

Empire State Pride Agenda meeting

Rochester, New York
May 19, 2007

Thank you Carmen, and thanks to Michelle who's been doing a wonderful job as MC tonight. Thank you also to Alan and to everyone at ESPA and to the Gay Alliance of Genesee Valley.

It's great to be in Rochester tonight. When I first received the invitation to speak to all of you, I jumped at it for two reasons. The first is that I love any opportunity to celebrate the tremendous work of ESPA throughout New York State. And the second is that, believe it or not, this is my first visit to Rochester.

I say this is hard to believe, because Rochester and New York City have long been the two major centers of activity and progress for ESPA. Our cities have stood hand in hand in the fight for LGBT rights. Whenever progress was made in one place, the other was sure to follow. And while I'd love to say that New York City was always the pioneer in New York State, Rochester boasts a laundry list of accomplishments that says otherwise.

With the election of Tim Mains in 1985, this city became the first to elect an openly gay council member in all of New York State. That early act paved the way for former New York City Council Member and now State Senator Tom Duane, as well as for myself and for so many other LGBT elected officials.

Rochester began offering domestic partner health benefits to city employees back in 1994. Of course New York City had started doing that in 1993... I'm not saying it's a contest, but still...In 2004, NYC opened up a Dinosaur BBQ, but you had blazed the BBQ trail by opening up one way back in 1998.

By 2001 you had passed a law extending nondiscrimination protections based on sexual orientation as well as gender identity and expression.

New York City already had a nondiscrimination law for sexual orientation, but not to be outdone we extended it to gender identity and expression the following year.

And in March 2004 you began recognizing out-of-state marriages for same-sex couples for all city services – a full year before we were able to accomplish that in New York City.

In the decades since the struggle for LGBT rights first began, our two cities have seemingly alternated in terms of who was able to accomplish what first.

I think a bit of healthy competition has proven very successful in this case. And to anyone who knows the history of Rochester, your position at the forefront of the Civil rights movement should come as no surprise.

This, after all, is the home of Susan B. Anthony, who devoted her life to championing women's suffrage and women's rights. And it's the home of Fredrick Douglass, who worked tirelessly for abolition and civil rights for African Americans.

Right here in Rochester, two American heroes were working simultaneously in support of two civil rights movements that some argued were completely unrelated. But by working together, the two communities found common ground, and both movements were left stronger as a result. Each recognized that a civil rights struggle couldn't exist in a vacuum – that the fight for the rights of some must be a fight for the rights of all.

In a similar way, our own community has grown larger than one individual struggle, and has taken its place in the overarching civil rights journey that has directed the course of our nation's history. And what began as a small activist community has grown into something larger and more universal.

Back in March, I had an experience that reminded me of the ways in which we have transcended old roles and stereotypes. As many of you know, this year I once again chose not to participate in New York City's St. Patrick's Day Parade because of a continued refusal to allow our community to march openly and proudly.

Instead, I accepted an offer from Dublin city officials to participate in their parade. I marched with my partner Kim on one side, and my 80 year old father on the other, in a parade that has always been open and inclusive.

I went with the purpose of marching in a parade, representing New York, the United States, and in a larger sense the entire LGBT community. And we were met with a traditional Irish welcome and greeted with open arms. As we marched, there was not one single hateful comment or sign of protest coming from a crowd of tens of thousands.

But while we were there we had an opportunity to play a part in another struggle for human rights that has been going on for centuries. Our visit came a week before the initial deadline set for power sharing in the North of Ireland.

We were asked as a delegation from the New York City Council to meet with leaders of both major political parties in the North – the largely Protestant Democratic Unionist Party which is loyal to England, and the mostly Catholic Sinn Fein, which supports an independent Irish republic.

Well, it turned out that while meeting with the Democratic Unionist Party, we were surprised to learn that we were actually going to be sitting down with Dr. Ian Paisley,

leader of the DUP. Dr. Paisley is an infamous religious and political figure in the North, with a long record of using incendiary anti-Catholic rhetoric.

