

Human Rights Conversations Across Generations
Professor Ryan Thoreson episode
Transcript of edited conversation
Originally Released August 2026

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:04

Hi, welcome to our podcast, Human Rights, Conversations Across Generations. I'm Meredith Lockwood, founder of Lockwood Creative, a purpose-driven creative agency. And I'm here with my dad.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:16

And I'm Professor Bert Lockwood, the director of the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights at the University of Cincinnati College of Law.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:26

Together, we are your father-daughter co-hosts.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:29

For over 50 years, I've had a front-row seat to the evolution of international human rights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:35

And now, we're sharing that expertise with you by connecting to the powerful stories and insights of human rights voices from around the world.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:43

We bridge the past and the present, making complex human rights issues more approachable and understandable.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:50

So, pull up a chair and join our table as we speak with Nobel Peace Prize recipients, political leaders and the world's leading human rights scholars and activists.

Today, we are joined by Professor Ryan Thoreson, an associate professor at the University of Cincinnati College of Law and the deputy editor of the Human Rights Quarterly. It's especially meaningful to welcome Ryan because he and my dad now work alongside one another at UC. Before joining the faculty, Ryan spent over a decade at Human Rights Watch, where he worked extensively on LGBTQIA rights, children's rights, anti-trans discrimination, and queer family recognition around the world. He's also the author of Transnational LGBT activism, working for LGBT activism, working for sexual rights worldwide. In this episode, we explore the current legal and political landscape surrounding LGBT rights in the United States and globally, including democratic entrenchment, anti-trans legislation, conversion therapy, marriage equality, and the evolving role of courts and institutions in protecting our human rights. Please join me in welcoming Ryan to the show.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:13

Ryan, thank you so much for joining us here today. I love to get started. And I'm going to let my dad ask our first question.

Track 7 2:21

Yes. Fargo.

RYAN THORESON 2:23

Yes.

Track 7 2:23

did you grow up in Fargo?

RYAN THORESON 2:25

I did. Yeah. Born and raised in Fargo, North Dakota.

BERT LOCKWOOD 2:28

I suspect that there aren't too residents of Fargo that have ventured into international law.

RYAN THORESON 2:36

Probably a fair assumption. Liz Magill, who's now starting as dean at went to my high

Track 7 2:42

Oh, really?

RYAN THORESON 2:43

Yeah. So she was also on the debate team that I competed on. And so she is still kind of remembered in Fargo blazing that trail.

BERT LOCKWOOD 2:51

Oh, wow. Okay.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:52

Ryan, like growing up in Fargo?

RYAN THORESON 2:54

I always say it was a great place to grow up. So it was very, like, clean and safe and everything. And I grew up Catholic. So the Catholic church that went to as a was very involved in Catholic social justice teaching. So interestingly, growing up, you know, didn't hear a lot of the kind of culture war, anti-abortion, anti-gay stuff, but a lot of emphasis on, like, our sister parish in Chimbote, Peru, and the preferential option for the poor. So I grew up reading a lot of Catholic social justice theory as I got older. And I think that, more than a lot of things in Fargo, shaped my worldview and kind of got me thinking about some of these global issues, even in, like,

middle school and high school. And kind of that and the debate team kind of primed me to ask some of these questions when I got to college.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 3:41

Ryan, to stay kind of in your early in starting your pathway into human rights and queer rights. And I'm really excited that you're on our podcast where we can really center LGBTQIA plus rights. As a proud ally to the I'm really excited to pick your brain and learn from your expertise in the domestic and international space, particularly in such an evolving climate. In your early days, were there any experiences or perhaps mentors that helped lead you into the path that you're currently on?

RYAN THORESON 4:16

Yeah, definitely. So, when I went college, I wasn't out in high school, although I went to, debate camp and randomly my junior year, one the questions was mental health in, in the United States. And so our labs project that summer was to research, um, LGBT youth mental health. So I like came home my senior year of, of high school, like armed with all of this research about being a, a queer teenager in the United States and, know, what that means. And the risk factors and all of that. And so I, I felt like the, you know, best equipped teenager to, to come out to my parents, um, when I got back. and going to college, there weren't a lot of outlets for that my Catholic high school. There weren't a lot of opportunities to engage in, in queer activism. so going to college, that was kind of my entry into, to human rights work. I got really involved in LGBTQ advocacy on campus. and I was one of the co-chairs of the, the Harvard LGBTQ undergrad group. and, and in the process of doing that, it was, uh, a really exciting time to be in Massachusetts. I started my freshman year in 2003. and the Goodridge decision, uh, came down from the, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. And so I was, um, at the end of my freshman year, like at Cambridge City Hall at midnight when they opened early to hand out marriage licenses. And then, you know, the next four years, as an undergrad, were defined by this marriage fight in Massachusetts, where we were regularly going out to the state house and trying to prevent, Governor Romney and the, the legislature from, um, overturning, the Goodridge decision through constitutional amendment. and interestingly, like at the same South Africa's constitutional court was evaluating marriage equality in South Africa, and handing down the Fourie decision in 2005, which was this monumental recognition, that the South African constitution protected the right to marry. and I was struck by kind of virulent the, the backlash was to marriage equality in the United States and how relatively muted it was in South Africa, which has this really rich tradition of, of public organizing and protest and, and all of that. so that what I ended up writing my, my senior thesis on. I went to South Africa for, about a month to do interviews for the thesis. and, I had a lot of great mentors in undergrad. Um, um, Kimberly Theidon, who's now at Tufts was, one of my anthropology professors and was a big influence. but I just really became interested in these comparative questions why gender and sexuality, of spark such intense feelings, um, in some places, but not others and, and how it interacts um, democracy and human rights and, the other kind of political commitments that, that a population has. and so when I had the opportunity to go to grad school before law school, that, that, tha was really what I, I focused on. and then when I got to law Jim Silk at Yale and Hope Metcalf at Yale were also, just incredible influences on,

thinking about the ways gender and sexuality and so many other issues, are still kind of critically relevant in the human rights space and how much work there is to be done around the world on, on these and a whole range of other issues.

