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# CONVERTING HATE TO HOPE

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By Hasani Malone

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An electrode was connected to the bicep of 17-year-old, Jimmy Lam, as he sat in his therapist's office. With a pornographic photo of a man in his hand, a small shock was given to him each time he felt aroused. First at his bicep -- then down to his breast, and later at his pelvis.

In 1975, Lam enrolled himself into gay conversion therapy at 17 years old in Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic. Now a writer in Florida, Lam works everyday on forgiving himself for undergoing "psychological torture," he said.

"[I grew up] in the small town called San Francisco de Macorís, which is northeast of the island in the middle of the valley. And it was horrible, I was bullied constantly since I was 8 years old," he said. "Everything was sissy, everywhere I went. The only place I don't remember being bullied was at home and in church."

Lam was born to a devout catholic mother, although while in grade school, he converted to Episcopalian in an effort to spite his mother whom he had a strained relationship with. He can remember the moment he realized he was gay, after being sexually assaulted by his god-brother's caretaker at 8 years old.

"It's called sexual abuse here, but I didn't know at the time. I had fun. He taught me all the tricks," Lam said. "[but] the first time I saw that word, I was doing a paper in high school for a class in geography and I went to the library. There was a book on sexual perversions, and that was the first time I read that I was a sexual pervert."

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2014 72 percent of people in Dominican Republic opposed same-sex marriage, while 25 percent supported it.



The cover of Jimmy Lam's poem, short stories and memories.

When Lam turned 17, after family and social pressure, he decided to enroll himself into conversion therapy through his university, Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, which offered psychotherapy.

The therapy last 11 months, coming to an end at the end of the year. Now, at 60 years old, Lam still feels the psychological effects of the failed therapy. Experiencing depression, constant anxiety, and sexual addictive behavior, he says he would do anything to end the psychological torture of conversion therapy.

"People think it's all about the sexual impulses, but basically what they did was they took my life and broke it into piece," Lam said. "The electricity was not that bad but all of a sudden, I didn't have hobbies, I didn't have friends because I had to do whatever he said for me to get cured."

"It's not just the sexual impulse, it [affects] the whole universe that surrounds you."

Lam joins the over 700,000 Americans who have been subjected to conversion therapy at some point in their life. According to a study conducted by The Williams Institute, only 8 percent of Americans believe that conversion therapy can change a person's sexual orientation, although it has been denounced by nearly all major medical and psychological associations in America.

As of January of 2018, nine states, the district of Columbia and 32 localities enacted laws that would ban the treatment for youth. And Lam is hoping to see the ban take place throughout Florida.

In the state of Florida out of 282 cities and the 410 municipalities, only 22 of these areas have enacted a ban on conversion therapy treatments for minors; but many LGBTQ advocates are asking for a state-wide ban on the procedure.

Rand Hoch, a leading crusader for the fight against conversion therapy in Palm Beach County, was one of the main forces to have the therapy banned in the area. As a former gay rights activist and the first openly gay judge appointed to the judicial bench in Florida, he found himself at the center of the fight.

"Over the last nearly five or six years we've received calls, mostly from middle school and high school kids, saying that their parents were putting them through conversion therapy and they didn't know who to turn to," Hoch said. "The reality is, being LGBTQ is not a problem and it's not something that should be fixed; [it's] clearly not something that can be fixed. It's just like any other trait that you might have. I'm tall, I'm right-handed, I'm also gay. And these are things that are just part of what make me myself."

"There is proof is that being put through conversion therapy is psychologically harmful. It causes a wide range of problems for the children," Hoch said.

Hoch, who works with the Palm Beach County Human Rights Council, helped draft an email to both the city and county mayors and argued that the treatment was harmful, as well as illegal under the fair trade laws, he said. After a series of hearings and heated debates with well-known, conversion therapist Julie Hamilton, a ban on the therapy was enacted in Palm Beach County.

Now if an individual is caught practicing conversion therapy, they can face a daily \$200 fine for each session that the therapy continues.

According to the Orlando Political Observer, 71 percent of voters believe that conversion therapy should be illegal, while 11 percent want to keep it legal. The last 18 percent remain uncertain.

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Of that 71 percent, Jimmy Lam stands proudly, embracing who he is after a long fight. In his new book *Sexile = Sexilo*, Lam details the horrors of conversion therapy through poetry -- which he says is cathartic and helps him through his own psychological trauma.

"I don't live in the [Dominican] diaspora. I live in the sexile. I came here because of who I have sex with," Lam said. "It was not a pair of jeans. It was not food; I had that over there. I came here for freedom."

"Being gay is an identity you embrace; it's not just clothes that you wear, or the way you cut your hair or that you have [sex] with other men...it's when you accept that, and you live through that and you take a stand for that," Lam said.

When asked what his biggest hope for the future is, tears flowed out of his eyes. His husband slid a box of tissues to him from across the room in their small design studio.

"That we don't have to live the kind of life we live," Lam said. "I really hope that liberation comes at last."

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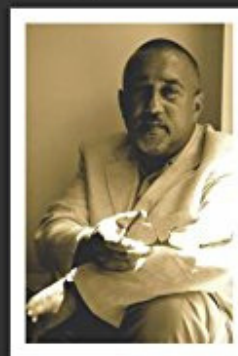


Photo by: Hyonseo Kwon

**Jimmy Lam** writes poetry, short stories, cultural and international political analysis and essays. He studied Medicine, Political Science and Modern Languages & International Relations at the UASD and City College in NY. Presently, Jimmy alternates between writing and the decorative arts/modern antiques. His work has appeared in the Internet (Cielo Naranja.com & Dominican Today.com) in Santo Domingo and in New York. His literature appeared in several anthologies: *Antología de la Literatura Gay* (2004); *The Best of Panic* (2010); *Mujeres de Palabra* (2010), *Development, Sexual Rights and Global Governance* (2010) & *From Macho to Mariposa* (2011). *Of 2 Worlds* (a video about his life) was screened in 2012 at NYU. After a long sexile that took him through Montreal, Oxford and New York he finally settled in Florida where he continues to write his interminable memoirs: *Neurosis of my Own*.



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