

LGBT LIFELINE

WRITTEN BY REBECCA BOWMAN WOODS

On the third Sunday in Advent, the reading from Luke's Gospel rings truer than true within the bright sanctuary of Hadwen Park UCC, spoken in the musically accented voice of a young, gay Jamaican named Sean Martin. He tells of Mary's retreat to the Judean hill country, where she's taken in by Elizabeth and reveals a great and powerful secret.

Just as Elizabeth welcomed Mary, this small congregation in Worcester, Mass., has opened its arms to LGBT asylum seekers like Sean, who fled countries where even the suspicion of being homosexual can get a person killed.

Sean Martin, in his Worcester apartment, talks about his experiences as a gay man in Jamaica and an asylum seeker in the United States. ▶





▲ Sean Martin is building a new life thanks to Hadwen Park UCC.



▲ Sean Martin on campus of Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester, where he is a student.

From a young age, Sean was brutally teased for being different. The taunts turned to violence as he grew older. Death threats from the kitchen staff were a daily occurrence at the hotel where he worked. He witnessed friends beaten severely. One was abducted from his home and murdered, his body never found.

Sean is one of the fortunate ones. He got out of Jamaica through a work-travel program before he became a statistic. Today, with the help of his attorney and Hadwen Park's LGBT Asylum Support Task Force, Sean is building a new life as an out gay man, pursuing his education and making plans to go into clinical social work. He's a church deacon and a symbol of hope for other asylum seekers.

From the outside, Hadwen Park UCC looks like the quintessential New England church. The congregation became Open and Affirming in 2005 but had no idea where God would lead them next or, more accurately, who God would bring their way.

One night in 2007, Pastor Judy Hanlon received a call from Worcester attorney Lisa Weinberg

about Linford Cunningham, a gay Jamaican man in the process of applying for asylum. Lisa knew the congregation was LGBT-friendly, and hoped they could assist with Linford's non-legal needs, which were significant. When Judy met

TECHNICALLY, HOMOSEXUALITY IS NOT ILLEGAL IN JAMAICA, BUT ANTI-SODOMY LAWS ARE USED AGAINST GAY MEN. GAY-BASHING IS SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE, SOMETIMES EVEN ENCOURAGED.

Linford, he was homeless, hungry and desperate. "He felt like God had deserted him," she says.

Technically, homosexuality is not illegal in Jamaica, but anti-sodomy laws are used against gay men. Gay-bashing is socially acceptable, sometimes even encouraged. "I'd be called 'Miss Lucretia,'" Linford says, "and I got into a lot of fights. I don't usually hit first, but if somebody knocks me, I'll hit back."

Growing up, Linford had to change schools several times. After being forced out of a teachers college, he nearly gave up on his education. In 2001, he came to Minnesota on a

student visa, but returned to Jamaica in 2004. "At the time, I never knew about political asylum," Linford says.

Back home, things got worse, so he found a job online, obtained a visa, and came to Worcester to work in a behavioral health facility for youth.

But life in the United States carries special hardships for people in Linford's situation. "The

sliver of difference for the LGBT immigrant is that they cannot find support in their own ethnic community once they arrive here," Judy explains.

Linford liked his job, but the Jamaicans he worked with perceived him to be gay and threatened him. He heard they were planning to beat him up. Exhausted, afraid, and also HIV-positive and running out of medication, Linford thought about ending his life. A female friend persuaded him to go to the University of Massachusetts Memorial Medical Center instead.

By this point, Linford knew about asylum, but hadn't been sure he wanted to go that route. Asylum isn't easy to obtain, he says, and it would mean staying in the United States permanently. During his time in the hospital, Linford decided to apply. He was fortunate to find an attorney experienced in working with LGBT asylum seekers.

Hadwen Park UCC fed him, clothed him, and helped him find housing. Then came the hardest part — healing the self-hatred created by ritual religious abuse and years of being told that God considers him an abomination.

