

Submitter: Brett Bigham
On Behalf Of:
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Measure: SJR33

In 2014 I was named the Oregon Teacher of the Year. Soon after I was called by my supervisor and told that if I said I was gay in public I would be "shot in the head." She then said, "I mean it. If you say you are gay someone is going to kill you." That was followed by written orders that I was not to say any words publicly OR privately, unless my supervisor approved them beforehand. I was also ordered to turn in all private mail from home for her to open and read to make sure I was not writing private letters with words they did not approve of.

That same year gay marriage became legal. My (soon-to-be) husband and I met at the courthouse to get married. The press showed up and refused to leave. I ended up marrying my husband in front of a roomful of journalists. One feed was carried live. The Oregonian had 45 pictures on their website the next day. Saying my wedding vows broke the rules that my district had given me. When I was honored at the White House by President Obama, I was asked by the White House Press Corp to speak up about my students. I said, "As one of the first openly gay teachers of the year..." and, again, broke the rules my district gave me. That same month I was told I could not do an interview with the New York Times because I could not give my boss my written responses to the questions I had not been asked yet.

Not long after this, my husband and I were invited to ride in the Rose Festival Parade. We were the first gay couple to be so honored. The day after the parade the superintendent of my district showed up in my classroom, furious with me for making a public appearance without approval.

I was investigated and fired, even though their rules were illegal. My firing was illegal and I was reinstated only to have the district announce they were firing me at the next board meeting. They lied and said the reason was because I had missed too many days as Teacher of the Year. They ignored the fact that they had signed a contract with the CCSSO that I would miss up to the entire school year in my duties as Teacher of the Year.

BOLI investigated my complaints and found "substantial evidence of discrimination" against me. My district was forced to pay fines over things they did to me. They continued to lie about to the public and did their best to smear me in a bad light. In the end I remained reinstated and every single administrator except one was either removed, reassigned or had their hours cut.

I share this with you because prejudice against LGBT people exists everywhere,

including in the most liberal of liberal cities, Portland. My case was sighted in the Supreme Court was of Bostick Vs Clayton County. I was the example of how terribly wrong things can go for a gay employee.

My husband and I never wanted special rights. In 2012 I had had a widow maker heart attack. All I wanted, was to be sure that if something happened to me, that my husband would not lose our house. I wanted to know that he could visit me in the hospital. I wanted the dignity to be honest about who I was. When I was named Teacher of the Year, it was important that a gay man, one who survived the anti-gay measures of the 80s and 90s, could stand proudly with his husband. The LGBT youth in our state could see a possible future for themselves. They could be successful. They could find love and get married. They could stand up for their own rights when they were infringed upon.

After all the headlines and craziness, after all the hateful threats I received, so many that the FBI once requested us to leave our house and stay in a hotel, I write this testimony to you to implore you to make our state a safer place for LGBT Oregonians. An LGNT high school student once said to me, "I feel like what you did, you did for me." I pass those words on to you now. You need to do it for them.