In all his years as DUP leader Dr. Paisley had never met with a community delegation of Irish-Americans, so this was really quite a stunning turn of events. And since Dr. Paisley is a true religious conservative, I'm fairly confident that I may also have been the first openly gay person that he had ever met with.

Many of you know that I am the first woman and first openly gay Speaker, but I am also the first Irish Speaker. At a different time, my visit would have been seen exclusively as that of an LGBT elected official on a LGBT civil rights mission.

But even though my original purpose for visiting Ireland was widely known and widely publicized, in 2007, my presence was also seen as that of a leading Irish-American elected official, a presence they seized upon to help forward the Irish peace process.

I was there as the head of an American delegation, who just happened to be gay. Our delegation was looked to for our leadership experience. And we were even called upon to convey messages between both political parties and to the English government.

Looking around this ESPA gathering tonight, we don't only see a room full of openly gay men and women. We see doctors and lawyers, police officers and firefighters, politicians and stockbrokers, teachers and social workers, people in every field and from every walk of life. We are no longer seen first and only as LGBT, but evaluated like anyone else based on our strengths and weaknesses, our accomplishments and our goals.

Duffy Palmer, who we honor tonight, was not chosen by Governor Spitzer to be Director of Education because he is gay. He was chosen because of his experience in education, his dedication to New York State, and his commitment to seeing all of our children succeed. Congratulations again Duffy; we couldn't be prouder.

Last January, I was chosen by my colleagues to serve as Speaker of the New York City Council. They didn't choose me because I'm openly gay, or because I'm a woman. They chose me because they felt that I had the qualifications and ability to best represent the Council and the people of the City of New York.

It has been an amazing place for me to find myself, given that I came of age with the LGBT rights movement. There was a time not so long ago when I spent much more time protesting on the steps of City Hall than working inside it. And as many of my fellow activists in the LGBT movement know, I had my share of arrests.

These days I have a seat inside City Hall. And I'm not sure what I could do to get arrested, considering I travel with a police security detail.

And my responsibilities have changed as well. I now represent not just my district, but the entirety of New York City. I'm charged with overseeing over 56 billion dollars in taxpayer money.

Now my day-to-day actions are not always specifically related to LGBT issues. But just like Duffy Palmer and other LGBT officials in government, I am guided in everything I do by the experiences we all share. These experiences form the prism through which we view our work, and I think we are all more effective and inclusive leaders as a result.

And this personal journey that some of us have taken – from activist to elected official, from the megaphone to the podium – that journey truly reflects our journey as a community. In New York City, what began as small pockets of activism in Greenwich Village has spread to all five boroughs.

There are now communities in Queens and the other boroughs where you cannot get elected if you don't say that you're for gay marriage. Even Staten Island, long known as a conservative holdout, has elected an openly gay State Assembly Member.

It wasn't long ago that coming out in favor of marriage equality was considered political suicide. Yet last year, in part because of the leadership of the Empire State Pride Agenda, Eliot Spitzer was able to say that he would introduce legislation legalizing gay marriage without any fear of repercussions. In fact, that promise barely created a ripple, and so greatly has the acceptance of LGBT New Yorkers grown that it wasn't an issue as he proceeded to win in a landslide victory.

But without ESPA and all of you, none of this would have happened. ESPA has made it possible for LGBT elected officials and our straight allies in New York to thrive. The Pride Agenda has gone from core groups of activist supporters in Buffalo, Rochester, Ithaca, Syracuse, Albany and NYC to having tens of thousands of supporters all across the state today.

And thanks to ESPA, we've won over 55 new laws and administrative policies on the state and local level providing protections for LGBT New Yorkers, and making ESPA the most successful state-based LGBT rights group in the country.

Many of you in this room have devoted your lives pushing for government policies to protect the rights of our community. But while we were doing that, we were also trying to open hearts and minds, to create a state in which citizens – gay and straight – now expect human rights for all.