BERT LOCKWOOD 7:11

didn't know the Kimberly Theidon connection,

RYAN THORESON 7:14

Yeah.

BERT LOCKWOOD 7:16

published in the quarterly. And I think she may have a book in the Penn series

RYAN THORESON 7:19

Oh, nice. Yeah. No, she was, she taught a class called human rights and social justice when I was in, in undergrad. And, it was fantastic. It was interdisciplinary. We were watching human rights films and, and reading ethnography. And, I made such an impact. My, my first book uh, dedicated to Kimberly. She's, she's.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 7:37

Ryan, for our listeners, at UC law, you're currently teaching constitution, constitutional law, torts and sexual orientation, gender identity, and human rights. And I'd love to be part of your classroom and learn from you and also be a fly on the wall to your current students when you're talking about sexual orientation, gender identity, and how those conversations in your teachings go. I was wondering if you could give us an inside look into what your courses are like, particularly from sexual orientation and gender identity, because you don't think about those sometimes in law schools.

RYAN THORESON 8:16

Yeah, I think sexual orientation, gender identity, the law is a fascinating subject to be teaching um, both domestically and internationally. So domestically, there's just so much movement happening. I mean, I was assigning cases, this semester in gender, sexuality, and the law, you know, where oral argument had just been held, and I was like, oh, I'll have students read the oral argument, and then the Supreme Court came down with a decision, or the Supreme Court took up things on the shadow docket unexpectedly, um, know, parental notification for, for kids transitioning in schools, or, the, the Trump administration's restrictive definition of gender on passports. and so it's, it's just a constantly dynamic field where we see, know, litigants and advocates really making the arguments and the court, um, shaping what is currently possible in the United States. I think internationally, it's a really interesting topic to teach because, it gives an alternative framework to think about some of those issues. So even we see this wave of anti-LGBT legislation, in the United States, and we see regression in a lot of respects, the international sphere provides a different way of thinking about a lot of these issues. And I Conversion therapy is a good example, right? We just had the Childs v. Salazar decision from the Supreme Court says talk therapy, that conversion therapy, is protected by the First

Amendment and it has to undergo rigorous before laws restricting conversion can be ruled constitutional. Internationally, you know, a lot of states just outright criminalize conversion therapy. They treat it as a crime and akin to a kind of torture. And I think giving students those different models and kind of allowing them the constraints of the U. S. legal system and think about how things might be done otherwise is just such a valuable component of a law school career and really illustrates, I think, the power of human rights, even if you are planning to practice in the United States and work within that legal system.

BERT LOCKWOOD 10:10

say, Meredith, you should know Ryan's a tremendous teacher. And the are very enthusiastic about classes.

Track 7 10:20

sense is

law like our current batches,

BERT LOCKWOOD 10:27

are more accepting homosexuality differences perhaps older that grew up in more conservative were not.

RYAN THORESON 10:40

Well I'll say it from, you know, a lot of my has been on, LGBTQ kids in schools and the way that they are navigating school environments and the kind of human rights violations that they face. And one of the really striking things, in that research was how many students said, that they might occasionally have, you know, some of them were bullied by peers or had conflicts with peers, but many more of them said, you know, my main stressor are the teachers and adults. in my life. That, that their classmates generally understood, like, you know, it's not cool to be homophobic anymore, uhm, that in many cases, it was totally fine that they were, were queer or trans in the school environment with their peers, but it was adults who, said they couldn't wear clothing consistent with their gender identity at school, made homophobic comments in the classroom, or you know, approach these issues in a way that this, the, the students found kind of uh, uhm, I don't know, offensive or belittled their identity. that to me was, was really striking but also some reason for hope, I think. The idea that, like, t is some generational change happening and as much as there's leg, legislative campaign, uh, against LGBTQ rights, you know, society still evolving on these issues. And I, I think there is a, a growing amount of acceptance as more people come to know, uhm, like, LGBTQ, LGBTQ, LGBTQ in all their diversity.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 11:59

You know, Ryan, when I was listening, I was just thinking of the, the books, which are also adopted into a Netflix TV series, He Stoppers.

RYAN THORESON 12:07

Mm-hmm.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 12:07

And have you watched it?

RYAN THORESON 12:08

I have not, no. I've heard great things, but I haven't watched it.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 12:12

it's, it's great. It's really great. it's really, you know, queer focused and about, know, kids in school in the UK and just embracing their full identity. And some parents are supportive, some faculty are not. but it really does show that intersection that I think for school children, things are changing. Your peers are evolving. , but it can be difficult if the school administration is not or perhaps your family home has viewpoints, and how do you protect those children and allow to evolve to their fullest self? I wanted to expand on the conversion therapy and the recent court ruling. Um, And, and to build a bridge for our listeners of the Cincinnati connection here that the Cincinnati ban on conversion therapy is, if I'm correct, Ryan is being Um, and that was a ordinance that was enacted in 2015, following a very tragic incident, where a local teenager named Lila Alcorn, com suicide. S was a young trans girl, and this ruling effectively weaponized the first amendment against local human rights protections. would you be able to speak about that case and the Cincinnati connection here?

