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- Sections**
- News
- Sports
- Opinions
- Features
- Comics
- Calendar

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- Dining Guide
- Display Ads
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[Home](#) > [Opinions](#)

Column: Marriage matters

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Article Tools: [EMAIL](#) [PRINT](#) [PREV PAGE](#) **Page 1 of 1** [NEXT PAGE](#)

We all have a tendency to assume that our personal beliefs are true. This is human nature, and it can be so strong that sometimes we stubbornly stand by our beliefs even when we're presented with irrefutable evidence against them. But every once in a while, something might happen to us that is so powerful that we have no choice but to reconsider what we've always believed about the world.

This happened to me last Friday when I sat in on a gay marriage discussion led by Evan Wolfson, professor of law at Columbia University and executive director of the Freedom to Marry Project. Wolfson made a compelling argument regarding why homosexual partnerships should be granted the same legal protections as married couples, but his words affected me in a way that extended far beyond legal matters. I was able to understand what it might feel like to have the government deny me the right to marry the one I love.

In his book, "Why Marriage Matters," which he referred to in his talk, Wolfson sets the stage for why we need marriage equality in America. He argues that because marriage is a legal institution, to deny any segment of the population the right to marry those they love because of their difference from the majority is simply unconstitutional. He also argues that enforcing this legal inequality offers heterosexuals absolutely no benefit whatsoever; it only serves to hurt American families that pay the same taxes and make the same contributions to society as everyone else. Wolfson believes that when someone makes the choice to sacrifice and serve their community, as many homosexuals do, it's only fair that they be rewarded with the same legal protections that everybody else enjoys. To deny them these privileges does a grave disservice to a group that contributes just as much to our communities as any other faction of society.

I liked how Wolfson focused on marriage inequality as an issue of civil rights, because the only fair way for our government to view this national conversation is by examining how denying homosexuals the right to marry affects the equality of American citizens. After all, our country's principles are based on the idea that everyone should be offered the same protections under the law. But as I listened to Wolfson talk, I began to see a personal side to this issue that I had never been exposed to before.

I am a heterosexual, and from my experience I've learned that many heterosexuals find the thought of homosexuality uncomfortable. To be honest, it's made me feel uncomfortable before, too. But even if the thought of homosexuality makes me uneasy, real people suffer when the law enforces my discomfort. Real people can't visit the bedsides of their dying partners at hospitals, real people in committed partnerships don't receive the same health benefits that I will when I am married, and real people aren't being offered the same tax benefits that I will

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I'm in a relationship right now with someone I am deeply in love with. I can't describe how wonderful it feels to be with and share my life with her. Anyone who has loved another can understand this. I can only imagine what it would feel like to share this connection with someone, this deep love, and not only have the society I live in reject it, but also have the government tell me that it "doesn't count" in its most basic legal sense. This is the sad reality that many Americans are facing right now.

Wolfson said that, "the most important benefit of marriage is marriage." I think that I'm now beginning to understand what that truly means. America has granted all of us the right to be both equal and different, and so marriage equality is as much a matter of principle as it is about denying protections to American families. Homosexuals are paying far too huge a price for being different.

