc Ribot y Los Cubanos Postizos

Daniel: After about a year in Guantanamo, the baseros heard the news they had all been expecting, but didn't know when it would come.

George: “And then at one o'clock the admiral of the base said OK they are going to say something that is going to affect your life in Guantanamo, the Clinton administration, by presidential parole allowed all the rafters living in Guantanamo Bay to go to the United States, I have picture of that moment. Everybody was screaming, everybody was jumping, everybody was crying, actually.”

Daniel: It was another month before George actually left. He remembers it feeling like another year. They drew numbers to see when they would leave. Robert and George were sent to the US about a month apart in summer of 1995. Once in Miami they used a hundred and fifty dollars they had scraped together from friends to buy a bicycle. Then they began an apartment search.

George: “We put together between three friends, 300 dollars, we saw an apartment for rent, we went over there, we talked with the landowner, and I remember very clear that we lied to her. Because she say from the beginning, listen, when you going to bring your furniture, never use the front elevator to put the furniture, you always have to use the back elevator. We doesn’t have anything, we doesn’t have furniture, we doesn’t have clothes, we doesn’t have anything. And then I looked to her and said don’t worry, our truck is like a week behind us. Don’t worry about it, when the furniture get here, we are going to use the back elevator. Laugh.” It was really funny because always she keep ask me, when the furniture coming? Laugh. And we doesn’t have anything, you know.”

MUSIC BREAK: “Pensativo,” Dizzy Gillespie y Machito

George: “I remember one night we were walking around the neighborhood, and we found a sofa. We said, oh, we have to take it, it was in the street. We decided to wait until two o’clock in the morning to take the sofa, but we had to cross a big avenue in order to get to the apartment, we just wait in the sidewalk, when no car were crossing and we decided ok let’s go right now. And we were in the middle, laugh, then hundreds of cars appear in the middle of the avenue. Laugh. We were, we started laughing, laughing, that we doesn’t have truck to carry the sofa, and then we just put the sofa in the middle of Ponce de Leon Avenue. But a woman in a van, she said ok, don’t worry, I did the same when I get to this country and I am going to help you with the sofa. And she put the sofa in the van and drive off to the apartment, and that was it, we had the first furniture.

MUSIC BREAK, “No me Llores Mas,” Marc Ribot y Los Cubanos Postizos

Daniel: George and Robert didn’t speak a word of English when they arrived in Miami. George says he was so tired at the end of the day doing odd jobs that he usually just fell asleep during his evening English classes. But he persevered, and eventually he found a job related to what he did in Cuba- working for an environmental consulting company. Now he runs his own business, and Robert works with him. They bought a house together, a fixer-upper with big trees in the front yard. George had captured his dream in Miami. But there was one unfinished piece of business. He knew he had to visit Cuba, the life he had left behind.

George: “When I get to Cuba, I found everybody so happy to see me, I found everybody very excited to talk to me, they were amazing, everybody, and at the same time, I wasn’t feeling very good because they are still living in that kind of condition, they are still living without hope. I was fifteen days in Cuba, I spent every night talking to my gay people in Cuba. It was amazing for days, explaining for example that we can go to Lincoln Mall, walking with hands together, or just living in the same house, that was amazing for them...They were happy for me, because in some way I bring hope for them. They saw there was life in the world. They don’t have it right now, but they are going to get it sometime.”

MUSIC BREAK “Bruca Manigua,” Ibrahim Ferrer

Crossfade with sound of waves breaking on the beach, fade under track. Keep both music and waves bedded under track.

Daniel: Standing on the shores that he risked his life for, amid hundreds of gay men sunbathing at South Beach, George still sometimes questions if this is real...

George: “I think sometimes that it’s just a dream, that tomorrow I’m going to get up and I’m going to find all my friends and all my family together here in this country...I was laughing about it one day, I just adapted to the city very well, that sometime I didn’t know exactly if I belonged to Cuba or to the United States. For me the city is like my original town, and I dream about it, I dream that someday I’m going to find everybody that I love, right around the corner.”

Sound of waves and music

Daniel Kraker is a reporter for Arizona Public Radio based in Flagstaff. You can see a picture of Jorge on the beach in Miami at our website: Outrightradio.org.

