Escape From Home: *LGBT Seeking Asylum in the U.S.*

By

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Claudino Weber was nine years old when he realized he was different. He had feminine mannerisms and he participated in activities that involved staying inside or cooking. His free time consisted of playing with girls exclusively. The year was 1980 in Brazil, and these characteristics being shown in a little boy were unacceptable, as they were, and still are, in more than 70 countries around the world.

In over 35 percent – or almost 80 out of the world's 196 independent countries, a person can be imprisoned for being part of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender) community according to the first United Nations report on the state of LGBT human rights. In nearly 10 percent of those countries, the punishment is the death penalty. What is a young, gay man like Claudino to do after years of torment and fear?

Political asylum is the protection granted by a nation to someone who has left his or her native country as a political refugee. Countries that provide asylum give shelter and protection from the dangers people face in their home countries. Every year, countless individuals escape their homelands in search of a place that will grant them this kind of security. According to the official website of the United States Department of Justice, over 40,000 people applied for asylum in the United States in 2014. While they don't specify how many of those applicants identified their reason for seeking asylum as being a part of the LGBT community, of that total number of applicants, less than 9,000 were granted the asylum they sought.

Claudino and several others like him are currently in the United States awaiting their fate when it comes to whether or not they will be granted political asylum. Their paths have led them here and they have since faced even more challenges in hopes of achieving happiness and safety.

Since 1994, the U.S. Department of Justice has allowed individuals who are persecuted because of their sexual orientation to seek sanctuary in the United States.

With no other options, Claudino told me during a recent interview at his house in Connecticut, he became one of those hopeful asylum seekers, escaping the confines of Brazil, a place that had punished him for nearly three decades.

Before he was 8 years old and before any mental abuse, he suffered physically at the hands of his father.

"He would beat me hard across the back of my legs and on my behind, using his hands, a belt, or sometimes electrical cords – I now have a scar there," Claudino described. "Every time I see the scar, I am reminded of the pain and fear."

The fear only intensified when he began fifth grade in Barra Bonita at a much larger middle school where he became even more vulnerable. Once his peers began to notice his differences and inability to kick a ball the way boys his age were expected to, the bullying began.

"The other kids often said things like, 'He doesn't know anything, he is a *bichinha*,'" Claudino said, explaining that the Portuguese word translates to 'sissy.' "They also called me a 'viado,' which means queer. I heard these two words over and over throughout my life in Brazil."

Classes that required displays of athleticism weren't the only classes in school where Claudino was humiliated. His math teacher recognized his lack of typical "masculinity" and ignored him in class, only addressing him when given a chance to ridicule him in front of his peers.

While working on a family farm after school and on weekends, he was constantly teased by the other male employees for the way he walked and talked. A man in his twenties was the worst of them all. He introduced Claudino at the tender age of 11 to the kind of abuse that many LGBT youth and asylum seekers face.

“He raped me at least once a month over a period of about two years,” Claudino recalled, “telling me I deserved to suffer because I was a bichinha, not a real man.”

This older man wasn’t the only one to take advantage of a pre-teen Claudino. The very same year, a neighbor in his twenties whom Claudino regularly saw at church, began to abuse him.

“He started forcing me to have sex with him,” said Claudino, “then he passed me on to his younger brother… and then to their youngest brother.”

The brothers convinced Claudino that no one would believe him if he told the truth. The closest police were more than 12 miles away and Claudino feared that even if he were to make it to them, he would be met with more harsh treatment and laughter.

Terrified of the consequences of revealing the abuse, Claudino never said a word. Threats to ‘out’ him to his community and family, especially his abusive father, were enough to keep him quiet. Even when he began to suffer painful rectal bleeding, the repeated rapes were kept a secret.

After completing eighth grade, Claudino left Barra Bonita for a nearby town called Tres Barras, moving in with a family who were friends of his parents. In exchange for living expenses, he worked in their family restaurant after school. Still, Claudino wasn’t safe.

