

PROFILE

Waiting to exhale

A Colombian gay man crosses his fingers as U.S. functionaries ponder his plea for asylum

by Inga Sorensen

With his generous smile and warm dark eyes, it's easy to fall in love with Sven Gomez.

And the trappings don't end there. His words, laced with the thick accent of his native Colombia, ring with poetry as mellow crooning flows from the CD player in his scant but cozy apartment—what he innocently coins his “flat”—nestled on an unassuming Northwest Portland street.

At this peaceful moment, it's hard to envision this 40-year-old South American as a man forced to run, fearing for his personal well-being and that of his family.

But that is, he says, exactly who he is.

“I came to the United States to save my life,” says Gomez. “I fear what could happen to me if I went back to Colombia.”

For nearly seven years, Gomez, who describes himself as an “outspoken gay writer and activist for human rights for gays and others considered ‘abnormal’ in Colombia,” has lived in the United States. He has not returned to his homeland—a place where his parents and sister reside.

“I miss them so much, but they are in my mind and heart,” he says. “I can feel my family with me.” Tears, nevertheless, well in his eyes when he speaks of them.

He yearns to visit them, he says, but dares not if he wishes to stay safe and alive.

Gomez is one of many gay men and lesbians from other countries who are in the United States seeking asylum because they fear persecution based on their sexual orientation.

Gomez firmly believes his “membership in the social group of gays” as well as his public criticism of “the Colombian government’s violation of human rights against gays, transvestites, [and] the homeless” would place him at enormous jeopardy if he were to return.

His fears, say many human rights activists, are warranted.

According to a 1995 joint report of the Colombian Human Rights Committee, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, and Project Dignity for Human Rights in Colombia (the latter formed in 1994 to investigate, document and help end the epidemic of “social cleansing” directed toward those deemed “disposable,” including sexual minorities), violence permeates Colombian society: “Innocent, often defenseless people are assassinated each day in Colombia, whether for political or nonpolitical reasons.... Still more are tortured, ‘disappeared,’ threatened, beaten or in other ways subjected to violations of basic rights.”

According to the report, “it is not uncommon for gay bars to be closed, and patrons are continually harassed by the police and army. Police raids are not unusual.... There have even been mass killings, such as a massacre in a town called Evigado in the outskirts of Medellín on June 6, 1992. Five gay men were taken from a gay bar, El Carriel, and killed by a group of men firing 9-millimeter Uzi submachine guns.”

Juan Pablo Ordoñez, author of the report, perhaps best captures the depth and prevalence of anti-gay attitudes by sharing bits of an interview he conducted in September 1994 with Henriquez Linero, a human rights ombudsman for the district of Barranquilla.

Ordoñez asks, “What are your views on the human rights of gays and lesbians?”

Linero, the person legally responsible for defending the constitutional rights of all segments of the population, reportedly answered: “Two faggots could get married for one hundred years and they’ll never have a child; from that standpoint they’ll never guarantee survival of the species.”

