



THE ROAD AHEAD

DEFENDING FREEDOM IN
AN ERA OF UNCERTAINTY

Donor Impact Report, Spring 2025





THE FIGHT CONTINUES: YOUR IMPACT IN A CHALLENGING TIME

Typically we start the new year with renewed optimism for the future of our work, setting ambitious goals for the year ahead with an energy and enthusiasm that will carry us through the coming months.

I have to be frank; the landscape that we are facing in our work is incredibly difficult right now. Recent executive orders from the Trump administration in the U.S. are a direct threat to LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers' safety and existence, and this is only the beginning. Internationally, anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-refugee sentiment is on the rise, and we are monitoring several crises that are causing the forcible displacement of LGBTQI+ people.

The most important thing I can say at this moment is this: We cannot lose hope.



AT A GLANCE

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Now is not the time to bury our heads in the sand; it is imperative that we mobilize in support of LGBTQI+ people at risk, now more than ever. An upcoming federal election in Canada is an opportunity for the incoming government to protect and strengthen important pathways to safety. As a community, we are incredibly resilient, and we can meet this moment head-on. We have faced challenging moments in our work before, and we know that we have come out of them stronger, more collaborative in our approach, and fiercer in our advocacy.

At the end of last year, you showed up in support of our work and for that, we are incredibly grateful. Unfortunately, we can't afford to wait for the next crisis to unfold; we are already in the midst of it. We will need to rely on each other to push forward. In this report, we hope to give you a clear picture of the strides that we are taking in building our capacity to face these urgent challenges.

We are excited to tell you about our plans to expand our bold and ambitious Communities of Care model, because

we know that LGBTQI+ newcomers need more supportive community integration options in the current climate. We are also sharing the story of a newcomer we recently supported, because the resilience of the newcomers we support is the spark that will light the pathway ahead of us in the coming months and years. And we are highlighting the vital role of a member of our community of donors, because the future of our work will not be possible without activists and allies like yourself.

There is nothing that inspires me more than the people behind this movement.

Thank you for your dedication, for your care, and for your belief in a brighter future. Let's take care of each other.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Devon Matthews". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Devon Matthews (she/they)
Head of Programs
Rainbow Railroad



ESCAPING PERSECUTION,
EMBRACING HOPE

JULIE'S JOURNEY TO SAFETY

For Julie, a transgender woman from Uganda, the journey to safety has been marked by resilience and courage. From childhood, she knew she wasn't like her other peers. "I realized I was different from other 'boys.' I found solace in wearing my mother's clothes, even though I didn't fully understand what it meant at the time."





Julie's school years were filled with severe bullying. "I was constantly harassed for being too feminine. But instead of breaking me, it pushed me to become an activist, fighting for LGBTQI+ rights in Uganda."

Her activism came at a heavy cost. Julie faced repeated arrests and brutal assaults by the police and faced charges for so-called "unnatural offences" and "impersonation," reflecting the hostile legal environment toward LGBTQI+ people in Uganda. "The violence I endured was unimaginable. I knew my life was in danger." After escalating threats, including attacks on her and her friends, she made the difficult decision to flee Uganda for Kenya. However, instead of finding safety, she was sent to a refugee camp, where she faced even more hardships.

"I learned about Rainbow Railroad through a friend who had also fled Uganda due to persecution. I realized I had no choice but to seek help in 2019. Rainbow Railroad became my lifeline, offering hope and a path to safety."

For Julie, being a woman is deeply personal and powerful. "Being a woman means embracing my true self, living authentically, and finding joy in my identity. Over time, I've learned that womanhood

is not defined by societal expectations but by the courage to be who you are, no matter the challenges."

Despite the hardships she has faced, she holds onto hope and offers advice to other trans women facing persecution: "You are not alone. Your identity is valid, and your life matters. Seek out supportive communities and organizations that can help you. Remember, your strength and resilience are powerful, and there is hope for a better future."

Relocating to Canada came with a new set of challenges, but Julie found solace in community.

"Community has been my lifeline. From the LGBTQI+ groups in Kenya to the welcoming networks in Canada, I've found solidarity, support, and a sense of belonging. These communities remind me that I am not alone in this journey."

Julie hopes that more people will understand the realities of trans women's lives. "I wish people understood that being a trans woman is not a choice

but a fundamental part of who we are. Our journeys are filled with courage, resilience, and a desire to live authentically. We deserve respect, dignity, and the same opportunities as everyone else."

She is deeply grateful to those who have supported her journey. "Thank you for seeing me, believing in me, and standing by me. Your support has given me a second chance at life, and I will forever be grateful. Together, we can create a world where everyone can live with dignity and pride."

While she knows the fight for LGBTQI+ rights is far from over, she remains hopeful. "The growing global awareness and support for LGBTQ+ rights gives me hope. Seeing more people stand up against discrimination and violence inspires me to believe that change is possible. For myself, I hope to build a life where I can thrive and continue advocating for others."



RISING THREATS AT HOME

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR LGBTQI+ REFUGEES IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

When LGBTQI+ people face threats to their survival, it is our community of activists and allies who have always stepped up to keep us safe. Grassroots advocacy has been essential in pushing us forward on the path to liberation.

This year, Rainbow Railroad is witnessing the systematic dismantling of refugee pathways and protections in the United States under a new administration. Globally, anti-LGBTQI+

and anti-immigration sentiment is on the rise. It has become increasingly clear that LGBTQI+ refugees, asylum seekers, and asylees need stronger community support and advocacy to ensure that they can resettle with safety and dignity.