The family had five children, three of which were boys who made it known through violence that their house was no place for *‘viados.’* It was another year of living in fear.

The very next year, Claudino moved to São Ludgero, his birthplace, where he found a construction job while he lived with his uncle to finish high school. While it may have been a different home, school, and job, Claudino felt no safer as the abuse stayed the same. He had the misfortune of finding a job where a relentless school bully was a coworker. He threatened to tell

everyone of Claudino's sexual orientation if he refused to have sex with him. He raped Claudino about once a month for two years, sometimes even taking the assault behind the house Claudino shared with his uncle, aunt and cousins. He knew he couldn't stay there much longer.

Claudino moved in with a coworker with whom he felt he had a trusting relationship. He was proven to have been naïve when one night, during a party his new roommate was hosting, he allowed a heavyset man to come into Claudino's room and attack him. He raped him as the party went on in the next room and when he finished, Claudino could hear the laughter from beyond the wall. As soon as he could, Claudino left and moved in with another friend of his, a female friend.

Claudino worked with his roommate's male cousin. Once Claudino's position changed and this man became his boss, they became friends. One night after work, Claudino agreed to grab a burger with his boss and allowed him to walk him home afterwards.

"As we were sitting in the kitchen, he asked me if I was gay," Claudino remembered. "When he asked the question, I was kind of paralyzed, but I thought he was a nice guy, my friend. I told him yes, I was gay."

Claudino's boss proceeded to grab him, demand to know where his bedroom was, pull him inside and rape him. Using his job title as leverage, he raped Claudino twice more. Afraid that if he did not do as he was told, he would be fired, Claudino continued his streak of being tortured in silence.

It was 1989, Claudino was barely 18 years old and more than half a dozen men had raped him more than 50 times. When his father died in December of that year, Claudino felt a sense of yearning rather than grief.

“I remember going to the cemetery to visit my father’s grave, looking to the sky and asking God why he was the one who died, while I was suffering,” Claudino said. “I wanted to be the one who died.”

Due to the sensitive nature of seeking political asylum and the uncertainty of pending cases, speaking to asylum applicants is a challenge for anyone not legally involved. In spite of that, I was fortunate enough to receive two compelling stories from an extremely helpful resource. I received these stories written in the asylum seekers’ own words from Pastor Judy Hanlon of the LGBT Asylum Support Task Force. She had each of their affidavits from their hearings in her possession and assured me that the following stories are accurate and could be published with the use of pseudonyms.

Susan was born about 4,500 miles away from Claudino in Nigeria in 1987. After her mother died during childbirth, she was left alone with her father. Unlike Claudino’s, Susan’s childhood and relationship with her father was typically healthy and happy.

“I went to school and loved it, and would come home to supper with my father,” Susan said.

While it was not uncommon for fathers to be less than affectionate with their children, Susan never doubted her father loved her and she even expressed her feelings of safety having him as her protector.

When she was sent to a boarding school in order to get a good education, Susan began to explore her sexual orientation. That exploration led to a discovery of her growing attraction to women.

“In my dreams, I imagined sharing my life with a woman,” Susan recalled, “but I knew that was impossible in Nigeria.”

She was anything but naïve, as the bullying began almost as soon as she began to identify as a lesbian, even if it was only on the inside.

After she graduated from high school, Susan’s father began to pressure his daughter to marry. Every possible husband he brought home for her was met with excuses.

“The first man – I just said I didn’t like him,” Susan said. “The second one, I told my father I disagreed with his religion.”

His daughter’s excuses didn’t satisfy or deter him. Susan’s father continued to push harder. She realized that because she was his only child, she was his only chance at having grandchildren. He also expected to hand her off to another man who would be able to support her financially, since he couldn’t be expected to do it forever.

When she could no longer think of reasons why her father’s potential suitors were no good for her, she finally confessed to the man who had raised her and protected her for her entire life that she was a lesbian.

“He beat me for the very first time in my life,” Susan said. “I was heartbroken.”

