



Rainbows on Rampart!

New Orleans City Council Unveiling of the Progress Pride Flags
Keynote Remarks by Courtney Sharp
Presiding: Larry Bagneris
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“One United Community”

Thank you, Larry, for asking me to provide remarks today. Thank you to the City Council members who took time from their schedule to join us today to send messages of inclusion to the LGBTQ community. I applaud your efforts to ensure that everyone in the city will feel safe and have opportunities to thrive.

Congratulations and thanks to the businesses that were recognized for supporting our community.

There are many talented, dedicated, transgender activists in this city who are doing important work who could be speaking to you today. It is difficult for one person to be the voice for such a diverse community. Many different personal experiences shape the lenses through which we see the world.

I am humbled to be asked to speak today because so many people have done so much work to move the community forward and I have been able to see the progress from the mid-1990s to today.

It was once unimagined that we would be unveiling a new Progress PRIDE flag and banner. It is a strong symbol that recognizes the work that has been done within the LGBTQ community and within the city. They all made sacrifices to build a more inclusive community. You have my utmost thanks.

Let's take a moment together to look up at those flags.

In 2018, graphic designer Daniel Quasar added a five-colored chevron to the LGBTQ Rainbow Flag to place a greater emphasis on "inclusion and progression". Quasar's Progress pride flag adds five arrow-shaped lines to the six-colored rainbow flag, which is widely recognized as the symbol of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) communities.

The flag includes black and brown stripes to represent marginalized LGBTQ communities of color – and people with AIDS and those who are deceased, along with the colors pink, light blue and white, which are used on the transgender pride flag.

Quasar says the main section of the flag incorporates the six-stripe flag so as to not take away from the initial meaning, while the additional elements form an arrow shape that points to the right, to represent "forward movement." They are placed along the left edge of the flag to state that "progress still needs to be made."

The 6 color stripes represent life (red), healing (orange), sunlight (yellow), nature (green), harmony/peace (blue), and spirit (purple/violet)

In 1995, the city leaders spoke of the "gumbo coalition" and recognized that our gumbo was better when we melded the various flavors together. The rainbow flag was symbolic of an inclusive community. But in reality, our community fell short in some ways. While progressive leaders quickly wanted everyone at the table to discuss and find ways to make social progress, a significant portion of the community opposed the inclusion of the transgender and gender non-conforming community. There was resistance within the gay and lesbian community.

The leaders who devoted their efforts to work for equality for the gay and lesbian community and viewed their work as social justice work, were quickly supportive of the transgender community.

Those leaders included Stewart Butler, Charlene Schneider, Jim Kellogg, and Skip Ward – all of whom are now deceased. But, they loved the gay and lesbian community and were all recognized by the legendary Human Rights Campaign for their social justice work. They did something, though, that gets to the heart of being inclusive. They created a world where we would all recognize, acknowledge, respect and celebrate the ties that bind us together as one unified community, including transgender people like me.

They did something remarkable. They took a stand with the transgender and gender non-conforming community and stood in solidarity with us in the effort to make the organizations more inclusive. They asked others in the community to join them. There was a large divide within the New Orleans LGBTQ community for several years in the mid 1990s and mid 2000s.

The late Rep. John Lewis understood that some trouble was “good trouble.” We had good trouble here in New Orleans. Remarkably, that trouble in 1998 was a precursor to what would later happen in 2007 across the U.S.

More than 400 LGBTQ organizations mobilized rapidly to take a stand against the largest national LGBTQ political organization, the Human Rights Campaign that had removed transgender protections from the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. The leaders in New Orleans planted of the initial seeds that led to the major historical shift in the national LGBTQ movement.

As a community, we grew through that experience. Like the general public, our community has groups of people who bring biases and fears that were taught to them. It is difficult to dismantle biases and prejudices. That’s the work we do every day. We must devote ourselves to that work.

In 1998, I was a member of the Mayor’s Advisory Committee for the LGBT community and the city passed an ordinance to address hate crimes. I was upset because we had worked hard to include gender identification as an expanded protected class in the new Home Rule Charter in 1995. It was a strategic move, and the Home Rule draft committee supported the inclusion. I wrote a letter to the Human Relations Commission asking why the hate crimes ordinance did not include protections for gender identification. The issue was brought before the full Human Relations Commission. Larry Bagneris was a commissioner at the time. There were many leaders of faith communities serving on the commission. Rabbi Cohn was a leader and Monsignor Morin also served.