And we have not fought alone. We had allies in the religious community. Right here in Rochester, places of worship like Downtown United Presbyterian, Lake Ave. Baptist,

Open Arms Metropolitan Community Church, Temple Sinai, Third Presbyterian, and First Unitarian have all been at the forefront of bringing pride to the pulpit.

And we have had allies in the business community. Here in Rochester, major companies like Xerox, Eastman Kodak, and Bausch and Lomb have been at the forefront of bringing pride to the workplace. And I can't tell you how happy I was to hear about positive hiring practices and benefits at one of my favorite Rochester institutions, Wegmans. We have a Wegmans by my weekend house, and so I was very pleased that I didn't have to boycott it and hamper my Memorial Day BBQ plans.

There was a time when our only recourse was to boycott or pressure government to act in the hopes that the business and religious community would follow. Now it is often the case that businesses, schools, and houses of worship set the bar that we in government must rise to meet. And in the end we are all forced to respond to an increased demand for universal rights and protections.

We, along with our allies, represent such a large segment of the community that businesses can ill afford to have discriminatory practices. They know that if they don't offer equal protections, we won't work there. Schools know that if they don't offer equal protections, we won't send our kids there. And governments know that if they don't extend full protections, we won't live there.

So we've been able to set our focus on goals that once seemed beyond possibility. Battles fought have paved the way for both more specific and more universal rights and protections. The City Council recently passed a bill – now signed into law – that will extend protections for domestic partners far into the future. From now on if the City offers any benefit or service to married couples, it will have to guarantee them to domestic partners as well.

Meanwhile pioneering ESPA programs like Pride in my School, Pride in the Pulpit, and Pride in my Workplace, which the Council is proud to fund, are helping make sure that all New Yorkers can feel comfortable in the places they call home.

But while we celebrate our victories, we recognize that more work is left to be done. The recent murder of Michael Sandy in New York City was a painful reminder that hate and prejudice still exists, and can still lead to tragedy. We must and will do more to combat hate crimes in our cities and throughout New York State. So out of our sorrow we draw increased resolve to prevent such tragedies, and to safeguard every member of our community.

Similarly, when we suffered a setback last year in the fight for marriage equality, we also didn't let it weaken our resolve. We continued to push forward, and now, with the support of Governor Spitzer, we are poised to see marriage equality become law in the State of New York. And while this bill still has a long way to go, we know that if we continue to push more of our legislators to open their eyes to justice, its passage is inevitable.

So while we continue to work against hate crimes, while we continue the fight for marriage equality, and while we keep our eyes always on the larger picture, we are building upon past victories in small but significant ways in communities throughout the state.

We now have a real and permanent seat at the table, and while the voice of opposition may be great at times, we are marching ever closer to full equality. Rochester's own Frederick Douglass said, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." So we continue in our struggle, knowing that our progress cannot be denied.

I want to close tonight with one final story. While we were in Ireland this March, and meeting with Dr. Paisley, the conservative Protestant, I made the same offer to him that I made to Sinn Fein, the Catholic party.

I said, "Dr. Paisley, I want you to know that we in New York City are very excited at the prospect of power sharing and of a lasting peace here in the North of Ireland. I know that as you work to rebuild the North, one of the biggest challenges you're likely to face will be economic development. In New York, we've had some real experience with that sort of challenge from when we worked to rebuild after 9-11. And I'd like to offer both my staff and the Mayor's staff to provide any advice we might be able to offer during this transition."

Dr. Paisley replied, "I would very much appreciate that, especially because I don't really have any friends in New York City. Sinn Fein has friends there, but all the friends I have in the United States tend to be in the Bible Belt."

And I said, "Well Dr. Paisley, I can honestly say I don't have any friends in the Bible Belt, so this might be a great chance for all of us to meet some new people." Our journey is far from over, but we continue to find new allies each day, and sometimes in the strangest of places. And while we face tremendous opposition, we know that, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, the arch of human history always bends toward justice.

I have no doubt that we will soon see the day when true equality comes to New York State, and I will continue to work with you here in Rochester to see that become a reality.

Thank you.