Susan ran to her grandmother’s house and found a job, but the sense of security didn’t last long. Her father found her and told her boss that she was a lesbian and she was subsequently fired. She came to terms with the fact that having an honest discussion with her father was her only chance at being able to live her life as she was created to live it. She wanted him to let her go.

“It was then that the worst thing in my life happened.” Susan began.

Her father imprisoned her in his home. Late one night, she said, two men came into her bedroom where she was locked away, and raped her. Her father had ordered this to happen – a devastating fact Susan realized after she found there was no forced entry into her home.

In Nigeria, many believe that a lesbian will change if she has sex with a man. According to current Nigerian legislation, just witnessing a homosexual marriage or partaking in a public show of same sex affection could lead to a 10-year prison sentence. This same idea is shared by other countries where homosexuality is illegal, sometimes even having government officials carry out what they call "corrective rape."

"I finally escaped [and] broke my foot as I jumped out the window," Susan recalled.

Six hours of bus rides and walking on her broken foot finally got her back to her grandmother's house where she soon discovered she was pregnant.

"I will let you imagine the horror, sadness and pain that I went through," Susan said.

Having her son Jacob was difficult. According to Susan, poor, single women in Nigeria are treated with anything but respect and she woke up after her emergency C-section feeling horrible and degraded, much like she had felt the night Jacob was conceived against her will.

A year and a half later, Susan and her infant son were left homeless after the death of her grandmother.

"In desperation, I left my son at my father's house without a conversation," Susan admitted.

To this day, Susan has yet to see Jacob again.

Armed with the determination to be reunited with her son, Susan immediately began looking for work. An ad for what looked like a travel agency led her to Turkey where she was

promised a job. Instead, she was forced into being a domestic slave to a wealthy family for two years.

She suffered as she cared for three adults, three children, and a 120-pound dog of which she was terrified.

“The sad thing is that I watched those people love that dog, while they treated me worse than a dog,” Susan remembered.

Jean was known as a king of a large community in his native country of Cameroon in West Africa. As the owner of a building that housed a cyber café, snack bar, grocery store and electronics shop, he was a very successful businessman. He was married to a woman and a father to several children. He was also – behind closed doors – a homosexual man.

“In my country, the government does not like gay people,” Jean said. “Most of us get married and have children as a cover for our sexuality.”

Along with having a wife and kids, Jean kept a boyfriend on the side in hiding.

“That [homosexual relationship] was discovered in 2005 and my boyfriend and I were put into jail and beaten and tortured,” Jean said.

The men were told they were not “real men” and were forced to suffer through their penises being mutilated by the prison guards. Jean’s boyfriend did not survive the brutal attack.

Claiming to have learned his lesson and assuring the authorities he had changed his ways, Jean was allowed to return to his business. After some time, he began a new relationship with a man that he thought no one knew about. Returning home from a visit abroad in June of 2012 proved that he was unfortunately very wrong.

“I heard that the building in which I had my business and offices was being burned down,” Jean said. “Someone sent me pictures of it burning.”

Jean looked at the pictures in shock as he realized not one firefighter or police officer was coming to help. There was no rescue attempt being made whatsoever.

“People walked up and down the street watching my building burn to the ground without any intervention.” Jean lamented.

It had become public that Jean was gay.

Upon returning to his home, Jean pleaded with the mayor and assured him that there must have been some mistake. He lied and said he didn’t have a boyfriend. The mayor gave him permission to rebuild if he was able to raise the money.

Two months after Jean was able to find the money and have his building rebuilt, the same mayor who had given him the go ahead put in an order to have it demolished.

Because he was becoming physically ill due to the stress of his home life raising his blood pressure, Jean booked a flight for the U.S. in order to receive treatment. Deciding to meet up with his boyfriend to say goodbye before his trip was one decision I’m sure he wishes he could take back.

“We did not know we were being spied on and followed,” Jean said.

The two men were found and attacked, as authorities attempted to repeat history.

“My boyfriend escaped through the window while I was caught and driven to the police station where I received heavy beating and torture during two days,” Jean recalled. “My spine was broken, my feet were beaten and I [had] wounds in my body.”

