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By: Wilko Martinez-Cachero

Every weekend, Ray Banguolo is greeted by an American flag, a prisoner of war flag, and a rainbow flag upon arriving at the Sayville Congregational United Church of Christ. However, in early November, he noticed that one of the flags was missing. It was the sixth time in five months that the LGBTQ+ rainbow flag had been stolen.

Banguolo, a pastor at the Sayville church, is one of many LGBTQ community members on Long Island who fear the re-election of politicians such as Lee Zeldin and Peter King in New York's 1st and 2nd congressional districts will fuel similar incidents.

"Sometimes, you do what's right and not everybody agrees, but you can't be held hostage to other people's opinions to do what you think is right," he said.

Banguolo called the Suffolk County Police Department, who referred the repeated incidents to its hate crime unit. Surveillance and overnight watches were instituted at the Sayville Congregational Church until 21-year-old Ronald Tyler Witt was arrested and charged with petty larceny hate crimes.

"I'm not happy that someone who was 21-years-old, for whatever reason, thought this was the right thing to do or a funny thing to do," Banguolo said. "It's not."

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He hopes that this experience will be helpful for the suspect in the long run. While the Sayville Congregational Church is not a political organization, they are concerned with matters of policy. Banguolo wants to make it clear that the church can be used as an LGBTQ+ respite in troubling times.

“What we do is just try to make sure everyone knows we’re here and that they’re welcomed here,” Banguolo said. “Our job is to love on people and be there to support them when the time comes. Nobody planned for the flags to be taken.”

During the midterm election, signs in favor of 1st congressional district Democratic candidate Perry Gershon were defaced with “gay lover, baby killer” graffiti. The 1st district encompasses most of Suffolk County.

“Personally, I don’t see the offense in the phrase ‘gay lover’ but I think the intention was with malice,” Zach Baum, a 25-year-old East Setauket resident and LGBTQ+ community member, said. “I

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don't think we'd be seeing these kinds of actions if Donald Trump wasn't president."

The re-election of Lee Zeldin troubles Baum, who says that the congressman has repeatedly stood alongside what he President Donald Trump's agenda, which he believes to be homophobic and transphobic.

"Years of progress under President Obama and former congressman [Tim] Bishop have been reversed as a result of this administration," Baum said. "I think any non-white or non-heterosexual has reason to feel threatened in this climate where Nazis, bigots, racists, and homophobes have a seat at the table in this administration."

However, despite voicing his opposition of same-sex marriage, Zeldin has recently supported legislation in favor of the LGBTQ+ community.

This includes the Maloney Amendment to H.R. 4974, the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act of 2017, which upholds employment discrimination protections, and a similar amendment to H.R. 5055, the Energy and Water Development Appropriations Act of 2017, which called for the barring of government contractors who discriminate against employees based on sexual orientation.

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“Both of these amendments prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity by federal agencies or contractors, and are similar to important employment and civil rights protections that are already a part of New York State law,” Christopher Boyle, Zeldin’s campaign communications director, said.

Zeldin also sponsors the Juror Non-Discrimination Act of 2017, which would ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in jury selection in federal courts.

Others continue to believe Zeldin has not done enough, including his Democratic opponent in the midterm election Perry Gershon.

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“Lee Zeldin’s alarming stances on LGBT rights must be combatted,” Gershon said. “I will continue to be a voice on this issue and the many others that impact Long Islanders, and empower our community organizations already doing critical work on LGBT issues.”

Suffolk County has been a Republican stronghold since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. He defeated his opponent Hillary Clinton by eight points and has routinely used Suffolk County as a microcosm of larger issues, such as MS-13 gang violence and immigration.

“While New York is a progressive state, I find Suffolk County to be quite conservative,” Kimberly Rissmiller, an openly transgender woman born in North Babylon, said. “I’m also afraid to work or live in Nassau County.”

Nassau County currently does not have employment and housing protections for transgender people. Rissmiller is so fearful that she has never even applied to a job in Nassau County.

“I don’t think it would be a good idea,” she said. “I would hate to be fired because some conservative higher-up finds out I am transgender.”

Peter King, whose 2nd district is composed of parts of Nassau County, also has a poor track record when it comes to dealing with LGBTQ+ issues.

“Some of the community leaders were going to meet up with [King] and he snuck out the back

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door when we went to his office,” Mila Madison, the executive director of the Transgender Resource Center of Long Island, said. “Politicians have found a way to make this a political issue when it shouldn’t. It’s about humanity. All people should have rights regardless of who they are.”

There is some solace with King and Zeldin currently in the minority in Congress.

“It would be great if our congress people on Long Island who are in the majority fight like hell for all of us,” David Kilmnick, president and chief executive officer of the Long Island and Queens-based LGBT Network, said. “Right now, it doesn’t look like they’re doing that.”

Democrats Tom Suozzi and Kathleen Rice were re-elected in New York’s 3rd and 4th congressional district, which include large parts of Long Island. Kilmnick wants them and the other Democrats in Congress to put a check on President Trump and other politicians whose views align with the president.

“This is the time for Democrats to stay strong and be united because we have a president and the Senate that is a threat and a danger to LGBT Americans, immigrants, people of colors, women, Latinos, and to our country as a whole,” he said.

“Change does come. Sometimes it comes slower than we’d like it to, but it does come and it will happen, and we’re going to turn the corner again and there’ll be better times ahead.”

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