Now, we've all heard the stereotypes about Hispanics – you know, the importance of the family; iron-fisted matriarchs. Well while we're doing stereotypes...we also know that gay men have a fondness for strong women and divas. Javier Reynaldos, an American-born gay man of Cuban parents explained how to navigate his filial landscape – a skill he learned when he brought his boyfriend home to meet his mother for the first time...

...when you walk into a Hispanic household...it's all about respect and so the first thing you have to do is go straight up to the mother – father second – but mother is always first and say hello to her – doesn't have to be much, but you definitely have to do it first, “Ola senora. Como esta usted, esta noche?” Which is, “hello ‘mam, how are you this evening?” At least have that bit of respect. My mother and I had a tough time well jeez, we're both very strong headed and a few years after I had come out and was still living at home b/c I was in college, I had met somebody that I thought would be the perfect boyfriend for all the approval points. I loved the guy. It was just perfect. He was 19 years old. He was just wonderful and I decided that this was the one that I was going to bring home as my boyfriend and when the poor thing – he was terrified of my mother. He wouldn't leave within an arm's length grasp of the front door. And my mother just terrorized him to death. The poor kid. My mother wouldn't refer to him by name. Well, she never spoke to him, actually. She only spoke to me and referred to him as “ese niño” – “that boy.” “Are you going out with ese niño?” “Yes, mom, I'm going out with ese niño.” And of course he spoke Spanish even though he was Jewish from upstate NY. So he knew what was going on. He was terrified of her. The poor thing.

DG: Did he not know about the protocol to go and immediately meet her?

JR: oh no no he was briefed and rehearsed for several months before I took him home to meet my mom, but of course the fear - just the image of my mother with that stare of hers immediately sent waves of fear through the poor boy and he was just gelled. He was just a complete bowl of jelly near the front door. So much so that my dad felt sorry for him and would stand next to him at the front door and talk to him. But Bryan could barely walk into the living room.

DG: was there ever a point where you managed to sway your mother ...convince your mother to accept you being gay and your relationships?

JR: She went through a lot of years of “oh, it's a shame you're not straight.” It wasn't until a few years later when I met Carlos who was also a CPA finishing his master's degree and was from the same town in Cuba that my mother was from. Also Catholic. From known quantity stock that my mother started to change and understand that, “well, he's OK. I don't like the gay thing, but this one's OK.” He was the guy that if my parents could have arranged a marriage for my sister, this is the guy they would have picked out. B/c he was “nuestra gente” – he was ours. From our town, our stock. Our people. And so he was OK. So much so that I'd come home from school at night to find Carlos my boyfriend sitting at the dining room table with my parents waiting for me to get home to have dinner. It was very, very odd – those years. That was a significant change in those years in the way that my mother and I, through brute force of will started to really gain some respect for each other.

DG: but the relationship with Carlos didn't work out right? (skip to JR at Track 6, :10)

JR: No it didn't. It ended pretty badly. I was pretty devastated and my (skip to :39) and this whole 6 years we had this unwritten rule – just don't let grandma and grandpa know you're gay. This was the huge family secret – all wrapped around keeping information from my grandmother. And I was devastated – we had just broken up a

few weeks prior and at that dining room table at a lull in the conversation I'm just kinda moving the vegetables around my plate and not saying much and my grandmother just kinda took my hand and said, "no te preocupes, mi hijito. Encontrara otro partner." Which is, "don't worry my child, you'll find another partner." And well, glasses dropped, plates clanged and you know the room came to a stop for a full 3 or 4 minutes and there in the midst of all this was my mother with rice coming out of her mouth. It was pretty funny. Laughs. But I think that at that point, she really – for my mom – that was a major turning point. She had prohibited anyone from letting my grandmother from knowing this horrible thing – she was trying to keep it business as usual. Javier has a "best friend" but they go on vacations together... another form of traveling salesman if you wish. And she just kind of started to figure out that it was not only was it better for me to have someone that I cared about and cared for me, but it was better to find that kind of a love in whatever shape it takes and live for that. After that point my mother was very sad that I was single at that time. And since then, she's been wonderful to every boyfriend that I've brought home and has granted my relationship the same respect that my brother has with his wife and my sister has with her husband.

DG: Do you think this was b/c of the moral authority of your grandmother asserted in the family at that table?

JR: Oh absolutely. My grandmother was like the Queen Mum. She had the moral authority for this family and although she wasn't the matriarch in power, b/c my mother was the matriarch in power, grandma...abuela controlled the...you're right, the moral authority of the family. And with her bringing that out in very plain terms, it was just accepted and this is just what it is.

