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NORTHWEST news

DEPORTED

Portland lesbian denied entry to England to visit partner

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Ramey Holsman and Kate Cooper have dreams of living a normal life together, and at times these dreams seem grandiose. They imagine the pleasures of day-to-day life as a couple; simply being in the same country at the same time would vastly improve their relationship. But restrictive immigration laws in both the United States and United Kingdom have put a wrench in their plans.

Cooper, a British citizen from Brighton, met Holsman, a native Oregonian, at a New Year's Eve party in 2002 in Astoria. Both agree it was love at first sight. Cooper was in the States on holiday, visiting her brother, who is married to an American woman.

But immigration laws in the post-9/11 era have kept them an ocean apart, with only brief stints of togetherness and thousands of dollars in phone bills. The couple had spent only six months together when Cooper's visa expired and she returned to England. Holsman's plan to spend six months in England with Cooper was thwarted by strict immigration policy and what they perceive as possible sexual orientation and racial profiling. Holsman is half Korean American.

"It's bizarre to be in a relationship where you try to live in the moment but you have to keep records and plan ahead to be together," says Cooper, who is in the States on a tourist visa.

According to British law, a noncitizen who has cohabited with his or her unmarried non-British partner for two years is eligible for residency. Cooper and Holsman worked on building up two years of cohabitation, planning to gain residency for Holsman. That proved nearly impossible when Holsman was denied entry to the United Kingdom by an immigration officer at Heathrow Airport in London.

"It's nearly impossible to build up this cohabitation time if you can't spend time in the other one's country," said Cooper, frustrated at reliving their ordeal.

On Jan. 27, 2004, Cooper waited, flowers in hand, for Holsman to land in London via Seat-

tle, to merge their lives for just less than six months, the legal length of stay on a U.S.-U.K. visa waiver program. They had purchased a round-trip ticket with a return date coinciding with the birth of Holsman's niece in Seattle, for which she wanted to be present.

But the length of stay raised red flags at the customs checkpoint, and Holsman and Cooper were held and interrogated separately for eight hours. Holsman was denied entry to the United Kingdom but granted a two-day stay on "compassionate grounds." Her luggage was searched, her address book, sketchbook and journal were seized and copied, and she now had a 2-inch-thick file with the British immigration department. She was informed that she failed to produce evidence that she intended to leave the country. For those two days, the immigration department held her passport, now stamped with a denial of entry.

Holsman says she was suspicious that, during the eight hours she waited, approximately 20 travelers came and went, but only one of them was white. She identified the ethnicities of fellow detainees as African, Asian and Middle Eastern.

In their two days together, instead of touring museums while walking hand in hand, Cooper and Holsman busied themselves by meeting with solicitors and calling members of Parliament, in a futile attempt to overturn the immigration department's decision.

With representation from an immigration attorney and a letter faxed to the immigration department by Cooper's member of Parliament stating that he believed it erred in denying Holsman entry, she was granted a second review, but was told to pack her bags to show intent to leave the country.

In the second interview, lasting seven hours, the nature of her relationship with Cooper was scrutinized, though she was told that her sexual orientation did not have bearing on the department's decision to grant or deny entry. Officers eventually decided that because Holsman owned no property, had no job to return to, had

*"We just want
to live together,
to have jobs and
get and go to work....
We just want
to be normal."*

—Kate Cooper



"He who hesitates is a damn fool." -Mae West

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