

# Changing Countries, Saving Lives

By Haydyn Shaffer, Rex Casillas, and Theo Sieber

A political activist and esteemed lawyer hailing from Ecuador, a man who saved countless lives back home has been a warm and accepting face here at Golden High School.



Señor Polo, in his free time, enjoys making soap, creates pottery available for sale on his personal site, and is a “Minions” superfan. Thanks to Polo, among others, LGBTQ+ marriage has been decriminalized in Ecuador since 2019; as for same-sex sexual activity and civil unions, since 1997 and 2008 respectively. “I grew up in a town

called ‘Pasaje.’ (pa’sa’hey) It is on the coast of Ecuador. I was trying to be a lawyer so I moved to a city in the Andes, it’s called Cuenca. I got away with a doctorate degree in law, in the city of Cuenca, Ecuador.” Señor Polo, a Spanish teacher at our very own Golden High School had lots to share about the process, and his time in Ecuador fighting for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. As Sr. Polo explained, his life while living in Ecuador was eventful, with his doctorate in law being credited to him after his move to Cuenca; Ecuador’s third-largest city and the economic center in the southern sierras of the Andes. A key aspect of his college education to become a lawyer was that all are allowed to be equal against the law. A mantra of sorts that he carried throughout his activism in fighting for human rights.

In April of 2008, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa stated “let’s be clear that the profoundly humanistic position of this government is to respect the intrinsic dignity of everyone, of every human being, independently of their creed, race, sexual preference.” What’s the next step? Here’s Andre Polo. Ecuador’s Article 516, specifically clause 1, likened homosexuality in particular to a crime, prescribing penalties of 4–8 years of jail time. As Sr. Polo explained, one person in Ecuador cannot be jailed for more than 25 years according to their criminal code. “Article 516 stated that sentences could go from 4–8 years, showing that being gay or being lesbian in Ecuador was a big crime, because of the time served. It was a really big deal. As part of my learning as a lawyer, one of the big things that the teachers were saying was ‘We are supposed to be equal against the law,

according to the constitution.’ In Ecuador, not everybody was equal”. Polo and others like him sought to change that. “We got together, and the main point was [to]... ‘Defeat Article 516.’”

And that is exactly what they did; as of 1997, same-sex sexual activity has been decriminalized in Ecuador.

Of course, it wasn’t an easy process for Polo. Facing constant persecution from



counter-activists, following ongoing death threats due to his activism, and after multiple tragedies in his community, he shaved his head and fled to America with “only the clothes on [his] back and two thousand dollars.” So Cristian Polo lands in Miami. But what about back home? Polo detailed his experience returning to Ecuador 25 years later (on the anniversary of decriminalization), in which he describes that a reporter who interviewed him for the anniversary was fired for doing so. So in short, all is not well, even on the 25th anniversary. However, Polo testifies that Ecuador is making further progress toward acceptance regardless. “The good part is, people are more visible now.

Before, it was a total crime. No organizations, no nothing. Now, thanks to defeating the law, people are coming forward.”

So what is a man of such merit doing at a high school in Colorado? Well, he loves the community here- “We are very accepting. Very open. I don’t see any discrimination here... That is the beauty of Golden.” As someone with extensive experience advocating and fighting for civil rights, Polo appreciates GHS’s ongoing culture of inclusion, and he has advice for anyone who wants to be active in their socio-political sphere, fighting for equality; “First, do your research. How can you [be] involved, what can you do to help?... Find what you think you’re passionate about and start working on it; get with a group.”