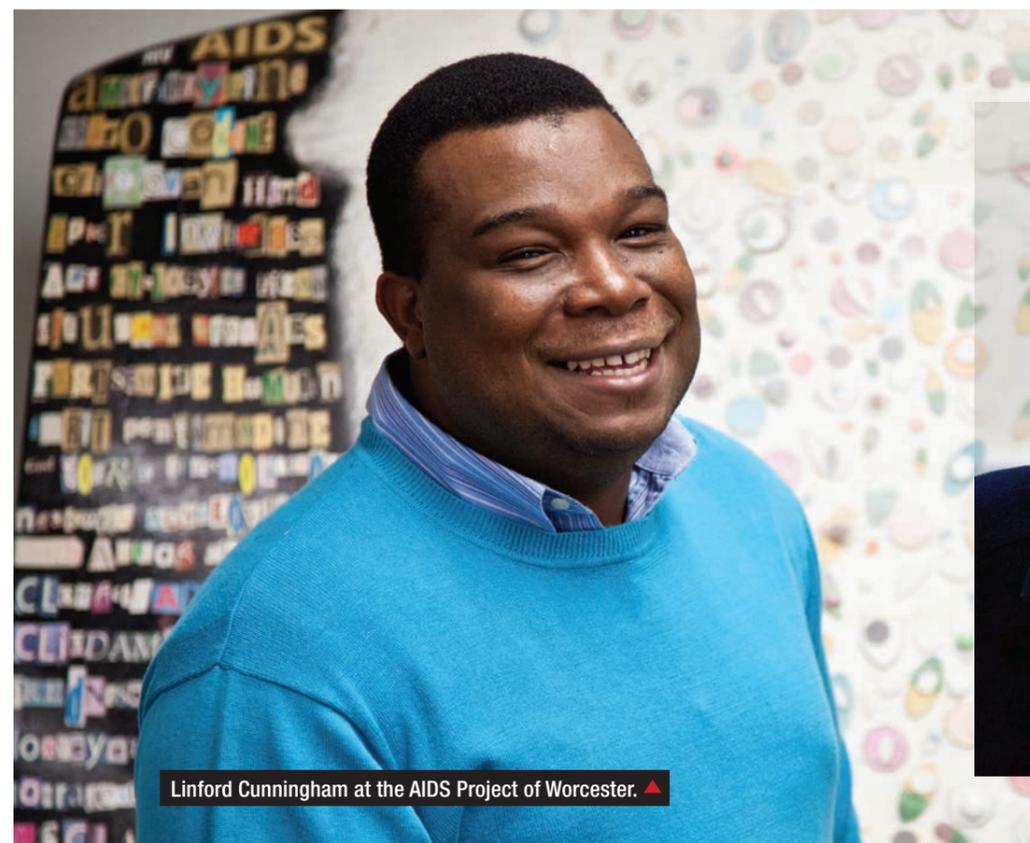
One Sunday, Linford finally let it all out. Worship was over and most of the congregation had gone downstairs for coffee and cookies. Linford came to the altar and knelt down to pray. He began to cry, then to sob uncontrollably.

Pastor Judy came over to him, and beckoned the few people still in the sanctuary. Earl Finne,

a deacon, laid hands on Linford's back as they gathered around him and prayed. "It just felt like his pain was being pulled into me," Earl says. That experience is one he'll never forget.

On the surface, Earl might seem like an unlikely ally of the LGBT community — a 6'2", 250 lb. straight, white male; a diehard Patriots fan and sports coach who splits his own firewood and drives a pickup truck. He grew up Catholic but was distant from church for many years. The events of September 11, 2001, convinced him that he and his family needed God and a faith

THE SLIVER OF DIFFERENCE FOR THE LGBT IMMIGRANT IS THAT THEY CANNOT FIND SUPPORT IN THEIR OWN ETHNIC COMMUNITY ONCE THEY ARRIVE HERE.



▲ Linford Cunningham at the AIDS Project of Worcester.

▼ Pastor Judy Hanlon listens during the meeting of LGBT asylum seekers and supporters.





▲ Earl Finne, at his home in Worcester, tells how his own faith was strengthened by getting to know Linford and helping LGBT asylum seekers.

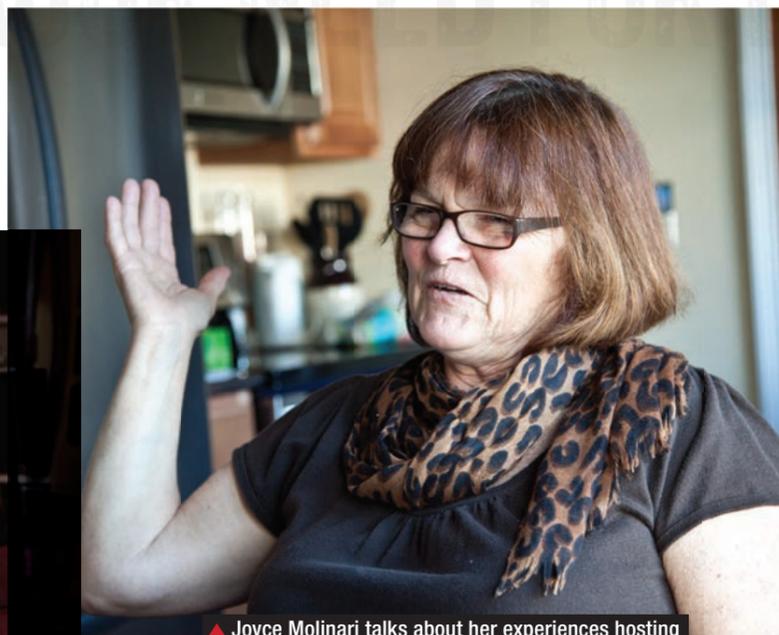
community, or else they would drift apart. The next Sunday, they visited Hadwen Park UCC.