RYAN THORESON 13:28

Yeah, yeah. So the, the case that the Supreme Court just Childs versus Salazar came out of, uh, a Colorado, conversion therapy practice. it's a woman, in Colorado who only provides talk therapy. So no kind of aversive techniques like electroshock therapy or anything like that. um, so that she doesn't prescribe drugs or do anything like that. It's purely kind of talk. but um, alleged that she has, uh, young people come to her who want to, reduce same sex attraction or, or kind of conform their sex assigned at birth. Um, and she wants to be to encourage them to, to do that. And Colorado has a law saying, you know, you can't engage in, in conversion therapy. You of change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity through, through therapy. Um, and this is based on, you know, a lot of medical findings that it's, it's ineffective, that conversion therapy just doesn't work. and that it's often harmful. It, it kind of makes people feel shame. it makes them feel, kind of lesser than in their sexual orientation or gender identity and often leads to, And anxiety and, uh, suicidality and other, um, adverse mental health outcomes. the court in evaluating um, agreed that the Colorado, uh, conversion therapy ban, uh, violated the First Amendment. Um, and they said that because it's purely talk um, uh, requires more rigorous First Amendment review than, than the lower courts gave it, and specifically that because, a therapist is allowed to encourage, um, young LGBT people to kind of live into their LGBT identity, but is not to discourage that, that it's viewpoint discrimination in conflict with the First Amendment. The challenge now is that the, the Colorado ordinance is going back down to the district courts, to be evaluated under a more rigorous form of First Amendment review, and that leaves cities like Cincinnati that had pioneered these ordinances back in, in 2015, in a, a weird position where, you know, the, the ordinances haven't been

ruled unconstitutional. But the, the, the court has sort of signaled that it's going to be a, a real uphill climb for them to be upheld. and so I know Cincinnati and a lot of other cities are reviewing what their options are in terms is, is there a greater evidence base that could be marshaled to, to support the constitutionality of, of these bans, which really do shield kids from, from real harm. are there other ways that they bring conversion therapy to an end, uh, separate banning practitioners from engaging in the practice. And my hope is governments don't give up this fight, right? there are other ways that you might address the harm of conversion therapy in public education campaigns, reaching out to parents, especially for parents who might be trying to do what they think is best for their kid and just aren't informed of the dangers of conversion therapy, that it's perfectly healthy to be LGBTQ. And my hope is that cities don't back away from this fight, but really redouble their efforts to make sure that know that they're valued who they are.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 16:21

I thought that was really insightful. I listened to a recent interview on WVXU, C edition for NPR, where you and a few of your peers talked about conversion therapy. And I really appreciated that you reminded persons that some parents are just not informed and they might be well-intentioned because sometimes I think we can go so far in one direction to assume that these parents mean harm if they're going to conversion therapy and not perhaps talk behavioral therapy. So I really appreciated your vantage point on that.

RYAN THORESON 17:00

Thank you. I appreciate that. Well, and I think of my own parents, right? I remember, again, I researched this topic so much at debate camp. And then I, you know, came back in that fall, I came out to my parents. And I remember my parents in a very well-meaning way said, do you think maybe we need to like go to counseling or we need to like talk to someone about this? And I was like, I don't, you know, but do you feel like maybe you need to go to a counselor? Like, are you struggling with this maybe? And I, you know, absolutely would not have been my response if I hadn't spent this summer kind of researching LGBTQ teen mental health and the dangers of conversion therapy and all that. But I also know that, you know, my parents are incredibly supportive. And I know that that didn't come from a place malice that came from, you know, them trying to figure out what to do. And this is, you know, again, 2002. So, you know, it was a very different time and totally understand their fear about, the danger that I could be in coming out as an LGBTQ but I, you know, I think there are certainly parents who do really want their kids to change, but there are also parents who just aren't informed. And it's figuring out, know, what menu of cities and states offer to, to make sure that parents have the information that they need to, to keep their kids safe and healthy.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 18:12

And that was in 2002. And I'm just curious if growing up in Fargo, if you remember hearing at that time to take us in 1998, so just a few years earlier, in Laramie, Wyoming, Matthew Shepard was sadly murdered. were you aware of that growing up in Fargo or was it later in life, you might've remembered Matthew's story?

RYAN THORESON 18:36

No, no, very aware of that in Fargo. I mean, I think especially it happening in Wyoming and just, you know, the similarities and the kinds of environments that, that did really, stick with me. And, and I think that the fear that a lot of like LGBTQ people grow up with, stems from, from very real incidents like that. And I think especially the ones that hit home. So I think also of, you know, trans friends of mine who, participate in the, the transgender day of remembrance every year and, and think about the, the trans people who have been killed. And many of them also, yo know, see themselves in people who have been, um, victims of fatal violence. and, and that I is, is both like a deeply affecting thing for, for queer people, but also sense of, know, you know, com, uh, community, uh, responsibility toward each other that we all kind of have this responsibility to keep each other safe and to, to keep calling out and remembering people who have been, been victimized by violence.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 19:30

Yeah. And for our listeners, I'm just going to add to our show notes, the Matthew Shepard Foundation website link. It's really worthwhile to visit. you can donate them as they help, young persons who are queer, finding refuge, finding resources. it was founded by his parents, Judy and Dennis. and Ryan, I was curious to on a topic of queer families and I'm going to give this to you and my dad. cause it's quite interesting organically during the research I was doing for our episode today how much Cincinnati connection there is for some of our major court rulings, at the federal level, at state levels, same sex marriage. And we know right now because of Trump and conservative Republicans, it could be at jeopardy. And I think for many persons, when same sex marriage was passed, it was obviously a major legal victory and the white house was lit up with rainbows and Barack and Michelle were inside celebrating with their girls and their whole team. And now in 2026, people are losing that sense of security, that sense of acceptance. and I was wondering if you and my dad could remind listeners about the significance of Cincinnati for that case. And then Ryan, your perspective of where we're at right now for same sex marriage and keeping that protection.