After collaborating with a lone police officer some time later, Jean succeeded in breaking out of the police station.

“Later,” Jean started, “I learned that that policeman was killed because I escaped.”

Although Claudino, Susan, and Jean have experienced similar journeys filled with torture, persecution, and feelings of hopelessness that led them to the U.S., their experiences of getting to America and the events that transpired following their arrival, are very different.

While attending college and after graduation, living in Brazil, Claudino practiced behavior that he felt would help keep him safe.

“I rarely went out by myself,” Claudino explained, “and when I did, I went to great lengths to hide who I was; I tried to act as ‘masculine’ as I could.”

Claudino soon came to terms with the fact that existing in a world that required him to pretend to be something he’s not could hardly be adding to his quality of life.

“I knew I had to leave Brazil if I was ever going to have a normal life,” Claudino said.

In the summer of 1998, Claudino contacted a friend who had migrated to the United States after she promised to help him find a place to stay. That September, Claudino flew to New York to start a new life, hopefully out of hiding.

Susan was accompanying the family she served on their vacation to California. She recognized the trip to the U.S. as her chance to escape her life of servitude.

“I had, by luck, arrived in America; a single, poor, gay woman,” described Susan. “I had to fight for my freedom here.”

Susan found a Greyhound bus station with the little bit of money she had worked tirelessly to save, and requested a ticket to Boston, MA, a place she had barely ever heard of.

“I did not know if it was a state, a city, an island,” Susan said, “Something whispered to me and said, ‘Boston is where you need to go.’”

Jean too found himself heading to Massachusetts, using whatever money he had on him to fly to Worcester where he planned to live with a distant relative.

People like these three asylum seekers couldn't always have found solace inside U.S. borders. Until 1990, the United States barred LGBT individuals from entering the country, as they were included under the 'mentally or physically defective' section of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1917.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 kept the same guidelines using similar language stating that 'aliens afflicted with psychopathic personality, epilepsy, or mental defects,' were not allowed entry. At the time, the U.S. Public Health Service included LGBT immigrants within that category.

An amendment made to the act in 1965 contained even more explicit language. The document excluded 'sexually deviant' foreigners from entering the United States. This remained law until Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1990. Four years later, the U.S. officially became one of only 14 countries to allow LGBT people the right to seek asylum inside its borders.

The Center for American Progress' LGBT Undocumented Immigrants Report lays it out by recognizing the fact that people seeking asylum have a justified reason to fear staying in their home countries. Their livelihoods are at stake and they risk facing criminal penalties, imprisonment, and even the threat of honor killings or execution based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

After Susan's cross- country journey of over 3,000 miles, she approached South Station in Boston. Unexpectedly, she heard a woman speaking her native language from back home in Nigeria.

"In terror and desperation," Susan described, "I walked over to her and began to beg for my life."

Susan asked the woman if she could have mercy and open her home to a perfect stranger with nowhere to turn. The woman told Susan that she would have to ask her husband first. If he agreed, he would be back to pick her up.

After being hurt by men many times before, Susan now had to stand waiting for a strange man to come and hopefully save her life.

"I stood in the same spot for six hours," said Susan. "I did not go to the bathroom or eat."

Susan stayed put. Finally, a man walked toward her in the train station and asked her name.

"I am here today because that woman's husband returned."

Having arrived in the U.S., Jean found that the Cameroonian government had taken all of the money he had saved back home. He retreated to a church to pray to God for his family, his safety and his freedom.

In both the cases of Susan and Jean, they discovered the LGBT Asylum Support Task Force in Worcester, Mass.

The LGBT Asylum Support Task Force is a group of volunteers who provide support for those who are seeking political asylum in the United States based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

When the Task Force members discovered that Jean was penniless, they voted to financially support him. They provided jackets, gloves and boots for the cold North American months he had never before experienced. He, along with several other asylum seekers, gets a monthly check for food, transportation and even a cell phone.

