

Yomiuri (Kansai Edition): CG Linehan says Japan may be ready to accept sexual minorities (March 28, 2013 evening edition – p. 4)

By Shohei Hara, senior writer

U.S. Consul General for Osaka-Kobe Patrick J. Linehan, 60, is married to another man, Japanese-Brazilian Emerson Kanegusuku, 40. They have both publicly announced that they are gay. In his speeches and interviews, Linehan always seeks respect for the human rights of sexual minorities and calls for a “society that accepts diversity.” We asked him about his experiences and thoughts.

It was natural but kept secret

Since I was four or five years old, I liked boys and was not interested in girls. It seemed natural to me and I didn't have a problem with it, but was somehow confused. My identical twin brother is straight (heterosexual) and had girlfriends since he was in middle school. We have the same genes and were together from elementary school to graduate school, but why are we different? No one knows the answer to that.

When I was a boy, there were no politicians, singers or writers who publicly announced that they were gay, which is why I also kept quiet. Later, American society changed rapidly. When I was 21 or 22 years old, I realized that while I belonged to a minority, I was not alone.

Coming out is an everyday thing

The first person to whom I admitted that I was gay was myself, and it took time for me to understand myself. Then I told my younger sister, who is also homosexual. I gradually started to tell my friends and colleagues, and decided to come out after meeting Emerson. We met at a Tokyo sports bar in Roppongi in 2002. I was enchanted by his smile and we started living together. We got married in 2007 in Canada where same-sex marriage is recognized, and I wanted the world to meet this partner of mine.

At that time, I also told my father that I was gay for the first time and he accepted it. If this had happened years ago, I would have lost my job and my friends would have never spoken to me again.

Coming out is an everyday thing that needs to be repeated over and over again. This is because most people simply assume that other people are straight and ask without even thinking, “Are you married? Do you have children?” since only 3-4% of the population is gay.

America has changed

In the 1950s, the U.S. government would fire civil servants for being gay, and homosexuality was a crime. Homosexuals were sacked by companies without any question; they were not allowed in the armed forces or schools and could not even get a housing loan. The American Psychiatric Association regarded homosexuality as a disorder.

An incident at the “Stonewall” bar in New York in 1969 triggered the change. Gays were harassed by the police simply for drinking beer there, and they resisted for the first time. In 1977, a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors came out, and ten years later, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives did the same. Gays became more “visible” and the situation improved.

The change began with individuals standing up to demand their legitimate rights, and the circle gradually broadened, influencing the courts and politicians.

In the U.S., same-sex marriage is now recognized in nine states and Washington, D.C. Two-thirds of the states prohibit discrimination and dismissal on the grounds of being homosexual. As of last year, homosexuals are now fully accepted in the U.S. forces as well.

I became a diplomat in 1984. After joining the State Department, a senior official declared on my second day of training: "Homos, get out of here." Today, the State Department recognizes my husband Emerson as a spouse, although it's not quite the same as a heterosexual marriage. For example, he cannot be included as a spouse on my health insurance, nor be eligible for tax deductions for spouses.

In a speech last January, President Barack Obama linked the gay movement with the history of women's suffrage and civil rights for African-Americans. He called for human rights for sexual minorities, which was epoch-making.

While the situation is different in each workplace, major companies like Starbucks and Amazon have declared equal rights for gay people. This is because discriminating against them both as customers and employees is detrimental to their interests.

The situation also varies in schools. In states prohibiting discrimination by law, schools teach that diversity is a good thing. On the other hand, if parents, the local community or teachers detest gays, children will imitate their attitudes.

America still has work to do; gay people enjoy full equality in countries like Denmark and the Netherlands. The incumbent Finnish foreign minister is gay, and two of the presidential candidates in the previous election were also homosexuals. Brazil now recognizes same-sex marriage after a supreme court decision.

Take pride

Japan today is similar to the U.S. 30 years ago. Less than five local assembly members have come out as being gay, and none of the Diet members have done so. However, many people have gay acquaintances. Emerson and I have never had a bad experience in Japan. Although many people say that Japan has a long way to go to accept same-sex marriage, we believe that Japanese society may be ready.

In Japan, young gay people feel distressed and isolated, and often commit suicide. The difference between them and young Americans is that Americans know they are not alone, because there are gay singers, actors, athletes and politicians.

The problem with Japanese society is the idea that everybody has to be the same; "The stake that sticks out gets hammered down." The way to achieve a breakthrough is through visibility. Gay people should take pride in themselves, and society should accept individual differences.