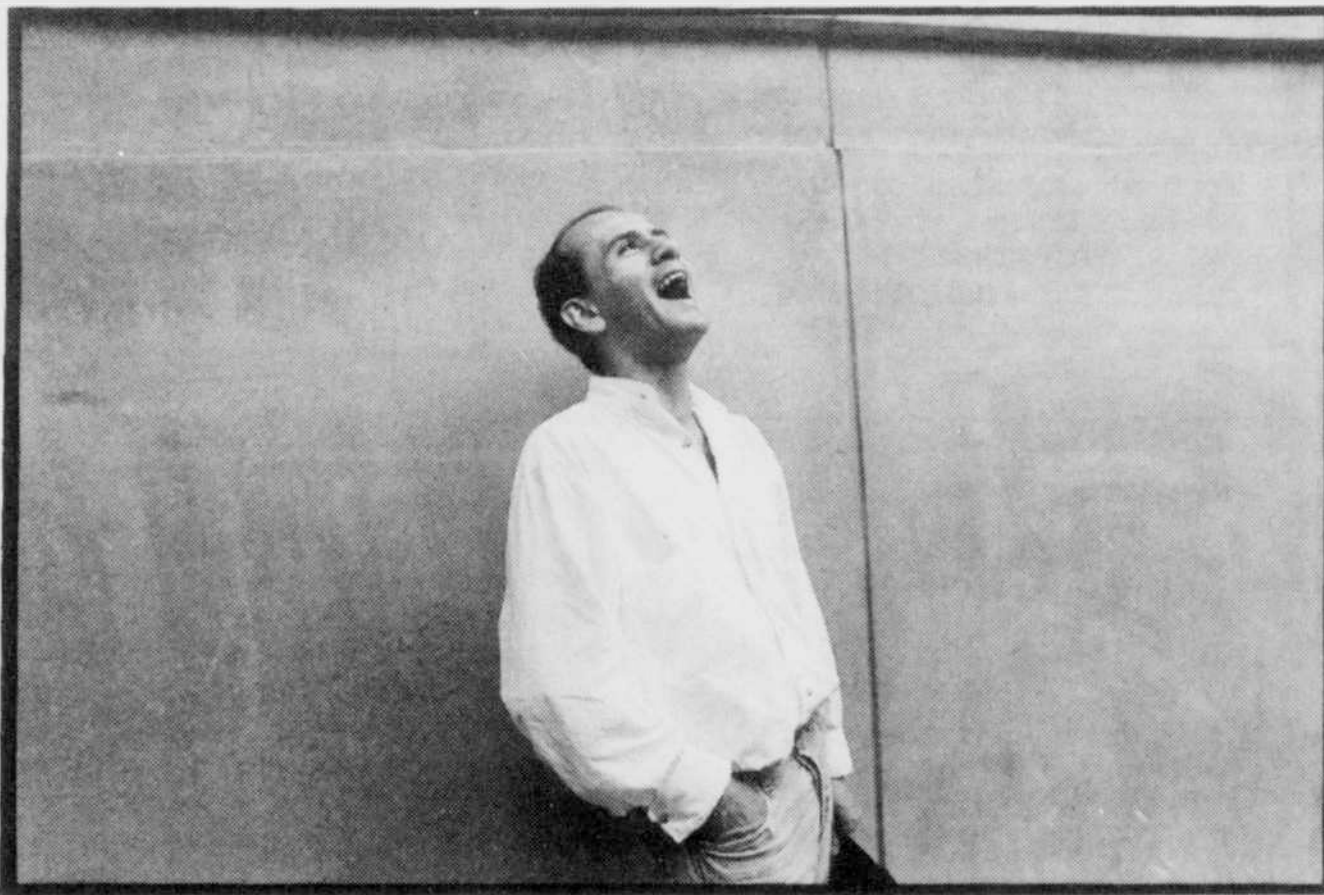
Later in the interview Linero says, “The moment a faggot begins hanging around my house, human rights are over. I won’t accept that, no way.... Woman was made for man and man for woman. That is, I’d rather have a daughter who’s a whore than a faggot son.”

Gomez traces his involvement in gay rights back to 1980, when he was part of a small group of gay men who gathered socially.

“However, when gays started being murdered, eight of us organized ourselves better and founded the Gay Liberation Movement,” he says via a statement he submitted supporting his application for political asylum.

Gomez says he handled public relations for the fledgling group, one of whose activities was to contact *Spartacus*, an international European gay magazine, asking that letters be sent to the Colombian president protesting the murder of gay men.

Gomez says in the mid-1980s “the Gay Liberation Movement came out of the closet politically in order to denounce the assassinations of gays, transvestites.... and to raise the awareness that gays did exist in Colombia and had the same rights as heterosexuals.”



Sven Gomez

In late 1986, he says, group members led a march of 50,000 unionists, sex workers, indigenous people, farmworkers and others, in Bogotá. The march was named *Sí a la Vida*, or Yes to Life, and made its way to the Plaza Bolívar, where the Presidential Palace is located.

According to Gomez, a month later threatening calls began to pour into the home he shared with his sister and parents in Bogotá.

“The first call came in the afternoon,” he says. “I answered the phone and heard sounds and then someone said, ‘Ah, you are the head of those faggots that go to the streets asking for rights. We are going to show you what rights you have.’”

Another caller purportedly warned: “Hey faggot. You better watch your ass.”

He says later calls threatened death. “They said that they would give me the same justice they gave Lorca, a gay Spanish writer who was murdered with three shots to his buttocks,” Gomez writes.

Despite the threats, he remained out and active. He says in March 1987 he became the first openly gay person in Colombia to get tested for HIV—on national television no less.

He says the purpose of the program was to encourage people to get tested. According to Gomez, gay men in Colombia were not getting tested “because of their fear that it was one way for the government to infect the gay population with HIV.... Since gays saw more and more [men]

murdered and mutilated without anything being done to stop it, they understandably were suspicious of anything that seemed to their benefit.”