After moving from couch to couch of many Africans in the area, Susan's attorney told her about the task force and since then, her life has significantly changed.

"I feel safe, I feel respected, accepted, and loved," Susan said.

Not only would the asylum seekers have legal battles to face, but also as Anthony Crisci, executive director of the Triangle Community Center in Stamford, CT says, there is a difference between legal equality and what he refers to as 'lived' equality.

The Triangle Community Center is an organization that aims to provide a safe place for the LGBT community of Fairfield County. Regardless of a person's legal status, Crisci feels that everyone deserves a basic set of human rights that affords them respect amongst the people in their community.

"I think having a government that supports LGBT rights is very important," Crisci said. "Our mission is to help the LGBT community in Fairfield County to achieve lived equality."

I met with Claudino in his Stamford, Conn. apartment in early February. He was recovering from a mild heart attack he had two weeks earlier, but graciously invited me into his home – still decorated for Christmas – to sit and talk with me about his journey and life today.

I learned of Susan and Jean's stories and struggles through The Reverend Judith K. Hanlon, director of the LGBT Asylum Support Task Force. She is known affectionately among

clients as Pastor Judy. Like Jean, many of the Task Force's clients find them through the Hawden Park Congregational Church United Church of Christ. The church's members are the program's primary supporters and they also receive funding from colleges, foundations, other faith groups as well as the general community.

According to their website, the organization is currently supporting 10 individuals in Worcester, MA, and has assisted more than 80 asylum seekers since their inception in 2008. While many cases are still pending due to the prolonged legal process, their homepage boasts that the task force has helped 24 people get granted asylum.

Hanlon described the layers of difficulty for LGBT immigrants in the U.S. For many, it is the first time they have been able to openly express their sexuality – assuming they are able to find a safe place to stay. More often than not, when a person immigrates to America, they end up staying with relatives or people from their country in order to get on their feet in somewhat of a familiar environment. LGBT immigrants however, often cannot stay with their own countrypersons unless they choose to remain closeted.

"This morning, I picked up a lesbian from Billerica, Massachusetts," Hanlon told me. "She had been watching the children of a Ugandan family for no money since she arrived last August. The woman who was hosting this young lesbian found her cell and saw texts to her girlfriend back home. She turned off her phone, she told her that she could no longer live with their family, and took $1,000 of hard saved money that would have helped get an attorney."

When the task force picked her up, the woman was scared to death of her children's father back in Uganda finding out about her sexual orientation from her hosts. Terrified of never being able to see her children again, she handed over the $1,000 willingly.

“I call that theft,” Hanlon said. “Privacy, confidentiality and deep fear [are] their surround sound. That is why we exist.”

Claudino Weber didn’t have such support. His legal battles were fought largely on his own and only after extensive emotional and financial turmoil.

“Although I felt safe and confident letting people know that I was gay, I did not tell anyone about my history,” Claudino admitted. “When people asked me why I had left Brazil, I told them that I wanted to immerse myself in a different language and a new culture; I did not tell anyone the real reasons. It was too painful to think about my history, so I hid it from myself and from everyone.”

Having buried the painful memories of his past in the deep layers of his mind, Claudino enrolled in English classes at Westchester Community College, started a job making deliveries for the Good Bread Bakery in Greenwich, Conn. and a second job washing dishes at St. Moritz Bakery also in Greenwich. Any opportunities to fill the hours were seized, as Claudino could not cope with the struggles of his past.

Avoidance tactics wouldn’t last forever, however, and Claudino realized he could not remain in the country illegally. In 2001, a friend referred Claudino to an attorney who promised to file a Labor Certification application for his job at the Bakery. Due to it being filed with the Immigration and Naturalization Service instead of the Department of Labor, he said the application was rejected. Even though the attorney never asked him for the details of his past, Claudino admitted he probably wouldn’t have been able to face his fears and be honest anyway.

More years passed until 2005 when another immigrant from Brazil recommended Claudino to a friend who she said had connections with immigration services. Their hopes were that this woman would help them get their green cards and release them from their illegal status.

