Ryan Thoreson places LGBT movement as a beacon for other global human right campaigns

By Lauren Vana, Staff Writer

In a culturally divided world, advances in the LGBT movement "gives some reason for optimism," Yale Law School Robert L. Bernstein International Human Rights Fellow at Human Rights Watch Ryan Thoreson said at his lecture "Transnational LGBT Activism: Working for Sexual Rights Worldwide" on Wednesday, Oct. 11.

"Despite significant advances in rights and recognition, LGBT lives are still considered expendable in very different parts of the world," Thoreson said discussing the rise of populist authoritarianism mentioning countries like Russia, Indonesia, and Azerbaijan.

Thoreson went on to talk about the lessons we can learn from LGBT activism, arguing that human rights workers could learn a lot from LGBT activism.

"It's a movement that has dealt with popular dislike in a lot of countries, or hostile leaders in a lot of countries," he said, "and has still managed to win rights, to persuade the public, and to make gains, both at the domestic level and internationally that seemed unthinkable ten or twenty years ago."

The interest in international LGBT activism began when Thoreson was in college and became an activist during a time when same-sex marriage bans were passing in the United States, yet South Africa legally allowed same-sex marriage relatively quickly.

"I became interested in why same-sex marriage happened so easily in South Africa and not in the U.S.," he said during an interview prior to his lecture.

Thoreson's research now focuses on how people use human rights language to argue against LGBT rights and activism.

"I hope my academic work helps activists think a little more critically about the claims they're making," he said during the interview.

Though his research and lecture focus on transnational organizations, Thoreson agrees with the importance of local activism.

"It's really grassroots movements that are changing hearts and minds around the world," he said.