DG: And along those lines, what about the prime minister – that would be your father? Was he accepting of you?

...later on that night um...my Dad's an architect and he would do side jobs at night and since I was a little kid, I would get up after the rest of the house had gone to sleep and I'd spend all night yakking with my dad while he drew and that night I talked over the night's events with my father and that was the first time my father said to me, "you're not the first gay person that we know. You won't be the last. I love you regardless." And that's kind of it.

Growing up in Miami you, especially if you're Hispanic, you straddle 2 different cultures. You're as equally into Bon Jovi as you are Juan Luis Guerra. The mix of culture and life here - especially if you're Hispanic - drives you to be more – it's wider. An aunt of mine told me that it would be very difficult to find someone to be with b/c I wasn't Hispanic enough for other Hispanics b/c I was a Miami-Cuban and I wasn't American enough for Americans b/c I'm not really American b/c I live here in Miami. Being gay on top of that adds a whole different dimension b/c the rules for being gay in Hispanic arenas are diff't than the rules for being gay in America. At the same time it's kinda fun b/c I'm able to bounce back and forth between all of these and w/o too much effort and in fact when I'm w/other Hispanics who are roughly my age we speak both languages at the same time. You choose the right word that fits and what it is that you want to say and as long as everyone knows what the word is, it works. With someone else who grew up in Miami, they might be pointing at the box of Lucky Charms and say hand me that box of cornflake and everybody knows what it is. Every cereal is "cornflake." Every refrigerator is "Frigidaire." Because in Cuba all refrigerators didn't say refrigerator on them, they said "Frigidaire" so Frigidaire. That was what they were all called. My mom always bought mentholatum whenever we had colds and you had to rub it on your chest and put it in your nostrils. Godawful stuff! She sent me to the store to get Q-tips and tissues and bee-bop-a-roop. And it wasn't until I was standing in the aisle with the jar of mentholatum in my hand looking at the Vick's Vapo-Rub on the counter that I realized this thing I had in my hand that was mentholatum – I always thought that the Spanish name for anything of that sort was Bee-bop-a-roop. Laughter. No, it's Vick's Vapo-Rub and that's just what it always was. So you dance across these cultures and you just make life out of it.

Javier Reynaldos from Miami.

Music

Coming up: Marta Donayre makes a case for the Permanent Partners Immigration Act on a bus headed for DC and Javier Sanchez finds his heart split in two as he heads back to Mexico. We'll be back with more stories from gay Latinos when Outright Radio continues... from PRI Public Radio International.

1 minute break

You're listening to Outright Radio, from PRI, Public Radio International, I'm David Gilmore. You can contact us at Comments@OutrightRadio.org or call us toll-free at 866-OUTRADIO. That's 866-688-7234. (Do this every time)

Now back to our theme of gay Hispanic life in America...

Brazilian born Marta Donayre came to the US via Ecuador in 1995 with her husband. Within 3 months she got divorced, and began questioning her sexual orientation. Unfortunately her timing was bad. As her lesbian life in Silicon Valley was expanding, the dot com industry in was shrinking leaving her unemployed with only a work visa. Newly in love, Marta and her girlfriend got creative. Here's her story...

I was driving to work early on the morning of March 13, 2000 while listening to CNN radio. I was trying hard to keep abreast of business news because I had an eagerness to move forward at work. Honestly, I was desperate to be liked enough so I could be sponsored for a green card by my employer. My work visa would expire in a few years, and I didn't know what I would do next if this happened. All I knew was that I would never have the courage to come out of the closet in my home country, Brazil.

When the business news began, I heard something I was not expecting. I still remember it clearly. The broadcaster began announcing that i2 Technologies, of Texas, had purchased Aspect. There were only two companies I knew of with that name: Aspect Telecommunications and Aspect Development where I worked. My heart raced and my breath stopped. In side my head all I could hear was a fast paced "telecommunications, telecommunications, please let it be telecommunications." Sadly, in that infinite lapse, the word Aspect was followed by Development.

Hell broke lose, and I immediately began crying as I reached for my cell phone and woke up my girlfriend, Leslie. I had a tough commute so I was working early to avoid some traffic. She was still deeply asleep when I called. "Hello," she said with sleepy voice. And I began telling her what I had heard on the radio. I was agitated and panicked, and in tears told her to get herself "an American girl that doesn't have these problems." "These problems" were being a recent college graduate working in Marketing at a firm that had just being bought by another. Logically the Texas company would want only one Marketing Department, and it would be the one already established in Dallas. Hearing Leslie say "that's not gonna happen!" was reassuring. It was unbelievable to hear her support and commitment to me when we had been together for only about a month.