When Claudino and his friend met with her at her home in New Jersey, he paid her $13,000 and she had him fill out photocopies of forms with the immigration service's insignia on them. He was assured he would receive a green card in about six months.

Without any copies of the forms or receipts for the money he had paid, Claudino waited patiently, thinking he had found a solution to his problem without having to delve into his past torment.

After many attempts to contact his supposed savior and only reaching her a couple of times over the next year, she began to threaten Claudino and his friend with deportation should they continue to call her. Realizing that he and his friend had been swindled, Claudino gave up. They didn't go to the police or anyone else for fear of their own persecution.

Several years later, they learned that the woman, known as Rosa Blake or "Rosa Vareiro", was under investigation for fraud. According to her indictment, she was charged with wire fraud, false personation of an officer or employee of the United States, and transacting in criminal proceeds. The document outlines the means by which she carried out her scheme and defrauded dozens of victims of at least $700,000, which she used to pay for, among other things, "lavish gambling trips to Atlantic City" and the monthly payments on a luxury BMW vehicle. This went on until mid-2009. Only recently was she convicted of immigration fraud and sentenced to seven years in prison.

It wasn't until April of 2007 when a more trustworthy immigration attorney informed Claudino that he would not be eligible for a green card based on employment. The subject of

seeking asylum was brought up for the very first time, but Claudino denied having any fear of returning to Brazil. He once again put his illegal status in the back of his mind.

Attorney Jason Dzubow started his own practice at the end of 2003. Since he had been involved with refugee issues since 1990 – well before he became a lawyer – he chose to have his practice focus primarily on cases involving asylum.

"A lot of times, there's a coming out story with the family that usually doesn't end well," Dzubow said.

Dzubow is not naïve to the countless struggles that asylum seekers face.

The law dictates that asylum seekers must file for asylum within one year of entering the United States according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services on the official website of the Department of Homeland Security. This requirement has prevented many individuals from seeking affirmative asylum relief, according to Dzubow.

Dzubow doesn't think he's ever had an LGBT case that was filed within the one-year requirement. He argued that there is no possible way for a person to know about the rule unless someone tells them or they do their own research. According to him, more often than not, a case can take five years.

The one year filing deadline has resulted in the denial of asylum protections to thousands of otherwise legitimate refugees, as outlined by Crosby Burns, Ann Garcia and Philip E. Wolgin in their report, "Living in Dual Shadows – LGBT Undocumented Immigrants."

One study conducted by the National Immigrant Justice Center, Human Rights First, and Pennsylvania State Law's Center for Immigrants' Rights, found that in approximately 46 percent

of cases where the filing deadline is an issue, missing the deadline was the only reason cited by the Board of Immigration Appeals as justification for denial of asylum.

While Dzubow says that the one-year issue is by far the most difficult, it isn't the only struggle that plagues asylees in their quest toward legal status.

Since a person's sexual orientation and gender identity is not always readily apparent, LGBT asylum seekers are at risk of having their cases dismissed because they fail to conform to stereotypes about what it means to be a gay man or lesbian woman, many of which can be taken as offensive or downright false.

One incident documented by Immigration Equality involved an Albanian lesbian who had been threatened with gang rape to "cure" her of her lesbianism and was denied asylum because she was young, attractive, and single.

Due to these issues, in the fall of 2011, the Department of Homeland Security created a training module on LGBT issues that is mandatory for all officers adjudicating refugee and asylum claims.

Threats of serious abuse and violence are common in almost every case of LGBT asylum claims. Like Claudino, many refugees have faced such traumatic sexual abuse that they are unable and or unwilling to think or speak about their pasts in their countries.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Guidelines on International Protection for claims based on sexual orientation outlines that, "It is important that decisions on LGBTI ["I" standing for intersex] refugee claims are not based on superficial understandings of the experiences of LGBTI persons, or on erroneous, culturally inappropriate or stereotypical assumptions."

What this basically means is that people involved in handling LGBT asylum cases must never defer to their preconceived notions about what they believe it means or looks like to identify as LGBT.

Article One of the United Declaration of Human Rights provides that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Article Two declares, "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration," and that all people, including LGBTI individuals, are entitled to enjoy the protection provided by international human rights law on the basis of equality and non-discrimination.

When a person like Claudino comes to the U.S., they leave everyone and everything behind. Attorney Dzubow describes this isolation as yet another tribulation asylum seekers face. Immigrants with all kinds of identities usually come to this country and stay with members of their family or people with culturally similar backgrounds. In Claudino's case and many others, family and people from their countries are the exact groups they're escaping.

"If you're gay and you're here and you don't want to be associated with your own community because you don't want to be 'out' to them, who are you going to associate with if it's not your own community?" Dzubow asked.

As an attorney based out of Washington D.C., Dzubow is also the operator of The Asylumist- a blog devoted to asylum in the U.S. In December 2011, Washingtonian magazine recognized Dzubow as one of the best immigration lawyers in the Washington, DC area.

Dzubow has clients from places like Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Syria and Iraq and, according to him the majority of his cases involving LGBT people have been successful. With a number of

cases from Egypt, Dzubow prides himself on them all being successful with only a couple still pending.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees states that discrimination, hatred, and violence can impact detrimentally on the applicant's capacity to present a claim. This is most definitely the case for Claudino Weber.

When Claudino first heard about the possibility of applying for asylum based on sexual orientation, he refused to pursue it. He was still completely unable to discuss his previous experiences in Brazil and his fear of returning. In spite of all this, a friend and member of the Board of Directors at the Triangle Community Center named Marc Smith finally convinced Claudino to consult with an attorney specializing in issues like his.

Marc hopes that someday the community center operates itself into oblivion, as there will be no more people like Claudino struggling with their identities.

"We do anything from stuff envelopes, run programs, write checks for a certain amount of money," Marc described. "We do anything that's got to get done."

Urging Claudino to get serious legal help was just another part of Marc's job description.

"When I met with [the attorney] I explained that I was interested in applying for asylum," Claudino said. "When he asked me for my reasons, I froze, unable to discuss my past or my fears."

Claudino agreed to write his autobiography in lieu of explaining everything in person. He promised to have it done within one week. This was a promise he would break.

"I could not face the idea of writing down my story," Claudino admitted. "I was afraid that beginning to write down my memories would take me back emotionally to the awful experiences I had come here to escape. I could not face the shame, fear, and humiliation again."

Another year passed without any progress and it was suddenly 2011. That September would be the 13th anniversary of Claudino's arrival in America. His 40th birthday was swiftly approaching as well as the expiration date on his driver's license.

"While this may seem like a small thing, losing my driver's license was the trigger that made me realize how tenuous my situation was," Claudino said. "I was truly living in the shadows and I couldn't take it anymore."

It was time. Claudino knew that he must face his past in order to have a future.

"For the first time ever, I wrote down all of the things that had happened to me; all of the abuse that I survived in Brazil because of my sexual orientation," Claudino said. "It was a very painful experience, but I knew I had no choice."

The United Nations presents a straightforward set of guidelines for anyone involved in LGBT asylum cases in order to minimize the re-traumatization of the client. The majority of those guidelines include the language necessary for all those involved to handle each case with the caution and care it requires.

According to the guidelines, an open and reassuring environment is crucial to establishing trust with a client and all interviewers and decision makers must maintain an objective approach. Conclusions should never be reached based on stereotypical, inaccurate or inappropriate perceptions of LGBTI individuals. The document plainly states, "There are no

universal characteristics or qualities that typify LGBTI individuals any more than heterosexual individuals."

Among other things, the guidelines make clear that requests made by applicants in relation to the gender of interviewers or interpreters should be considered favorably and that specific procedural safeguards apply in the case of child applicants such as processing on a priority basis and the appointment of a qualified guardian and legal representative.