During the second commission meeting, one of the members spoke up, and said that she could not, in accordance with her religious beliefs, support the inclusion for gender identity, and she submitted her resignation. I was sitting across the board room table from Larry and he had an immediate reaction that came from deepest part of his being. It is forever seared in my memory. You have to put that in the context that the LGBT community was deeply divided, and the probability was high that the gay

representatives on the commission could have easily stood against the transgender community. Larry provided an example of leadership that remains with me. Thank you, Larry, for setting an example for me to follow.

The commission proceeded to draft an ordinance to amend Section 86 of the Municipal Code the Human Relations Code to provide the same protections that other citizens had to the transgender community. The City Council passed the non-discrimination ordinance in July 1998.

New Orleans was the first city in the South to do that.

As a community, we grew through that experience. Like the general public, our community has groups of people who bring biases and fears that were taught to them. It is difficult to dismantle biases and prejudices. That's the work we do every day. We must devote ourselves to that work.

Rev. Howard Thurmond was the spiritual confidant to many of the civil rights leaders in the 1940, 50s and 60s. He noted a pattern that exists throughout history. That pattern still exists today. It's been applied to each minority group seeking equal rights. Justification for marginalization follows a pattern. First, they assume that it is normal to marginalize the group. From there, the justification cascades...if the marginalization is normal; then it is correct; If it is correct, then it is moral; if it is moral, then it is religious.

Religion is thus made a defender and guarantor of the presumptions.

We saw this in the recent state legislature with the anti-transgender bills that targeted children and adolescents. These transgender girls were a threat to women's sports and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. If they participated in sports with their peers, they maintained that woman's sports would disappear. They also wanted to prohibit gender affirming medical care for these children.

IF ONLY they would have taken the time to talk with the parents of these children, they would have learned that the medical care is life-saving and that the love of their parents is life-saving. The medical doctors, therapists and social workers have some of the largest hearts that I have witnessed, and they deserve recognition.

I'd like to recognize the hands that are extended to lift up the less fortunate. Many of them have experience sleepless nights during this legislative session.

What did we witness when the Louisiana House passed the bill to prohibit transgender girls from participating in sports on girls' teams? *The Advocate* reported that the conservative legislators stood up and cheered.

Let me repeat that. They stood up and cheered.

That's what happens when they believe their behavior is normal, correct, moral and, thus, based on religious foundations.

However, our community should know that there are many leaders and individuals in communities of faith who are appalled that religion is used to defend discrimination and mistreatment of members of our community. They devote a large part of their lives to dismantle the discrimination and ensure social justice for everyone. They face significant pushback from others within faith communities. They are our allies. We can be thankful for their sacrifices on our behalf. Because of their efforts, many LGBT lives have been saved.

I'd like to recognize the hands that are extended to lift others who are less fortunate.

Now allow me to relate this to something that is credited to an anonymous 70-year-old gay man.

Intimacy is a mutual exploration of a shared safe place.

Abuse is anything that takes away the safe space.

Addiction is what we do to make ourselves feel good when we don't have a safe space.

All our children desire is to be able to play sports with their peers. Like most children, they are not world class athletes. The Louisiana High School Athletic Association knows of only one transgender student, Ashton, who tried to join one high school sports team. In the fall of 2019, the association told him when he was a senior that he would have to join the girls' roster if he wanted to compete in cross country track meets.

Mandeville High School appealed Ashton's disqualification and helped him submit a "hardship application" to try to keep him on the boys' team.

The teammates did not know he was transgender. His application was denied.

Anyone can see that if these children's schools are not safe spaces if they are not allowed to participate in activities that are provided for other children. These children are more likely to experience mental health issues and have an increased potential to develop addictions. That's too high of a price for these children to pay because of political expediency.

As many of the medical professionals know, the marginalization puts these children at high risk for suicide. I ask the leaders in our city to work with us, to help us identify ways that we can be assured that all of our children, including LGBTQ children, can be safe and have their human dignity affirmed in our schools. Currently, many of these children must be homeschooled because they are bullied in the schools.

In the midst of the painful legislative session, one ray of sunshine peeked through. The New Orleans City Council passed a resolution condemning the bills targeting transgender youth. They recognized the bills were inhumane and discriminatory. Councilwoman Helena Moreno said it was important to publicly demonstrate that New Orleans did not agree with the proposed legislation. "We must show that while other parts of the state may be spewing hate, we, the city of New Orleans are about respect and acceptance of all people."