I ended up not getting laid off, but instead changed jobs to Ariba, Inc., where a green card was offered as part of the deal. I switched jobs, and felt great about where I was in life. After a year of dating, Leslie and I moved in together. I felt on top of the world. But my dependency on my job bothered me. Although the employer and the INS had scrutinized me, the work visa was not mine. It belonged to my employer, and as long as I was with them I could be with Leslie.

Sadly, the new job was not immune to the dot-com crash, and neither was I. In a massive layoff I found myself amongs the third of the company that was let go on the same day, and with no green card in hand. Breaking its promise, the company never even filed for it.

As all my recently laid off colleagues gathered at a local brewery to have some beers, I ran to Leslie's office so I could apply to some positions at her company. I had no time to waste. We had heard from different lawyers and HR professionals that I had anywhere from 10-90 days to find a new job or leave the country. If I couldn't find a new job quickly, I was entitled to a one-way ticket home. Fortunately the job appeared, and I was able to stay.

Yet the new company wasn't all that stable. It was a start-up and Silicon Valley was starting to crumble under everyone's feet, and I was afraid that I would be in for a bitter surprise if I sat around to wait. Leslie and I evaluated our options and decided that the best thing we should do was to move to Canada. Canada is always looking for talented individuals to immigrate there, and we both thought we had a chance. In addition, Canada recognizes same-sex partners for immigration purposes, so as long as one of us qualified, the other would be able to come along. The paperwork was tedious, lengthy, and it even required police records from every country we had lived in for the past 10 years. We had to get FBI background checks. I had lived in Ecuador for a few years before moving to the U.S., so I also had to obtain a police background check from there. As promising as Canada seemed to us, we felt humiliated, hurt, and very angry we had to move there under those circumstances. Ever since, Leslie has a hard time saying the Pledge of Allegiance, not because of God, but because she is unable to say "liberty and justice for all." She felt expelled from her own country for being a lesbian.

Leslie and I met at a gay group for which both of us volunteered. We had always been fighters, and taking things sitting down was not our style. After we felt sad for ourselves, we became very angry at what was happening to us. Our advocacy soul kicked in and we turned this anger into action. We started Love Sees No Borders, where we put to use our skills and shared our story. Our goal was to denounce the horrible injustice that we were enduring. Living in the Bay Area at the nadir of the dot-com crash we were certain that we were not the only same-sex couple affected by immigration issues. But there was a deafening silence from both the gay and straight communities. This silence made a lot of sense to us. You see, immigration services know that by U.S. law, same-sex couples cannot marry, and therefore the American cannot sponsor a same-sex partner for immigration. At the same time, having a partner that is considered a spouse is a compelling reason for a foreigner to remain in the U.S. So instead of running the risk of having this person break immigration law, U.S. consulates abroad automatically deny visas when a same-sex relationship is revealed. Our decision to leave the U.S. for Canada protected us from the INS. The worse case scenario was that I would be deported to Brazil, and if this were to happen we would simply meet in Canada instead of traveling together. And this is how we became the mouthpiece for a silent community.

We did and still do all of our Love Sees No Borders work for free and in most cases pay for such expenses out of our pockets. We set out to be a public relations machine for the Permanent Partners Immigration Act, a bill currently in both houses of Congress. This bill would add the words "or permanent partner" every time the word "spouse" appears in immigration law, and defines who a permanent partner is. When this bill is finally enacted, Leslie and I, and many other couples, will no longer fear that the government will separate us.

One of the unexpected benefits of starting Love Sees No Borders was the visibility Leslie and I gained. At a meeting of the San Francisco chapter of the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force, a lawyer suggested that I apply for asylum based on my sexual orientation. Leslie and I vaguely explored that option when I was first laid off, but since I came out only in the U.S. I had no story of past persecution in Brazil, so I had no case. But the lawyer said that things had changed since I was first laid off, and that now I had a public profile and visibility. We spoke to several lawyers about this, and they all agreed. So we filed for asylum and fortunately the INS concurred, and I am now here in the U.S. as an asylee.