RYAN THORESON 20:50

yeah. um, as the, the kind of federal battle for, for marriage equality picked up steam, um, a lot of the, the circuit courts of appeal around the country ruled in favor of the marriage plaintiffs and found that there was a, a right to marry for same-sex couples in the US Constitution. it was in the, the Sixth Circuit, covering, um, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, the, the Sixth Circuit, overruled the district courts and said that there was not a federal right to marriage equality. And that was when the Supreme Court stepped in to resolve the circuit split, meaning that the, the Sixth Circuit case and the local plaintiffs from around here, including Jim Obergefell and, in the Ohio case, you know, they became the face of, of marriage equality, and that was the case that ultimately reached the Supreme Court. and there was a, a symposium about a year ago to celebrate the, the 10-year anniversary of Obergefell that brought together a lot of the litigants and the, um, the lawyers who had worked on the cases, um, that they had at, uh, Chase at Northern Kentucky University, at their school of law. And, it was such a, a powerful moment, I think, because you had all these people in, in the room whose lives had been touched in so many ways by the decision, right? And some of them, like Jim Obergefell,

you know, by being litigants, but also, know, myself and other professors who were able to marry our spouses as a result of that decision. And, as people were talking about the decision and the meaning of the decision, it, it felt like church. It felt like a religious experience. and there was something so refreshing about thinking about something that the Supreme Court did that was a civil rights victory that meant so much to people, that moved society and progress forward in our lifetimes. And it feels lately like, it's just kind of this onslaught of rights being rolled back or chipped away, or, you know, you think As something like, like Dobbs overruling Roe and overturning a 50-year-old precedent that meant so much to many women. it just seems like a stream of bad news. And there was something kind of cathartic and wonderful about, um, remembering the court as a force for good in, in civil rights enforcement and what that could look like. And my, my regret is you know, so many of my students are young enough that they don't really remember that decision. Um, they've kind of come of age at a time when the court has largely been kind uh, has largely been kind of, uh, clipping the wings of congressional power, limiting the promise of the constitution, returning to a very kind of rigid, originalist methodology. and, and I wish that, you know, more of them had been there to experience that and recall what it, what it's like when the court, just delivers this, this once in a lifetime victory.

BERT LOCKWOOD 23:23

the, and the, and on the Cincinnati connection, uh, even the, the Clifton, uh, uh, connection is that the, first case was actually a Hawaiian case, um, of the, Hawaiian Supreme Court. Um, and the judge that wrote that decision, um, was from Cincinnati. Um, he was not a graduate of our law school, um, and his father was a doctor that lived on street right here in Clifton. And, uh, uh, uh, I had him when he came back uh, visit the family. Uh, I had him for a dinner with the um, um, but that, that was many, many years ago. Um, that, uh, Cincinnati connection on, on the gay rights issue is, that, that was the first decision, I believe that found, gay marriage. Is

RYAN THORESON 24:11

Well,

BERT LOCKWOOD 24:11

that

RYAN THORESON 24:12

and I talk about that, that Cincinnati connection in my constitutional law classes too, because I, I joke that you could teach an entire semester of constitutional law to, um, the individual rights class just through the lens of Cincinnati cases. Like, y know, Brandenburg versus Ohio and the incitement cases or the Robert Mapplethorpe case uh, obscenity law, um, Obergefell and same-sex marriage. There are so many different, Supreme Court cases that kind of, you know, have their roots in Ohio and Cincinnati specifically.

BERT LOCKWOOD 24:40

Well, the, um, uh, the Mapplethorpe, uh, it has a particular, connection. Uh, uh, uh, Arthur Spiegel was the, uh, the judge, uh, federal, uh, judge, Democrat, who lived right by Clifton

Meadows, and I When the, sheriff went and arrested museum director, a couple lessons. One the judge on a Sunday, the, uh, federal court buildings were all closed, is, he made our, trial courtroom a federal court. and he convened a hearing and issued the, uh, injunction, against them. so that the one. the other lesson that people sort of understand, um, that. had the prosecutor, guy named Joe Dieters, who was, really, um, a conservative activist, if you will. had he done nothing, you probably would have had a hundred people go the exhibit. uh, b bringing this action, I mean, there were thousands, uh, that went and saw the, exhibit. They, you know, he just,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 25:56

So it backfired.

BERT LOCKWOOD 25:57

It, i absolutely backfired. But. But they never learn the lesson by cracking down, it increases the awareness issue.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 26:09

They don't learn the lesson,Dad , but they sure do play the long game. Ryan, one community I really want to spotlight and talk to you about is the trans community. And right now, they are constantly attacked in our country. Very proud of the ACLU that continues to take up the fight in the courts to protect trans rights. it's so hard because anti-trans legislation is impacting so many categories of everyday life for persons, their families, their communities, from health care. To sports, to schools, to restrooms, to identity documents. Ryan, with your expertise in the law, constitut, gender identity, how should we understand this current anti-trans backlash?