Even after getting his story on paper, Claudino was completely unable to assist in preparing his case verbally. The journey was far from over. His attorneys suggested that he consult a psychotherapist, something he probably should have done the moment he escaped his torture.

"It took months for me to develop enough trust in [my doctor] and my attorneys to be able to prepare my application for asylum," Claudino said. After so many years of being betrayed by people I trusted – in Brazil and the United States – it was extremely difficult for me to establish the necessary level of trust."

Claudino resisted his doctor's suggestion of taking antidepressants due to the stigma that is attached to them. He wanted to gain strength on his own. As another anniversary in this country approached, he realized his depression began to worsen.

"I was having suicidal thoughts constantly," Claudino said. "There is a large stone wall along side Route 25 in Trumbull, CT which I passed every day on my way home. I planned how I could drive my car into the wall to end my life. I considered taking my life many times as I drove past that wall."

Due to the severity of the situation and Claudino's family history – both his grandfather and uncle having committed suicide when he was young – Claudino's doctor urged him to seek further help with a psychiatrist who could prescribe medication.

It was two months on antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication before Claudino could continue to prepare his application with his doctors and attorneys. He admits that without the assistance of both doctors and medication, it would have never been possible to submit his application for asylum. He would still be hiding.

Susan Contee, Jean Ibori, and Claudino Weber came to the United States with extraordinarily different pasts, but similar goals.

"I know that I will get an education and work hard," Susan said. "I know that I have a bright future."

She isn't the only one who has found solace in the U.S. According to Hanlon, Susan and Jean have both received work permits and are thus able to work many hours every week in the healthcare industry.

"The night after I received my first monthly check, I slept like a baby for the first time since I left my country," Jean said. "Months ago, I could not tell my story without tears. When I get my papers in the USA and have legal status, I will rebuild my business and help my children to be educated."

The LGBT Freedom Asylum Network website provides a list of groups and organizations all over the country like the LGBT Asylum Support Task Force that provide direct material and housing support to LGBT asylum seekers.

Center Global at the DC Center in Washington, D.C. for example was established in 2013 and has since provided services to more than 15 individuals. The First Unitarian-Universalist Society of San Francisco, CA has what it calls a 'Guardian Group' that not only provides support in navigating government agencies but also "unconditional friendship" to the refugees seeking their help.

The Freedom House in Detroit, MI provides temporary housing for survivors of persecution from around the world seeking legal shelter. Their mission is to, "Uphold a fundamental American principle, one inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty: To provide safety for those "yearning to breathe free."

While applications are still pending and nothing is finished yet, Claudino and the others have faith. Some find it in the Hawden Park Church; others, like Claudino, find it in their newfound sense of security and or careers.

Claudino will have been in the U.S. for 17 years this coming September.

As the President of Claudino Weber Productions, Claudino specializes in home staging as well as wedding and other event productions, ranging in size from intimate to large scale.

"I cannot complain," Claudino spoke softly as we sat in the living room of his Connecticut apartment. I sat in a designer chair while he stretched out on his couch resting his feet in slippers on top of the glass coffee table between us. "I have achieved so much professionally that I wouldn't have been able to have done in Brazil. This country offers you so much more opportunity and you can be yourself and respected for who you are. I live a true life."

He feels very fortunate to have never gone a day without work in this country using his many talents for event planning, decorating and serving as a private chef. He is finally comfortable in his skin demanding to be treated as a human being.

“Don’t treat me like a piece of garbage or a piece of shit,” Claudino said, looking at me confidently with his piercing blue eyes. “If you do, I don’t need you.”

“2017,” Claudino said, “Two more years until I become a citizen. Fingers crossed.”

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Interviews

- Claudino Weber – In Person Interview – January 13, 2015
- Marc Smith – In Person Interview – January 13, 2015
- Anthony Crisci- In Person Interview – January 30, 2015
- Sharita Gruberg – Email Interview – March 10, 2015
- Reverend Judith K. Hanlon – Email Interview(s) – March 10 & 11, 2015
- Jason Dzubow – Telephone Interview – March 26, 2015