Sometimes we are called to do the right thing even if it means we stand alone. Thank you to the City Council members who voted in favor of her resolution. **Do the right thing because it is right.** Find inner peace in living a life of integrity.

Former Defense Secretary Colin Powell said:

"Pissing people off doesn't mean you're doing the right things, but doing the right things will almost inevitably piss people off."

There are three obvious fault lines in our country: race, gender and class. The "culture wars" that surround these are interrelated.

Here are seven things I have learned while living in what felt like "the Sanctuary of Outcasts."

1. There are hateful people in the world who will intentionally harm you. At the same time, there are many angels in the world who will extend a needed hand to help you. Focus on the angels, don't ignore them or take them for granted.
2. You will be scarred. It will hurt and sometimes you will be disillusioned. You will be alone. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, provided the following wisdom. ***"The great secret of life is how to survive struggle without succumbing to it, how to bear struggle without being defeated by it, how to come out of the struggle better than when we found ourselves in the midst of it. Struggle is the gift of new life in disguise ... and there is beauty in the dark valleys of life. It is called hope."*** The gifts that can emerge from the ashes are conversion, faith, courage, surrender, limitations, endurance, and transformation.
3. There are lessons in the Wizard of Oz. The wizard knew that the human qualities symbolized by brains, heart, and courage cannot be given. During their trials, the Scarecrow had been shown his brains, the Tin Man his heart and the Lion his bravery. Solutions are within us. Beware of any leader who hasn't done their inner work and doesn't have a deep sense of humility. Beware of people who are certain in situations where there is much ambiguity and will stand up and cheer after they vote to "other" someone else. People cannot tell us what meanings to make or what directions we should take in our lives. That has to come from us. Others can walk beside us...and extend their hearts and hands.
4. Live from your heart rather than your hurt.
5. Our identities are important for our psychological growth. At some point, as we mature, the identities have served their purpose and it is time to expand our awareness. The same identities that saved us when we were young can separate us from the rest of humanity. When we recognize that we are all connected to one another and we identify with everyone, we naturally shed the identity that saved us but now confines us. We are a part of a tapestry of humanity just as the Pride Banner symbolizes. Horizontal hostilities within the community based on various identities only separate us from others.

6. Sometimes we don't live up to our own ideals. Learn from those situations. Do your inner work.

7. This one comes from the author Brene' Brown. "Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen." Staying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we want to experience connection.

When we let go of our fear of uncertainty, we enter into the mysteries of life. I understand the deep need for certainty and I also understand that simplistic interpretations can provide a sense of certainty in a world where certainty does not exist. However, we are called to enter into the mysteries of life that are presented before our eyes. We will then see things that we could not see before.

In the words of Gershon Winkler at Patton State Hospital, Patton, California "A religion may start off crystal-clear, but once it drops into the reality of human diversity, it shatters into many pieces."

Like the late Abraham Joshua Heschel once put it: "There is only one truth, but many ways of misunderstanding it. The hope is not that we can succeed in putting the pieces back together, but that instead of cutting ourselves and each other on the broken pieces that we can rather hold each fragment as a precious gem in its own right."

Now for the children. My heart goes out to the trans children and their families. Now is a time when our community can make a difference in their fragile lives.

Helena Moreno knew that it was important to take a public stand against hatred and discrimination. These children have been abused by being "othered." The families have experienced trauma.

This is one of my most meaningful passages because it provides a message of hope that many children and their families need to hear. It's from the book, the *Velveteen Rabbit*.

Listen closely.

What is Real?

"Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.'

'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit.

'Sometimes,' said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.'

'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' he asked, 'or bit by bit?'

'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.'

— Margery Williams Bianco, **The Velveteen Rabbit**

Finally, I call upon us to heed the call of our deceased exemplary leaders Stewart Butler, Charlene Schneider, Jim Kellogg, and Skip Ward. They challenged the community in 1998 to be inclusive.

So, let us proceed in a way that gets to the heart of being inclusive and create a world where we recognize, acknowledge, respect and celebrate the ties that bind us all together as one unified community.

So, let the emblem of hope represented by the new Progress Pride flag live in our hearts.

Courtney Sharp