RYAN THORESON 26:58

So I the, the current anti-trans backlash, is very much responding to, progress that's been made on a variety of fronts. I think some of this is attributable to, the kind of post-Obergefell moment where you um, organizations that had lost the fight against marriage equality, and they immediately kind of sought a new boogeyman for, for fundraising and political victories and to kind of make political hay out of. And, um, some of that was around religious exemptions, seeking to, to kind of, exempt, uh, certain actors from in any way recognizing or, or participating s same-sex couples who were getting married. but a lot of it was, was anti-trans, legislation. And, there was a Houston municipal ordinance, um, Houston Equal Rights Ordinance, um, where the, it was kind of a broad, Houston human rights ordinance covering a lot of different protected classes and a lot of different spaces. And the opponents narrowly focused in on, trans people in bathroom access. And all of the, the kind of anti-ordinance, advertising was around transgender people in bathrooms. And it worked and it sank this, this ordinance would have, that would have protected a lot of people in a lot of different, uh, spaces. And I you right-wing groups recognize the, the rhetorical power of that strategy. Not as many people knew trans folks as new gay and lesbian couples. Um, it was easier to kind of demonize them and, spread misinformation about them. And so you saw things like the bathroom bill in North Carolina, and then there was the big pushback against that that was successful. and then for a while things, you know, then, then Trump was elected and there

wasn't a lot of, of federal movement around trans rights. And then as soon as, know, 2020 hit president Biden was elected, I think states really started to pass egregious anti-trans legislation, essentially to pick a fight with the Biden administration and and to, to kind of flex their own muscles at the state level. And that's when you saw the first, restrictions on trans kids playing sports or accessing gender-affirming health care. uh, accessing bathrooms after the, the North Carolina debacle, all of that legislation at the state level all started in, in 2020. And now it's, you know, it's, it's rampant across the U S and so many of these, laws have not only been passed into law, but have, um, started to affect the way that, tha courts are evaluating, trans claims under the equal protection clause. I think, the way that I would understand it is a kind of moral panic against, uh, transgender people just with the way that, that trans people have been demonized. and as something really has, I think, caught the movement flat footed in that it used to be possible to kind of track these laws, to send people to testify against them. and now, you know, I think just the sheer volume of the laws that are being passed, it's, it's difficult to keep track of all of them. There's hundreds every year. Um, often you'll have, expert testimony from a variety of groups that is just flatly ignored or bills passed without a hearing. There's, there's just little that, that groups are able to do to say, you know, this is unfair. This hurts people. this is legally problematic. This is unnecessary. None of that seems to matter the way that it, it may be did in the early days of some of the trans rights fights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 30:11

from there, I wanted to go to Kansas, where we've seen detrimental Senate bills be passed, particular Senate bill two, four, One thing I was reading up about the Senate bill 244 that requires Transgender people to use the restrooms and other sex-separated facilities in government buildings associated with their sex assigned at birth. And then the other part to the bill is IDs for transgender people, that it prohibits those persons from updating their driver's license or state ID cards to reflect their gender. And also invalidates transgender people's existing driver's license, state IDs, and birth certificates if those documents were issued in Kansas and reflect a gender difference from a person's sex at birth. And the current rollback statistic I found was approximately 1,700 trans persons in Kansas were ordered to surrender their valid license. Ryan, could you share with us what kind of impact that truly does have in a trans person's life? Because sometimes I think when we read these headlines, we're trying to research these bills. And, if you could also maybe talk about, if you're familiar with it, the procedural tactic that the Kansas legislature used called gut and go, Where they where they took 244 and stripped it of its content, but then combined it into one to get through certain hearings and loopholes. And to me, it was complicated because I don't know all things about the law.

RYAN THORESON 31:53

Yeah, so I'll start with that last point. Um, this is a tactic that's been used in a lot of other states to rush through, legally problematic legislation. U, you know, in, in, uh, Kentucky there was some anti-trans legislation that was essentially passed, like, late at night with no prior notice for opponents to, to testify or to, to give counterpoints to the bills. Ohio, there um, a bill that essentially combined, two separate anti-trans bills. So one on, um, sports and one on

healthcare, in order to get it through the legislature, kind of violating the, the principle that each bill should be on one topic and shouldn't fuse, uh, multiple bills together. so these, these kinds of procedural tactics, uh, certainly are not So I think what's really worrying about the, the Kansas bill is that, identification plays such a central role in people's lives. And, and we know that when trans people have to show identification that kind of outs them as transgender, that, that shows a gender marker that is different than the way that they're presenting out in the world, it puts them at risk of anti-trans violence, which is often um, know, intimidating and often results in, in real physical harm. so, uh, the, the, the Kansas law essentially invalidates, driver's licenses that do reflect, uh, people's gender identity that had been validly issued by the state of Kansas, and, and requires people to, to turn those in and get. New identification that's inconsistent with, with the way they present in the world. Um, and I think the, the, the, the Kansas law is reflective just a, a bigger, kind of ideological approach conservative lawmakers have adopted, which sees someone's sex assigned at birth as really the only facet of their, their sex or gender. Right. That, that, that you have a sex with the, that you're assigned at birth and that is kind of permanently yours. I unchangeable. That's the only relevant sex. And we know that that's, that's just not the way that we perceive sex in the world, right? As people use bathrooms or locker rooms or, navigate the world, it's, it's kind of the way and the way they identify that matters, not what their birth certificate said, you know, 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago. generally federal courts in the past have been able to recognize that difference, right? That a transgender woman is similarly situated to a transgender woman. to a cisgender woman in, in many respects in everyday life and should be treated like a cisgender woman under sex discrimination law. the executive orders from the Trump administration, but also a lot of the, the state legislation that's being passed, You know, force is this very narrow and restrictive definition of sex that just kind of ignores the, the everyday way that we recognize and live gender out in the world. And I think, that I worry about that definition being crystallized into law, um, with some of the upcoming Supreme Court cases, and just the way that that, has certainly, you know, negative consequences for, for transgender people, but really negative consequences for everyone, as we're kind of going to be, you know, kind of, you know, rigidly limited in the way that we can express our, our gender. and sometimes that, you know, in addition to the violence has, has other consequences. So I think um, if you are a transgender person who does not want to give up their driver's license, that limits your ability maybe to fly or, or to vote. There's, um, increasingly stringent voting laws that require you to show ID, you know, that, that these ways of limiting trans people's passports and ID documents, don't only, uh, d only, uh, offend the right to discrimination or, or the right to express your identity, but also infringe a lot of other fundamental rights under domestic and international law.