From 1986 to 1989 Gomez says he also wrote for *El Ambiente*, a gay newspaper.

According to his statement, Gomez spent most of his time in 1989 at his mother’s farm in Guateque, Boyaca, outside of Bogotá, due to continuing threats.

That spring during a visit to Bogotá, Gomez says he was detained by the National Security Police, and had his identity papers confiscated.

Gomez says police often conducted roundups in the gay areas, “physically and verbally abusing the drag queens, kicking their clothing and wigs, and making everyone flee the area without looking back.”

In early 1990 on another visit to Bogotá, Gomez says he “noticed four or five armed men

sitting in a dark-colored Jeep watching my bedroom window. I fled my home by the back door and cut through a neighbor’s home to avoid detection by these men.”

That same year, fellow gay rights advocate Luis Eduardo disappeared.

“Once that happened I was even more afraid and started spending even more time at my mother’s farm and going in to Bogotá only once a month to take care of business,” he says. “Luis Eduardo’s disappearance made me realize just how serious the situation was.”

In an effort to alleviate stress, Gomez says he took a short trip to Canada to visit friends.

“I felt strange being out of my country and also felt that I had abandoned my fellow gay activists and family,” he says. “For these reasons I decided to accept my fate and return to Colombia, despite my great fear of living there.”

Within a week, Gomez says he received a call from someone threatening to kill the person he was closest to if he did not leave the country for good. “I knew then I was being watched, since these people knew that I had returned,” he says. “I knew that I had no choice but to flee the country for good this time.”

With little money or time to say goodbye, Gomez caught the next plane out, which landed him in Los Angeles. That was June 1990.

He gradually made his way north to San Francisco, where he lived for a time, eventually

landing in Portland.

“When I came to Portland I had two small boxes of books, a suitcase, and I guess about \$17 in my pocket,” he says.

When asked whether he was scared of an unknown culture, he answers: “It’s like when you go to the edge of a cliff and decide you are going to jump, and you say ‘one, two, three—’” he snaps his fingers, and finishes, “and then you go.”

With his ever-upbeat persona, Gomez appears to have hit ground like a feather. He has established close friendships in the Rose City, and supports himself through various means (from interpreting to housecleaning). He enjoys assisting those living with HIV/AIDS, and has volunteered for various causes.

All along, he has kept in touch with his native land.

“I have found out that in September 1990, another founding member of the movement, using the pseudonym ‘Adrian,’ was killed,” he writes in his statement. “He was crossing Independence Park on his way to his apartment when he was assassinated by three shots from a revolver by agents of the [police].... Independence Park was the meeting place of militant gays. Adrian’s body was found in the morgue by his family three days later.”

Gomez says another gay activist—a university professor—was abducted and his body later found in the morgue pocked with bullet holes.

According to Gomez, the university said the man had died of AIDS complications.

And still another gay comrade disappeared.

“I now believe that I am the only survivor of the original founders of the gay movement in Colombia,” he says, adding that he cannot reside safely anywhere in Colombia because of his high-profile status.

“I knew that to remain in Colombia meant that I would have to live like a prisoner and under constant stress of being killed,” he says.

Since 1994, U.S. judges in an estimated 60 cases have granted asylum to refugees fleeing persecution based on their sexual orientation.

New restrictive immigration legislation, however, could halt the slow, small gains. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, in part, prohibits aliens who have lived in the United States for more than a year from applying for asylum.

While Gomez has already requested asylum, he could get sunk in the sea of anti-immigrant fervor washing over this country.

This past March, the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service Asylum Office sent Gomez a letter saying it had not granted his request.

It maintained Gomez has, thus far, failed to establish that he is a refugee due to past persecution—or establish that there is a “reasonable possibility” he would suffer persecution in the future.

The missive further states Gomez’s claim was not deemed credible in part because his testimony about the gay rights movement in Colombia “is completely inconsistent with reports from other sources.” The letter did not specify what the other sources were.

The letter is not a denial of Gomez’s asylum application, and states his application will be considered when he appears before an immigration judge during a hearing scheduled for mid-September.

For his part, Gomez says he’s gathering documentation, as he and his Oakland attorney prepare for the proceedings.

“I am trying to enjoy my life,” he says, “and I know all my life I’ve had good luck. I have to be optimistic.”

Those wishing to file an asylum claim or receive a referral may contact the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission at (415) 255-8680 or asylum@iglhr.org. Also available from IGLHRC is a guide entitled “Asylum Based on Sexual Orientation: A Resource Guide.”