Now Earl rarely misses a Sunday, and will tell you that a man with a pickup truck can do a lot to serve the least of these. He has helped several asylees (those who've been granted asylum) move into their first homes — usually one-room apartments in the poorest parts of town. Sometimes he brings along his teenage son. "I want him to understand," says Earl. "To them, it's everything compared to where they came from."

Housing is a major need for LGBT asylum seekers, because immigrant communities — usually the primary support system — won't take them in. Hadwen Park's Task Force helps place them in apartments together, or with church and community members who offer a spare bedroom for the six to nine months that it takes, on average, to be granted asylum.

Asylum seekers are prohibited from working, and most have little or no money. Once asylum is granted, they can find jobs and begin rebuilding their lives. Until then, the waiting period can be a time of loneliness and even second-guessing. Many asylum seekers are highly educated professionals, accustomed to being active and independent. Having to wait, and depend on others, can heighten the feeling of isolation. During this time, the LGBT Task Force is a lifeline connecting them to a welcoming, supportive community.

Joyce Molinari is a member of Hadwen Park UCC and a longtime friend of Judy's who has opened her home to five asylum seekers in the past two years. Over coffee at her kitchen table, Joyce chuckles as she recalls that first phone call from Judy: "I need to ask you a favor." A divorced mother of three grown children, Joyce was adjusting to an empty nest and grieving the loss of her sister to cancer. It wasn't the first time Judy had talked her into what seemed, at first, like a crazy idea.



▲ Joyce Molinari talks about her experiences hosting LGBT asylum seekers from Jamaica and Uganda.

Soon Dwayne moved in. He gradually opened up to Joyce about his life in Jamaica — poverty, an abusive father, selling plastic bags on the street for pennies. "He was a great survivor," Joyce says. When Dwayne received asylum, he got his own place.

Candie was the second houseguest to receive asylum. Joyce now hosts two men and one woman, all from Uganda. "They're kind of like my family now," she says. The Ugandans share their music, language, and food with each other, and with her. "At least I can give them a little piece of home," she says.

One of the things Joyce loves most is taking them to church on Sundays. It will be hard to see them go, she admits, "but I want them to fly."

The Ugandan asylum seekers asked that their names not be used, for fear of jeopardizing their cases. They also worry about saying something to endanger their families and friends back in Uganda — a country where imprisonment, torture, and "corrective rape" are used against homosexuals, and where one newspaper, in 2010, published names and photos of suspected gays and lesbians, along with these words: "Hang Them." David Kato, a gay activist

identified in the newspaper, was bludgeoned to death in his home a few months later.

For the past three years, Uganda has been considering legislation to make homosexuality — already illegal — punishable by death. According to polls, more than 95 percent of Ugandans support the measure.

At a gathering of Task Force members and LGBT asylum seekers at Hadwen Park UCC in December, the conversation turned to Uganda, Kato's murder, and the Obama Administration's announcement that the United States will punish countries with poor human rights records, including those that persecute gays and lesbians.

One Ugandan asylum seeker worries that it will only make life more difficult for those who can't get out of the country. Angela Knapton, board chair of Hadwen Park's LGBT Task Force, agrees, to some extent. "Things can get more brutal, but it also gives people hope who are there going through it," she says. "They believe it's never going to change if countries like the U.S. don't stand up and say it's wrong."

FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS, UGANDA HAS BEEN CONSIDERING LEGISLATION TO MAKE HOMOSEXUALITY — **ALREADY ILLEGAL** — PUNISHABLE BY DEATH.

The vocal and visible support of religious communities also is crucial, Knapton says. Uganda's move toward draconian measures was sparked by three anti-gay American evangelists who held a seminar in March 2009 in Kampala to "expose the truth about homosexuality and the homosexual agenda."

Coming out is not an option for LGBT people in places like Uganda, and one of their biggest challenges, in an asylum case, is proving they are LGBT. "They haven't fled with their asylum case in mind, so they don't often have documentation," says attorney Lisa Weinberg. Friends and family back home are often afraid or unwilling to help them get records or documents from hospitals, schools, companies, and the police. A letter from a former partner helps, but many are living in hiding.

