

Testimony of
Gordon Stewart

June 3, 2009

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United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

"The Uniting American Families Act:
Addressing Inequality in Federal Immigration Law"
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Chairman Leahy, and members of the Committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Gordon Stewart, and I am an American living abroad simply due to the fact that our country's immigration laws have forced me to leave the United States in order to be with my partner, Renato, the person I love.

I am here today because, like so many other Americans in similar situations, I believe it is imperative that we fix our broken immigration system, and specifically that it is long past time we treat lesbian and gay Americans and our families equally under the law. I traveled to be with you today from London where I work for Pfizer.

I am fortunate to have worked for more than 14 years for Pfizer. Pfizer is a company that recognizes domestic partnership. Unfortunately the US government does not recognize Renato, my partner of more than 9 years. For 2 ½ years, Renato lived with me in the US as a full-time student, studying English and pre-Law. He is a trained lawyer in Brazil. In June 2003, while enrolled in a full-time, accredited academic program in New York, he returned to Brazil for what we thought would be a routine second renewal of his student visa. The renewal was rejected and he has never been able to return to our home in the US. For weeks, I left his things exactly as they were the day he left, hoping that soon he would be able to come home. He never came back to the US.

Renato wanted to live and study in the United States. Yet because the immigration laws did not recognize him as my family member, nothing I could do would bring him back to our home.

So to be with Renato, I commuted to Brazil every other weekend for more than a year and a half. This commuting took a huge toll on me emotionally, physically and financially. Eventually, I was fortunate to find a position with Pfizer in the UK, where we can live together again. The UK government has recognized us as dependent partners and we both have the right to live and work in the UK. While we are grateful for this solution, it means separation from our family and friends, and puts significant limitations on each of our career opportunities. And we were forced to sell our apartment in New York.

The United States' discriminatory immigration laws have also affected my extended family. I am lucky to have five siblings. In August, I will attend my niece's wedding in California. It will be a

big family reunion but my partner will not be able to join us. Renato cannot even get a tourist visa to visit the US. Imagine what that means.

If I want to be with my family for important occasions such as weddings, graduations, Thanksgiving, Christmas and the recent baptism of my godchild, I have to travel alone and leave Renato in London. Or if we want to celebrate an important occasion together, it is usually the two of us alone, far away from our family and close friends.

Recently, when my sister was diagnosed with cancer, Renato could not travel with me to visit her and I could not spend as much time with her as I wanted because I live and work in London. That is the reality of our life together.

Last year, I reluctantly and sadly sold our family farm in Goshen, Vermont because I cannot vacation there with Renato. Our family had the farm from when I was 6 years old, and our parents both died and were buried there. Imagine what it is like to own a property to which you cannot travel with your partner. It is impossible to maintain a 19th century farmhouse from the other side of the Atlantic. That is the reality of American immigration law for couples like us.

I am deeply disappointed that my country has treated Renato this way and I am furious that we can not visit or live together in the US. Despite the fact that I am a tax-paying, law-abiding and voting citizen, I feel discrimination from my government.

Fortunately, my company, Pfizer, has been very supportive from that awful day when Renato's visa renewal request was rejected in 2003.

The UK has allowed both Renato and me to move there based on my temporary transfer from Pfizer. The UK recognizes permanent partners for immigration purposes as do 18 other countries. Renato has a permanent partner visa. The US should offer the same.

The decision to move to the UK was the best decision I could have made at the time. But I would like to be able to come home; I should have the right to come with my partner to visit or to live; but we can't. That is the reality of US immigration law.

Thousands of other lesbian and gay families are separated like we are. Unlike us, however, they do not have the support of a company like Pfizer to help find a solution to this impossible situation. The Uniting American Families Act needs to be passed now. I hope today's hearing will be a step in that direction.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Senator Leahy for the strong stand he has taken on supporting families like mine. Let me thank all the Senators for taking the time to listen to my story. I am the voice of many wonderful Americans who have been forced to make the difficult choice between family and partner and country and partner.

Allow me to add that my company, Pfizer, has earned, for the fifth consecutive year, the top rating of 100 percent in the 2009 Corporate Equality Index, an annual ranking published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation that evaluates businesses on their treatment of LGBT employees, investors and customers. Pfizer Chairman and CEO Jeff Kindler has said Pfizer supports its LGBT colleagues because "doing better in recruitment and retention, in understanding diverse markets and in making Pfizer a better place to work does ultimately drive

up our value." However, he said we mainly "support our LGBT colleagues because it is the right thing to do."

America also should support its LGBT citizens and families. Because it is indeed the right thing to do.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman.