
Spotlight on immigration issues involving gays

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Stories about immigration are common, but stories about gay immigrants are less common, and journalists covering these issues may be entering uncharted waters, panelists said at a session titled "Double Discrimination: LGBT Immigrants in the United States" on Saturday.

Samuel Toba, an Immigration Equality board member, captivated an audience of about 75 convention attendees with the problems gay bi-national couples face.

"Americans who fall in love with immigrants abroad quickly learn they can't bring them back," Toba said. "On the other hand, straight couples who meet just once can qualify for a visa."

Toba said gay and lesbian foreign nationals weren't officially allowed into the United States until 1990, and foreigners with HIV or AIDS are not eligible for green cards.

A video clip from the "O'Reilly Factor" featured Immigration Equality Executive Director Rachel Tiven explaining the importance of granting green cards and citizenship to the partners of U.S. citizens.

Toba used the Advocate newsmagazine to explain the dangers gays and lesbians face abroad and the problems they encounter seeking asylum in the United States.

"I thought [the plenary] was very useful," NLGJA member Yetu Robinson said. "Members [should] understand the issues of people seeking immigration or asylum who are LGBT."

Toba was joined by former reporter Clay Smith, director of the Texas Book Festival, and moderator Sergio Chapa, an Al Día reporter in Dallas.

To kick off the plenary, Chapa showed a video he directed about the struggles of Hispanic immigrants in Dallas as an example of how journalists can cover these issues.

Smith gave attendees an in-depth explanation of how he covered gay immigrants in a Dallas Observer article.

He recommended reporters learn Spanish and contact Hispanic organizations before embarking on what can be a complicated issue. He cited the reluctance of many illegal immigrants to say anything that could jeopardize their status in their communities and this country as a possible road block for journalists.

But he stressed the importance of these stories.

"Immigration isn't really covered in the LGBT world at all," Smith said. "America has been overwhelmed by immigration stories, but there's still so many more to cover."