

Testimony of
Mr. Keith Bradkowski

September 4, 2003

Testimony of Keith A. Bradkowski
Before the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Constitution
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Good afternoon Honorable Chairman and Members of the subcommittee.

My name is Keith Bradkowski and I am a resident of California. I've been a registered nurse since 1983 and have worked for many years in hospital administration.

It was on a Tuesday, almost exactly two years ago, that I received a call from American Airlines notifying me that I had lost my life partner, Jeff Collman. Jeff was an American Airlines flight attendant who volunteered to work an extra trip on September 11th. His flight was the first of four planes hijacked by terrorists that day. I know in my heart Jeff died with courage, trying to protect the passengers and crew.

The last time I spoke with Jeff - who was my soul mate of 11 years - was at about 2 a.m. Boston time on the morning of the 11th. He had awoken in the middle of the night and uncharacteristically called me to say "I love you and can't wait to get home." I believe he must have had some premonition of the events to come, and I feel blessed to have had that last moment with him.

Jeff was the ultimate caregiver -- I experienced his caring by the trail of post-it notes he left for me every time he went on a trip. His last note, still on my bathroom mirror, greets me every morning with a "Guess who loves you?"

Jeff and I had exchanged rings and we were married in our hearts. Legally, it was another matter entirely.

After his death, I was faced not only with my grief over losing Jeff - who was indeed my better half - but with the painful task of proving the authenticity of our relationship over and over again. With no marriage license to prove our relationship existed, even something as fundamental as obtaining his death certificate became a monumental task.

And that was just the beginning.

During the years we were together, Jeff paid taxes and had social security deducted from his paycheck like all other Americans do. But without a civil marriage license, I am denied benefits that married couples and their families receive as a matter of routine.

Jeff died without a will, which meant that while I dealt with losing him, I also had huge anxiety about maintaining the home we shared together. Without a marriage license to prove I was Jeff's next of kin, even inheriting basic household possessions became a legal nightmare.

Married couples have a legal safety net of rights and protections that gay Americans are currently denied. Until Jeff died, I had no idea just how vulnerable we were - where married couples have security and protection, gay couples are left without a net.

Like so many other gay Americans, my mourning and grief were compounded by the stress and anxiety of horrific legal uncertainty and confusion.

The terrorists who attacked this country killed people not because they were gay or straight - but because they were Americans. It is heart wrenching that our own government does not protect its citizens equally, gay and straight, simply because they are Americans.

Two years ago we were all united against the common threat of terrorism. Now, less than two years later I am sitting here and being told that my relationship was a threat to our country.

Jeff and I only sought to love and take care of each other. I do not understand why that is a threat to some people, and I cannot understand why the leaders of this country would hold a hearing on the best way to prevent that from happening.

In closing, I would like to read an excerpt from a letter that Jeff wrote to me on our last anniversary:

"Keith, we've been through much the past 11 years. Our lives haven't always been easy, but through it all, our undeniable love for each other has carried us through! I love you - don't ever forget that! When you're feeling lonely and I'm not home with you, just pull out this letter and read my words to you once again and know how much you will always mean to me! With loving thoughts of you now and forever, Jeff."

I truly believe I have learned the meaning of the phrase - Love is Eternal.

Thank you. I am honored to have had this chance to appear before you.