Senna Seniuk, Rainbow Railroad's Director of Engagement, describes the significant challenges these individuals face: "While each refugee and asylum seeker's experience is unique, one near-universal truth remains – humanitarian protection programs were not built with the needs of queer and trans refugees in mind."

The Expansion of Communities of Care in a Complicated Landscape

Over the past two years, Rainbow Railroad has built and launched the Communities of Care model in the United States, mobilizing volunteers to create strong post-relocation support systems for LGBTQI+ newcomers. Senna describes the program's evolution:



“While the original U.S. partnership was moderated through our relationship with the Community Sponsorship Hub and the US government, our program has always looked and organized beyond those limitations. Now, with greater flexibility, we can set higher standards and expectations for what affirming and safe welcome looks like for LGBTQI+ people.”

In the coming months, Rainbow Railroad will expand Communities of Care across the United States and Canada to support LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers arriving through various pathways, including emergency travel support and government-assisted refugees. We will also cultivate strategic partnerships and build solidarity with grassroots organizations serving LGBTQI+ people affected by forced displacement.

Building Welcoming Communities through Key Partnerships

Rainbow Railroad will also launch a Community Access Fund to support grassroots organizations serving LGBTQI+ refugees, asylum seekers, and asylees. Through strategic partnerships, we intend to build a strong network of service providers and community activists who serve LGBTQI+ newcomers, but may lack the capacity and resources to offer comprehensive wrap-around services.

Senna shares, “We need as many community members as possible – not only to advocate for continued access to programs and services for LGBTQI+ newcomers, but also to fill the inevitable gaps in welcome. We need community partners across industries to mobilize and create holistic, affirming support systems.”

Rainbow Railroad’s community is uniquely positioned to lead this effort. “Our Communities of Care are composed of queer, trans, and allied volunteers, trained in a consent-based, trauma-informed approach that recognizes a diversity of global understandings of gender and sexuality.”

In an increasingly hostile landscape for LGBTQI+ people and refugees, now is the time to stand in solidarity – building more robust welcoming communities, where everyone can find safety, home and belonging that they deserve.

We will be sharing more information about the expansion of the Communities of Care program in the coming months. If you have questions or would like to get involved, either by volunteering or providing financial support, please email community@rainbowrailroad.org and our team will be happy to reply.

Communities of Care Across the United States



Arizona

Phoenix

California

Los Angeles
Palm Springs
Sacramento
San Diego
San Francisco
Santa Rosa

Colorado

Glenwood Springs

Illinois

Aurora
Carbondale
Chicago

Indiana

Indianapolis

Kentucky

Lexington

Maine

Portland

Massachusetts

Boston

Michigan

Ann Arbor

Montana

Bozeman

New Jersey

Wharton

New Mexico

Albuquerque
Santa Fe

New York

New York

North Dakota

Bismarck

Oregon

Portland

Texas

Dallas
Houston

Washington

Seattle

Washington, D.C.

Wisconsin

La Crosse
Milwaukee



FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION:

SARAH'S COMMITMENT TO
GLOBAL LGBTQI+ RIGHTS

For Sarah, the journey to supporting Rainbow Railroad and LGBTQI+ refugees began with a personal awakening. Coming out in 2009 and joining a support group at Toronto's 519 Community Centre, they encountered refugees whose stories of persecution shocked and moved them. "It had never occurred to me that you could be killed just for being gay," Sarah recalls. "Hearing their stories opened my eyes to how hard it is for LGBTQI+ individuals who live in countries where they have no legal protections."

The Moment That Sparked Action

Sarah's first connection to Rainbow Railroad came through Jonathan, a volunteer with the organization at the time. His dedication – leaving his job to support the organization – and his words about how \$5,000 could transform a life struck a chord. "I thought, we have to support this through our foundation!" Sarah says. They brought the idea to the K.M. Hunter Charitable



Foundation, which supports organizations helping marginalized communities, and despite much larger, more established organizations being considered, the vote was unanimous among all board members. That first donation was just the beginning.

Since that pivotal moment, Sarah and their foundation have continued to stand with Rainbow Railroad, witnessing its growth firsthand. "When we first started supporting the organization, it was tiny," they reflect. "We recently developed a new International LGBTQIA+ portfolio in our foundation, and Rainbow Railroad's work was a direct influence on that portfolio being developed."

Why This Work Matters Now More Than Ever

As the world becomes increasingly hostile for queer and trans individuals, Sarah believes Rainbow Railroad's mission is

more critical than ever. "There are so few 'safe' places for LGBTQI+ people now, and it seems that is getting worse with each passing month," they observe. "Even the U.S. feels less safe now than it did a decade ago. Across the globe, we're seeing political conservatism push back against the inroads made for LGBTQI+ rights."

At a recent donor event, Sarah was especially moved by a newcomer's story. "But I have also heard so many stories like this," they add. "The Chechens Rainbow Railroad brought to Canada in 2017 was also a poignant chapter for me. I knew people personally who reached out to help them once they arrived."

Encouraging Others to Take Action

Sarah firmly believes in the power of individuals and communities to make a difference. "People can support in so

many ways – by donating, volunteering, hosting refugees, or simply reaching out to newcomers and helping them transition to life in a new country," they say. "Speaking up and out about the reality of homophobia globally is also critical."

For those considering supporting Rainbow Railroad, Sarah has a simple message: "This is one of the most important and efficient organizations out there protecting international LGBTQI+ rights today."

Sarah feels immense pride in seeing Rainbow Railroad grow into the impactful force it is today. "I am confident that we will continue to support this organization going forward," they affirm. "It has been an honour to be part of this journey, and I look forward to seeing the impact we can continue to make together."



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