

Submitted by James Slauch:

Firstly, I want to thank the House Oversight Committee and Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney for allowing me to share my story today regarding anti-LGBTQ+ violence. Hate rhetoric from politicians, religious leaders, and media outlets is at the root of this problem. It is this sort of violence that threatens to stop many voices in our community and most recently left five wonderful people dead: Ashley Paugh, Raymond Green Vance, Daniel Aston, Derrick Rump, and Kelly Loving. We miss each of you.

I have always struggled with my sexuality, not because I deny who I am but because many others do. Because others want to hurt me for being me. My coming out story involves my family and their support. My sister, Charlene, paved the way for me to accept myself. After she was forced out of the closet and ultimately the house by our mom who, at the time, believed being gay was a sin, our household went through a transformation. In the end love won, as it always will. Our mom became loving and accepting. She chose her children and it was this road my sister and I had to endure that allowed me to feel safe enough to say "Hey mom, I like guys". She recently passed but before she did, for the past 15 years she has been an advocate for our community, especially in her religious circles.

The events of November 19th were a nightmare come true. Right before midnight, on the eve of Transgender Day of Remembrance, my boyfriend Jancarlos and I were about to leave when a shooter walked in. Several "pops" rang out and I immediately felt a searing pain in my arm. I fell over knowing I had been shot. My right arm wasn't working but I was able to call 911. I saw everyone on the ground, glass panes shattered, and blood running from my arm and chest. Jancarlos was next to me, shot in the leg but thankfully alive. To my horror though I saw my sister bleeding out. My heart melted as she tried to dial 911 with her good arm. I called out to her and I heard no response. I don't want to imagine what may have happened had the shooter not been taken down. Five wonderful people were still murdered.

The fear based and hateful rhetoric surrounding the LGBTQ+ community, and especially around Trans individuals and drag queens is unacceptable. We shouldn't have to fear going and being shot. We shouldn't have to fear losing our rights, rights that every American deserves. It is apparent that this rhetoric incites fear, stokes hatred, and ultimately causes violence. Pretending it does not is tolerating intolerance. Club Q was one of two queer spaces in Colorado Springs. It's where I met Jancarlos and where we would go regularly. It was one of the few places I felt safe and accepted and I can assure you I am not the only person who feels this way about safe spaces like Club Q. It was a second home to all of us and safe spaces like Q are important to the entire community because, outside of these spaces we are continually being dehumanized, marginalized, and targeted.

It was only after the violation of our safe space that I came to realize just how powerful love can be. Before sunrise that night we continually received messages from all over the world with affirmations of love. Random people who we had never met giving us their best wishes. A family friend immediately started a gofundme and we've experienced a ton of support. When I left the hospital I was brought to tears by the memorial that had been created in front of the club. I would like to especially thank the Colorado Victims Advocates who have been instrumental in our recovery and helping with funds, the staff of GLAAD have been simply amazing in helping me share my voice, and I appreciate everyone here today for being willing to hear my story. I can't thank you all of enough for your time and kindness.

The hate rhetoric needs to stop now. Rhetoric that makes people "less than" for being different. Rhetoric that threatens to silence what sports we can play, what bathrooms we can use, how I define my family, and who I can marry! Every American, especially those elected to positions of power, has a responsibility and a choice to use their words consciously. Hate starts with speech. The hateful rhetoric we've heard from some elected leaders in positions of power spurred the horrific shooting we saw at Club Q. We need elected leaders to demonstrate language that leads to love and understanding, not hate and fear. I urge LGBTQ Americans and allies to join together today as one community. Hateful people want to drive us back into closets and to live our lives in fear, but we cannot be afraid. No bullets will stop us from being proud of who we are or will injure the support and love that exist in our community.