BERT LOCKWOOD 35:25

It sounds sort of like the scarlet letter.

RYAN THORESON 35:28

Yeah. Right. Like, and enforcing people to, to carry ID that, um, that just doesn't reflect who they are.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 35:35

it's just astounding certain lawmakers, politicians, leaders, how they're going after the trans community. Ryan, when you were working at human rights watch, uh, for our listeners, you worked there for a little more than a decade and you were first, the Robert Bernstein international human rights fellow. Then you transitioned to a researcher and a specialist, again, working extensively on LGBTQ rights, children's rights, anti-t discrimination and queer family recognition. during your time at human rights watch, When you focus on documentation, research, and translating lived experience like we just went through for trans persons, can you share what you learned about those experiences? When we take into account policy change the direct engagement you've had with said vulnerable communities?

RYAN THORESON 36:31

Yeah. So I think often, you know, going out and hearing people's stories and how they have been affected of negative, uh, laws and regulations just gives a different picture than some the kind of top line messaging that you get from, from NGOs and civil rights organizations. Um, and so I think of, you know, there were a couple of instances where I think even, know, people I know who might be, might have questions about trans rights or kind of buy into some of the anti-trans arguments. There, there are some stories that I think even resonate with them. Um, so I remember once I Talking to teenage girl in, Texas who was transgender who talked about, um, being forced to use the boys' restroom at her school and then being assaulted by a group of boys in the restroom, because she wasn't allowed to use the, the girls' restroom with her peers. And to, to kind of illustrate to, to people, you know, what it is like to be a transgender girl know, identifies and presents as female and yet has to use the boys' bathroom, of course that's going to put you at risk of bullying or physical or sexual assault in a high school environment. I remember, um, a kid that I talked to who was also a teenager, whose, uh, school wouldn't let him use a bathroom consistent with his gender identity, but there was a gas station, within walking distance of the high school that he could use the bathroom at, and so he would walk every day over lunch to that gas station, and when I was like, you know, how has the school been, like, what is your, what are your concerns being trans in high school? His main concern was that he never got to eat lunch with his classmates, right? That, and, and you think of that as like just such a fundamental taken for granted part of being a high schooler. It's not something that you think about in the, the national debates, but that's the kind of, know, lived impact that these laws have on, on kids. and so much of the, the anti-trans laws have been motivated by these, these kind of what if scenarios, right? What if somebody who is, presenting as female, goes into a restroom with the wrong purposes, right? Or, or kind of malicious intent, or, um, you know, what if, uh, an athlete, a bunch of transgender athletes kind of crowd cisgender women out of an athletic category? And there are things that, that haven't happened, and there are states with, with trans inclusive laws for decades that haven't seen these things happen. but, but the harms of anti-trans laws and policies are so immediate and are happening every day. And I feel the, the work with Human Rights Watch and the, the conversations with, with young people really surface the everyday way that the trans people are, are facing discrimination.

BERT LOCKWOOD 39:00

are powerful stories,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 39:02

It's just like astounding. he has to go to a gas station where he should be safe and protected at his own school. Like a school is supposed to be a sanctuary for

RYAN THORESON 39:12

Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 39:12

students.

RYAN THORESON 39:12

Well, and, and you think about often how, you know, how minimal the ask really is, right? It's a, it's a trans boy who wants to be able to the boy's bathroom. And often the, the trans plaintiffs in a lot of these cases, are, are ready and willing to address the, the concerns that the schools have. So in, in some schools, um, administrators have said, well, what about the privacy of the other students? And they've said, all right, you know, we can put up, um, privacy curtains. You could improve privacy for all students in bathrooms and locker rooms. Like no one is really, you know, looking at anyone else in a bathroom with dividers. and, and schools are just unwilling even to, to take those very common sense steps. And it's, um, I think unfortunate that schools have been kind of more interested in, in doubling down and litigating against trans students than, you know, the kind know, easy fixes that might um, objectors concerns and also ensure that trans kids are treated fairly and without discrimination.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:07

Wow. Absolutely. I wanted to bring you both in to talk about Human Rights Quarterly. And for our loyal listeners, they've heard us mention it quite a few times. For any of our new listeners, dad, I'm going to ask you to introduce Human Rights Quarterly. And I'm excited to hear about your experience on HRQ. since I have my hat on, Ryan, for our listeners, I'm wearing one of our merch. but I'm so excited that you're a deputy editor and you're part of the staff. I, you know, dad, Human Rights Quarterly is 47 years old.

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:40

well, let's see. I took it over in, uh, 1981.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:46

Okay. So 44 years. I was close. 44 years.

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:48

Okay.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:49

Okay.

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:49

44

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:50

So

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:50

years.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 40:50

older than me. I'm still a millennial, but.