Several of the Ugandans currently being helped by Hadwen Park would like to devote their lives to changing the conditions for LGBT people back in Uganda, if they are granted asylum. Chances are, they'll have to do that remotely.

But the success of the LGBT Task Force is testimony to the power of networks. Each time someone finds his or her way to Worcester, to Lisa Weinberg's office, to Hadwen Park UCC and the LGBT Task Force, word gets out. Stories of asylum travel across oceans and cultures, via the Internet and word-of-mouth, in ways beyond uncanny. Connections are made. Hope is renewed. Lives are saved.

Following Linford's arrival at Hadwen Park UCC in 2007, five other Jamaicans came within a year, including Sean. After the LGBT Task



▼ Asylum attorney Lisa Weinberg explains the complicated process of seeking asylum as an LGBT person.



▲ Linford Cunningham outside the AIDS Project of Worcester, where he works.



▲ Linford Cunningham talks about his experiences as a gay man seeking asylum in the United States, while two Uganda asylum seekers listen.

▲ Pastor Judy talks with a church member after Sunday services.

Force set up its website, they received a desperate email from Oscar, a gay, homeless Salvadoran in Southern California. Sean and Pastor Judy maintained sporadic contact with Oscar, keeping his hopes alive while Judy searched the UCC website and found First Congregational Church of Riverside, Calif., an Open and Affirming congregation. They put Oscar in touch with the church, where Senior Minister Jane Quandt helped him plan his next steps. Pastor Judy used her connections to help Oscar find an LGBT asylum organization in San Francisco and a lesbian couple who gave him a place to stay. Oscar received asylum in 2010.

In July 2011, Linford, Sean, Oscar, and four others led a General Synod workshop on LGBT asylum. Three of them, including Linford, shared their stories with the entire plenary right after the Synod adopted a resolution on international LGBT human rights.

Each asylee will tell you that recounting their stories is difficult, even agonizing. They do it because somewhere in the world, at this moment and the next and the next, a child of God is suffering as they did. Ministries like the one at Hadwen Park UCC help them know — regardless of what religion, society, or government has told them — that God’s desire is for them to be safe, to be loved, and to live fully as the people God created them to be. ♡

EACH ASYLEE WILL TELL YOU THAT RECOUNTING THEIR STORIES IS DIFFICULT, EVEN AGONIZING. THEY DO IT BECAUSE SOMEWHERE IN THE WORLD, AT THIS MOMENT AND THE NEXT AND THE NEXT, A CHILD OF GOD IS SUFFERING AS THEY DID.

A LONG HISTORY OF LGBT WITNESS

In 2011, the United Church of Christ’s General Synod (our governing body) overwhelmingly passed a “resolution of witness” entitled, “Supporting International Human Rights Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.” The resolution focused on discrimination, violence, and abuse in “contexts where such abuse is not prohibited by law but rather legally, politically, socially, and even religiously sanctioned.”

This resolution affirmed an action of General Synod from more than 30 years ago: “A Pronouncement: Civil Liberties without Discrimination Related to Affectional or Sexual Preference,” which stated: “In faithfulness to the biblical and historic mandate, we hold that, as a child of God, every person is endowed with worth and dignity that human judgment cannot set aside.” It also was in keeping with several other resolutions passed by the General Synod supporting the rights of LGBT persons.

The 2011 resolution also declared support for the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (see ucc.org/sogi). The Principles were created by a group of international human rights experts in response to well-documented patterns of abuse.

See additional interactive content of this issue of StillSpeaking magazine online. Visit ucc.org/spring2012.

40th ANNIVERSARY

INSPIRING, IGNITING, SHAPING CHANGE AND ACCEPTANCE IN OUR WORLD



FOUNDING OF THE COALITION FOR LGBT CONCERNS and ORDINATION OF COALITION CO-FOUNDER

We congratulate the Rev. William R. Johnson, Coalition co-founder, who in 1972 became the first openly gay man ordained by a mainline Christian church. Today, four decades later, we remain united, faithful—and strong.

Join the UCC as we join our hearts, hands and voices together with the Coalition to rise to the challenges of the next 40 years. Working to protect LGBT youth who face bullying and assault in their schools, and building over 1,000 ONA congregations into a movement that can advocate for marriage equality and basic civil rights—this is the force of change! Be a part of it.



UCC COALITION FOR LGBT CONCERNS

www.uccoalition.org



www.facebook.com/ucc.coalition