Solving our personal problem was not enough for us at two levels. The first was that neither of us could bear to see our friends in such a horrible predicament. While working so hard for this issue we met a lot of couples that became very dear to us. The second reason was that we found out that asylum is not permanent. If conditions

were to change in Brazil, the U.S. can come to me and tell me that I no longer need protection, and that I should leave. As an asylee I am entitled to apply for a green card, which I already did this year, but it is taking 11-12 years for asylees to obtain green cards. This is a very long time frame and a lot of things can happen in the interim. Knowing that we're not completely safe, every now and then Leslie and I find ourselves looking into our Canada file, and thinking about heading north.

Our work received a major boost when I was invited to join the staff at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, in San Francisco, and I jumped at the opportunity. Thanks to this position, I was able to bring our activism to a new level, and engage the gay community further in the immigration battle. I couldn't have found a better organization to move this issue forward. NCLR has a great vision, enabling me to come out to the straight world with my message.

I recently participated in the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride. Inspired in the Freedom Rides of the 60s, these rides were organized by unions and immigration groups to denounce the various problems faced by immigrants in this country. We left from 12 different cities and met in Washington DC to lobby Congress on these issues. Altogether we were 800-900 riders nationwide. Surprisingly, I found myself being the only person officially representing a gay-community organization and whose agenda was to promote same-sex immigration and the Permanent Partners Immigration Act. There were many gays and lesbians in the rides, but all of them were representing the organizations they work for, such as unions and immigrant groups.

Throughout the 3,000 miles of the trip, all I heard were words of support for my cause from both participants and organizers. I was pleasantly surprised that my fellow riders were incredibly accepting of me. All but one. He was a short, but strong man, and apparently in his 60s. He appeared to be a determined person. When the rides first left San Francisco, his daughter fell ill, but he decided to continue the fight. He was representing his local union, and he would be back home after a few days. When I heard about this I had no idea who he was, but I thought to myself that he must be a strong person willing to be away from his family in order to show his solidarity to the cause. This solidarity ended when he heard a public speech made by someone other than me that one of the rides' themes, "family reunification," included same-sex couples. As a matter of fact, he said that if he had known he would not have come on the trip. His words caught me off guard. According to him his union was not told that same-sex couples were part of the message, and that his fellow members would have rejected this message. He felt he was only representing them.

Fortunately the organizing team acted swiftly and pushed forward the gay sensitivity training that was planned. I helped by facilitating it, but I didn't have to say a word. The entire bus defended not only me personally, but the cause I was advocating. A fellow rider even wondered how we could be crossing the country to go to DC to advocate for the end of discrimination if we were so quick to discriminate against ourselves?

The next day we were getting ready to leave the hotel for Capitol Hill to meet with Congressional representatives. I had brought along with me some stickers advocating for same-sex immigration calling for Immigration Equality for Permanent Partners. I was diligently placing them on my fellow riders, when I ran into the man who said that he would not have come if had known better. I didn't know what to do, so I offered him the sticker anyway, as I smiled at him. He looked at it, tilted his head and asked me in Spanish "what's that?" "A sticker for same-sex immigration," I answered. He stared at the sticker, thought about it, stared some more, and then took it. I walked away, gently squeezing his shoulder. I didn't see what he did with the sticker. For all I cared he threw it away, but I was happy he was willing to at least take it from my hand. A couple of hours later, I saw him on the West lawn of the Capitol wearing the sticker very visibly on his jacket. My eyes filled with tears.

Marta Donayre is a co-founder of Love Sees No Borders, and is the Public Education Director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

Music

Our next story comes from Xalapa the capital of the state of Vera Cruz, in eastern Mexico. Javier Sanchez was born in Mexico, but has enjoyed the privilege of dual-citizenship in the United States. His fascination with all things north of the border began with American movies. After many years in the States, he's now back in Mexico facing the choice of family life or gay life. Here's the story...

It's almost 3 am and I have been chatting on the internet for hours. This guy asks me about my favorite movie. As a movie buff, that's hard to answer, but a title that is always on my list is the 1989 movie, *Cinema Paradiso*. I focus on the scene where a young man named Toto is leaving his tiny Sicilian village to pursue his love of the movies in Rome. At the train station, his friend and mentor Alfredo tells him never return, never write, and never

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look back. And this affecting farewell, will boost him to leave the world he knows and seek his own path, far, far away from the ones he loves.