BERT LOCKWOOD 40:54

it, it actually is sort of I think interesting story. I taught the first course in international human rights at, uh, uh, universities, uh, law school, I was the Associate Dean there, and I taught it in the evening, uh, I think probably in the, in the summer in that first seminar I had something like six or seven Foreign Service uh, and this one political scientist at the University of Maryland who had already written a book on, uh, human rights, Richard Claude. we became, friends, and so he had founded something called Universal Human Rights, and it was published by, uh, a, uh, private publisher, and then beginning, with Volume 3, he moved uh, to Johns Hopkins University Press, and changed the name to Human Rights Quarterly. And, uh, when I, came out to Cincinnati to, was the program in, uh, international human rights, it had become too much for him, uh, editing And, uh, he, um, h, um, asked if I would be willing to take it over. And I jumped at the chance because, in Cincinnati, Ohio, there wasn't a lot going on in international human rights in 1979. and, uh, I knew that this would be something I could get students to work on. And that's how quarterly came Cincinnati, it was a central part of human rights program. That, in conjunction with sending students in the summers to work human rights groups around the world, was really sort of central vision quarterly, One of the things I particularly liked about the quarterly was that it was multidisciplinary, and for the subject of human rights, it's much than simply the law. so we probably about half of the articles are by lawyers or law professors, but the other ranges across the social sciences and even more. We have an English at the University of Connecticut wrote wonderful piece on the theater and human rights, for instance. Gary English is name. a lot of political scientists, those perspectives as important as the perspectives. I the reason for our success has been the wonderful students that we've been able to attract and dedication and their realization of the importance their for the quality of the quarterly. again, I think that has been the key to the success. Ryan, I I've been delighted have both Jacob Kogan on our faculty and become deputy editors of quarterly. I think that's going strengthen continue importance of the quarterly to community.

RYAN THORESON 44:20

No, I've loved being on it. the first time, I think, Bert, I met I was at the 2019, Human Rights Clinicians Conference when I was a teaching fellow in the human rights clinic at Yale, and was back there, um, after working at Human Rights Watch. Um, I remember, like, you know, Bert

gave me his business card and a copy of Human Rights Quarterly, and I knew Human Rights Quarterly from, you know, undergrad and, and grad school, and, yeah, I remember reading it on trip back to, to Yale. A, Human Rights Quarterly just has such a unique space and such a, a kind of foundational space the human rights literature, and working on it has been great. I think for, for similar reasons that I've enjoyed working on, LGBT rights at Human Rights Watch, right, that these kind of generalist human rights organizations and, multidisciplinary human rights journals like HRQ, uh, I think, um, uh, encourage people to, to look beyond whatever human rights issues they're most interested in and to think about just the whole breadth of issues and the way different movements are, are calling on the Human Rights Framework and using the Human Rights Framework in different ways. And I think that's, there's so few spaces where, where we can kind of get outside our own silos and, and think about that. And I think, Human Rights Quarterly has just been an amazing kind of connection point for a lot of academics who, who work on, on different fields.

BERT LOCKWOOD 45:37

and, and, and I think the range uh, countries that we've published articles from, scholars or activists in those countries raises the visibility of those issues that you're not going to find in the New York Times, which I read I mean, they probably haven't risen that attention but important issues, and I think that's another service that the quarterly served. The quarterly was the first. I will say now there are many law schools

journals. It's not their principal law review but have law journals that are publishing in human rights field. But given to the rise of human rights in terms of the importance of the to legal world, if you will.

RYAN THORESON 46:31

I'll say one of the other nice things about HRQ, too, is the articles are shorter than most law review articles, they're the kind of standard journal length. And I think that is a real service also, to put out scholarship that is timely incisive and thoughtful and multidisciplinary that people actually pick up and read. I think it kind of has a unique space in law pantheon because it's multidisciplinary doesn't require that people submit a 25,000-word piece.

BERT LOCKWOOD 47:05

Well, actually I've been out speaking foreign countries at other conferences where people say they want to write something for the quarterly, would we, would we be interested? And my standard pitch is that my perspective of over 40 years, that the articles that have been the most influential are at about 10,000 words. . . . what happens is you'll get the, quarterly, um, open to the table of contents and. there's an article like 10,000 say, you know, that's really interesting and sit down and read it. And if three times that size, they'll say, that really is interesting. I'm going to read it and they'll put it aside and, you know, some will get back to it. won't.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:58

I've been guilty of that.

BERT LOCKWOOD 48:00

I think that's still true. And I think the legal does sort of a... An injustice, if you will, that often when those tenure decisions are coming up, the number of pages of an given a significance

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 48:19

I was going to well, Ryan, that dad my sister and I, and w were interns at, uh, Human Rights Quarterly. so we were footnote editors. I've, I've shared this before, but during our summer, uh, breaks, we would be in the, oh, you never got to experience the old law school.

RYAN THORESON 48:35

like, no.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 48:36

That was Basically windowless and didn't have natural light. It was very dark in there. And we were in law library being footnote editors with, you know, very smart law school students. We were teenagers and, undergrads. one thing that I do remember learning about that really surprised me. And I think this was when I was maybe a freshman or sophomore at university. and I was interning at HRQ was the international human rights abuses against queer folks in different countries. And that the death penalty is a consequence that is enacted if you are gay in different countries. And I know currently some of the countries where the death penalty law remains tied to same sex relations is Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, under the Taliban, parts of

BERT LOCKWOOD 49:33

Uganda, I think is, I think is, I think of their back, aren't they?

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 49:37

Well, it's, you know, Ryan, maybe, you know, cause I read conflicting reports.

RYAN THORESON 49:41

Yeah, they've passed a law that is now in uh, where, they distinguish, the offensive homosexuality from aggravated homosexuality, which can like sexual assault against a child of the same sex would be aggravated homosexuality. But also things you know, same sex, uh, sexual activity with someone with a disability broadly defined, would be aggravated homosexuality, um, or, or sex if you are HIV positive can be aggravated homosexuality. so things that can be kind of purely consensual, for many people, but still carry the, the death penalty because of the new legislation.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 50:17

Aggravated. Yeah, I did not know that.

BERT LOCKWOOD 50:20

yeah, I, I thought it was even broader, I thought it was aggravated if it was basically if you had

RYAN THORESON 50:26

No, I think, and I'm trying to remember if it also um, multiple offenses. Because that was in earlier legislation, the penalty is heightened if you were kind of a repeat offender and someone who is known to the state.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 50:39

Because we've talked so much about domestic, U. S.-based LGBTQIA rights, I would love to, and I know this is such an expansive question, and I want to also be mindful of your is being able to share with our listeners how they can understand the current global landscape of said LGBTQIA rights, particularly in these countries where governments continue to criminalize queer identity and relationships.

RYAN THORESON 51:06

Yeah,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 51:06

Right.

RYAN THORESON 51:07

so, you know, still around the world, um, there's, uh, more than sixty countries that still criminalize, same-sex sexual activity, um, and, those laws, the countries that have those laws often see spillover effects in other areas, right, that people are not gonna go to the police if they've been, you know, victimized in a hate crime because they, um, worry that they will be extorted or, or that they will be arrested for, for going to seek help. Often, you know, there aren't anti-discrimination laws and, in laws that, uh, criminalize same-sex activity, u, relationships are, are kind of fraught because you worry that you could be arrested under those laws, so are, you know, like, parties and associations and assembly, so those laws, I think, are particularly egregious because they really limit the space, to kind of live openly as a, a queer person. there's also a lot of countries that still, um, things like legal gender recognition, so recognizing transgender people consistent with their gender identity, um, that, uh, still haven't enacted comprehensive non-discrimination legislation. The U. S. is in that vein of, even though, uh, same-sex activity is constitutionally protected and we have the right to marry, we still don't have comprehensive non-discrimination legislation that explicitly protects, uh, sexual orientation and gender identity. many countries, don't recognize, uh, marr equality or any kind of partnership recognition, although I'd say the regional human rights systems have really been on the forefront of, of recognizing that as a human rights concern, and, and particularly the inter-American system. um, so, you know, um, so, you know, the, the global landscape really varies quite a bit, but I think there have been some really positive signs, even as there's been this, this kind of global backlash what, what many right-wing activists call gender ideology. So, you know, you know, things like, um, access to, to, to reproductive rights and contraception and abortion, recognition of transgender people, uh, same-sex marriage, sex education in schools. there's been a pushback against all of that, but at the same time you're seeing, people coming out and organizing and demanding change, in their own countries in a way that I think

has been really efficacious. So, you the, um, the South Korean courts recognizing that, know, it's unjust to, to prevent same-sex partners from getting access to health insurance, or Thailand recognizing, same-sex marriage, or, a Philippine court recognizing that it's, that it's unjust to deny property rights to, a member of a lesbian couple that has split up when they've invested in property together. these kinds of, you know, everyday disputes and the, the effort that's being put into LGBT equality by local activists, I think is really bearing fruit even in the face of this anti-LGBT backlash globally. Um, and that's the thing that I think gives me the most hope. and, and judiciaries, I think are becoming more attentive to that too. And, and one of the recent projects I worked on, I was looking at a lot the recent decisions that have decriminalized same-sex activity in, uh, especially former British Commonwealth countries that inherited these really, um, awful, uh, anti-LGBT criminalization laws. and a lot of the courts, um, use dignity as a, a kind of vehicle for, overturn the laws either rhetorically as a legal hook. and just emphasizing the dignity of, of queer people and, and what it means for a person's dignity to be, you know, arrested for their intimate relationships or arrested because they're wearing, the wrong clothing on the street, or presumed to be engaging in sex work because they are transgender. that, that there are all these ways that the law, um, just fails to respect LGBT people's dignity. And that attention, I think, is real reason for hope. That it's, it's not just that courts are, kind of responding greater global awareness of LGBT rights, but that they're really seeing LGBT people as, as people under the human rights framework.

BERT LOCKWOOD 54:52

I wanted say how much I Ryan's contribution the field, but law school. He's a wonderful addition to the faculty so important to quarterly, the Cincinnati the forefront of human rights. And he an exceedingly future.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 55:20

Ryan, what we like to do is close out for reflection and advice. And I'm very confident that we audience members who have been inspired by you and might even be for going to law school, knowing that they could one day teach constitution, sexual orientation, gender identity, and make a real difference in not only the US, but the global landscape, is there any advice you could offer our listeners?

RYAN THORESON 55:50

Sure. think that it's easy to be right now not only the kind of authoritarian turn in the United States, but the authoritarian turn globally and feeling law is malleable or law doesn't mean anything when people in power don't want it to mean anything. And one of the that really clung to how much of this people, right? It's people who make the law. It's people who organize and resist unjust laws. That all of this is people. And even when it seems like things incredibly difficult or there isn't progress to be made, one of the things that I still cling to is how many of my recognize injustice when they see it are committed to address injustice, and how many people in the are in that Th want to be part of making the world better. They want to see positive change. And there's such a kind of unique and special role that I human rights advocates have bringing people into the fold and giving them the opportunity to do that, to tap them into a social movement, help people be a part of something bigger, and to kind of

create that lasting change makes a real difference in people's lives. And so, you know, a advice to students, I often tell them, know, find the way that you can do that. Find the social movement that you care so deeply about that you're willing to put it all out there and bring people in and build bridges and create something new. And don't be discouraged by the enormity of challenges. know, pick an issue dig in. And I think, you know, with enough people doing it really creates the possibility of a wider kind of social change.

Track 7 57:31

Th you.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 57:32

Thank you so much. I really appreciate

RYAN THORESON 57:33

No,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 57:34

it.

RYAN THORESON 57:34

of course. Thanks for having me on.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 57:38

Our gratitude again to Ryan for sharing his time, perspective, and insight. If you would like to learn more about Ryan's work, you can visit his website, which is linked in our show notes. If you enjoyed today's episode, please consider subscribing, rating, and reviewing the podcast on Spotify and Apple. Thank you for listening and tune in next time.