Like Toto, I also grew up with a passion for movies. But instead of Italy, I grew up in Mexico, in a small artsy town called Xalapa: A quaint and charming place in the mountains close to the gulf of Mexico. Xalapa is known for being a cultural hub and a great place to grow coffee beans. In fact, exotic plants and insects grow uncontrollably there. Even orchids grow wild on trees. I remember that in summer, most kids spent their days flying paper kites, catching tadpoles and butterflies, and fireflies at night. But every Saturday afternoon, I went to a theatre that showed two movies for just a few pesos. Sometimes, I didn't even know what was showing, I would just go, and I loved it. My parents preferred that I spend more time studying music, because they are both classical musicians, and they wanted me to follow in their footsteps. My mother, who is a very white American woman, divorced my very Mexican father when I was a kid, and raised me on her own in Xalapa. From my mom, I learned the basics of life, I learned music, and I learned how to be independent. Mexico and the movies taught me everything else: that life was to be lived with passion, that relationships with people were to be profound, and that I should never stop believing in magic.

Like in *Cinema Paradiso*, I left home to pursue my love of the movies, and I came to the United States to get my education. That was 1988, the year of "A Fish Called Wanda", of "Die Hard", of Milli Vanilli and Belinda Carlisle. I knew American culture well, but getting used to living in the U.S. was harder than I expected. For many years after my arrival, I continually told people how Mexican ways were better, always describing to my friends how things were done in Mexico, and although I am also an American from birth because of my mother, I always identified myself as Mexican. I know people got tired of hearing that. No matter how good my English was, no matter how well I understood the American way of life, almost daily something would come up to tell me in effect, "You do not belong here". The hardest thing to take in was how differently Americans handled personal relationships. I was accustomed to friends back in Mexico who were very reliable, intimate, committed, volatile, and adventurous. My experiences with American people showed much lower expectations on friends, which in turn created connections that were much more civilized, scheduled, cerebral, and somehow more casual.

The person I am chatting with on line tonight is a 37 year old Mexican dentist. He tells me that only select people know he's gay. He asks me about my coming out process. I tell him I came out when I was in school, living in New Orleans in 1991.

Music

I remember the exact moment when I was completely sure I was gay. It was the morning after I had shared an intimate night with another man for the first time in my life, and as I opened the door to my apartment the sun brightened my face as if the Virgin of Guadalupe herself opened the skies and appeared before me. Heralded by a choir of cherubs in a cascade of roses, there it was: My identity. I was now a gay American man.

The first time I went home after coming out, I noticed that a gap was growing between the Mexican me and the American me. I realized how the whole concept of Gay is so fundamentally cultural. Everything I knew as an American homo did not apply in Mexico. I didn't know how to spot a fellow queer, or the local lingo, mannerisms, or their mating rituals.

Music

After college, I moved to Seattle. Gay issues glided right to the back burner. My professional, social, and spiritual horizons expanded, but there was a pretty big problem in the love department. I dated men who once they saw my romantic side, would immediately bail out. Was it me? Was it them? One day, a man I was dating said he was afraid of my intensity. I know that I have a strong personality and have never been short on opinions, but "intense" seemed like an exaggeration. After a few failed flings, I tried to see with American eyes what they were so scared of. It was Passion. In a bit of a "wow" moment, I saw that after all these years, a Latin lover still lived inside me, he was almost the caricature of the guy with the pencil-thin moustache who strums his guitar and croons love songs under his sweetheart's window. He was an unbending romantic, who only understands love as ritualistic and transforming.

Years before, when I learned that apathy would be a common trait in my American friends, I managed to tame my feelings, in true American fashion. But as I was facing romance, I found that love was something that was more deeply hard-wired. For ages, I wondered how much of this intensity thing was strictly my issue, and how much of it was instilled by my upbringing. During one of my trips to Mexico, I made a point of looking closely at Mexican society. I noticed people who have foreplay freely in public, people who speak of amplified feelings after a first meeting, people who put monumental efforts in acts of romance. I began to breathe easier, because it was plain to see that the passion that intimidated people was not just a personal quirk, but an honest product of my culture. I then understood the policy that a Hispanic gay friend in New Orleans has, which is to **never date Anglos**. At the time it seemed very narrow of him, but now, I can see where he is coming from. Hispanics don't want to sell ourselves short. But, in an environment so different from ours, what are our options for love?

For more than a year, I had been living in Los Angeles, focusing on my dream of working in film, surrounded with interesting people, exciting things to do, and fabulous places to go. And then one morning I got The Call.

I was asleep when the phone rang. I groggily picked it up; it was my mother's voice on the other end. "Oh, Honey, I'm sick" is all she said, and at that moment I knew those 4 words were about to change my life. In 5 days, I shut down my life in California, and just like in the movie "Big Eden", where a New York artist leaves the big city to care for his ill grandfather back in their small Montana town, I made my way back to my home town, the place where orchids grow wild. But instead of something beautiful, my mother had a furious cancer growing inside of her, born in her lungs, and spread throughout her body. Her Doctors had nearly no hope.

From living a cosmopolitan life in L.A., I was now sharing the streets with mules and horses, being awakened every morning by roosters, donkeys and turkeys instead of helicopters. To witness the person I love the most suffering is plenty hard enough, but being catapulted back into a life I felt I had evolved out of made it much harder. It's annoyingly ironic that after living in great American cities, my biggest challenge now is to live in the same small town I grew up in.

Over the years, my support network has been mainly made of gay people, and now that I need them the most, I am required to live in a closet society. I know there is a gay life here somewhere, but I'm just not equipped to find it.

Music

The most straight-forward way to connect with other gay men here is the bars. While I don't enjoy that world, to be proactive I have gone to them whenever my duties allow me. I've been with an open mind and an open heart, but so far my attempts to meet people have failed. I know that my north-of-the-border bohemian image is out of place here. I also know that most men here are very traditional and will follow a heterosexual relationship model, which clashes with my emancipated point of view. It's disappointing that I find myself irritated by their terrible fashions and by the fact that people don't have their acts together yet. Through these thoughts, I have come to realize a very hard truth: I have reversed my role from 15 years ago. I'm now frustrated that things in the states are better than in Mexico... I'm feeling that my American ways are superior, always describing to people how things are done in the states, and, I identify myself as American.

I have little culture clashes everyday. Today I was lost in thought while running errands for mom. When I stopped at a red light, as is common here in Mexico, a boy no older than seven came by selling candy. He leaned into my open window very casually and said "Come on, buy some candy," to which I responded, "Sorry guy, I don't eat candy." He didn't seem to give my response much thought when he asked, "why are you wearing earrings?" as he looked at my tiny silver hoops. I said "'cause I like them." A toothless smile widened across his face, and boldly said "Sissy!" and walked away. I yelled "Hey, wait a minute; it's not nice to call people names." He said "Well, only sissies wear earrings!" and confidently walked on to sell candy to the next car. I sat there for a moment wondering what to make of this little exchange. At first, I laughed, but at the same time I felt a familiar sense of sadness towards a family and a culture that provides young children the ingredients to single out others, and for limiting their ability to expand their minds. Is that too American of me?

It's difficult to face this dissonance between fundamental elements of my identity. I've been soul searching, trying to figure out how my different parts can be harmonized. I am telling this to my online buddy and I begin to wrap up our little on line chat. He asks me how I will handle this issue. I tell him I don't know, but I am starting by looking at the contributions both cultures have instilled in me, much like how my heart and my mind can do great things when I get them to collaborate, how I don't see myself as surrendering to passion as easily as I used to, and I now see myself as a "practical romantic," which allows me to be my passionate self, with a pinch of healthy skepticism.

It's about 3:20 am when we finally say goodbye. Without my typing sounds I notice the crickets outside, and my computer's hum. My mother is sleeping peacefully downstairs, since she is responding so well to her treatment. I'm really happy about that. I take a big sigh and let the silence percolate my thoughts. My mind takes me to a moment in Scott Hick's "Hearts in Atlantis" when Anthony Hopkins says, *Sometimes when you're young, you have moments of such happiness, you think you're living in someplace magical, like Atlantis must have been... then we grow up and our hearts break into two.* In the movie, they don't elaborate what happens to each half of your heart. For the time being, I know very well where they both are. I can only hope I don't lose track of them so that I can always be starry-eyed by life, as Mexico raised me to be, and also be sensible to life's realities. That's the person I want to be.

Javier Sanchez from Xalapa, Mexico, the town that gave Jalapeno peppers their name.

That's all for today's show.

ORR is produced in collaboration with KXCI in Tucson, Arizona. Senior editor for our show is Jesse Rose DeRooy. Our business manager is John Brennan.

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