

2009 GALA CHORUS CONFERENCE

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Keynote Speech

Lynne Bowman, Exec. Dir., Equality Ohio

Thank you, Jeffrey, for that introduction. And thank you all for the welcome and of course, thank you to the organizers for the invitation to speak today. As my partner would tell you, there's nothing I like more than talking about the work towards achieving equality...and she really appreciates you giving me the opportunity to do so here today, thus giving her ears a break at home! But seriously – thank you. I'm honored by the invitation.

So, welcome to Ohio; one of the worst places in the nation to be gay! Yep, at the state legislative level we tie with the likes of Mississippi, South and North Dakota, Wyoming, South Carolina and Nebraska in terms of “safe” places. Ohio actually doesn't have any laws protecting or recognizing LGBT people or our families. As the Executive Director of Equality Ohio, our 4 year old statewide organization focused on achieving equality for LGBT people, I have the challenge of working with people in Ohio to change that... to make our state a place where everyone can feel at home regardless of where they live, work, or play. To make our state a place where people actually want to come and visit – and not just because of the Buckeyes ☺ O-H

But I'll bet you'd never know Ohio as a state was so unwelcoming to LGBT people from your time here this weekend, right? That's because you're in Columbus, one of the most welcoming places in our state. Not *the* most welcoming, of course. No, that honor goes to Toledo...our own little gay safety zone in rural northwest Ohio. But Columbus is right up there towards the top – and I hope you've had a great time and felt a warm welcome in our Capitol City.

The difference between our local and state laws in Ohio has some history. See, we have incredible activists across our state that have been working for years to make their part of

the Buckeye State a place where people can be safe and respected. Actually, as dismal as we are at the state level, when it comes to protections for LGBT people at the local level, we're proud that Ohio ranks in the top 5 in the nation. We have over 20 cities that have some form of law protecting or recognizing LGBT people and our families. And all of that is due to people locally who have taken the initiative to make change happen in their own backyard with the best resource they have available to them... their own passion. Ohio is a better place because they were willing to take the sometimes scary step to use what they had to make a difference. We're a better place for each of you to live or visit because of each of them.

PAUSE

I'm here this morning to give a keynote to your weekend of work and learning. The things I've seen about your time together indicate that you're discussing how you, in your roles with GALA Choruses across the nation, can have an impact on social justice. How you can fulfill your mission of creating social change through music. Fair warning – you're probably not going to hear from me anything you don't already know. You're here because you believe in the amazing power of what you do. My hope from the podium is to help you find just a little bit more inspiration, maybe send you out of here just a bit more energized about what you do than you already are. Oh – and to entertain you through dessert.

Let me start by telling you how much I admire the work that you all do. Not the social justice work, or the changing hearts and minds stuff, we'll talk about that in a bit. No – I just plain old admire the music and production.

See, one of the things that people may not know about me is that I LOVE MUSIC. Love it, love it, love it. And I really love choral music. Throughout High School and College, I was in concert choir, show choir, church choir. I accompanied the children's choir, anything I could do to be around choir music. As a matter of fact, I even went to college for music education because I wanted to teach music and direct choirs. Of course, things

changed and I ended up graduating with a Bachelors Degree in Music Theory and Composition. Obviously, I'm not using that degree now...but it was a perfect match for who I was at the time and I still love choir music.

Music is just so important in my life. It always has been. There's hardly ever a time that I don't have something playing in the background. Whether it's at the gym in the morning, driving in the car across the state (and singing along loudly enough to garner some odd glances from the cars I'm passing) or just making dinner for my partner – there is always music in the air. As a matter of fact, when I think about it, all of the important memories in my life have a song associated with them. In essence, my life has a soundtrack.

The first song I ever learned was taught to me by my mother. Apparently, I had to know my phone number before I was allowed to go to pre-school. Since I was having trouble learning it, she developed a song to help. Now, almost 40 years later, it still pops in to my head every once in a while.... 3-6-3-3-1-0-3....3-6-3-3-1-0-3. She knew that music has the power to make something mundane into something important and lasting.

And so it continued..... whether it was Marlo Thomas and Friends teaching me about getting along with people in “Free to Be, You and Me”...or those crazy Saturday afternoons growing up when we'd clean the house to the sounds of Tevye and his daughters (I still do that today)...or dancing with my brother to ABBA's Dancing Queen – first when we were little just for our parents and then at his wedding 20 years later.... Music helps me connect to who I am.

I bonded with my partner over Seagram's, candles and the mellow tunes of Neil Young's Harvest Moon (yes, a lesbian cliché)....and then left her (albeit briefly) to the empowering beat of Martina McBride's Independence Day (don't worry, there was no abuse as depicted in the song...but I left on the 4th of July...yeah, not too creative, huh?). To Chumbawumba's I Get Knocked Down I got over my parent's divorce...to Debussy I

made it through the pains of late night college study and with a little help from the theme song to Rocky, I survive my marathon and triathlon training.

Now, I know I'm not "special" in this aspect. Music is an incredible art form that has the power to reach beyond just what a person hears and truly impact who they are, how they think about things and how they chose to act. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said, "Music is the universal language of mankind".

The movement towards social justice has its own soundtrack as well. For me it is sounds like *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot...* and other negro spirituals from the south. Or the opening call of the bugle at rallies during the Women's suffrage movement in the early twentieth century – using those notes to draw people's attention to the outdoor gatherings so the suffragists could reach as many people as possible with their message. Tunes like *We Shall Overcome* of the Civil Rights movement or the amazing folks songs in the 1960's that spoke of peace, love and understanding to a generation caught up in war. (as an aside – one of the highlights of my life was the night I got to sit down with Peter, Paul and Mary after one of their concerts...) And most recently, the stirring sounds of Yo Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman during the inauguration of the 44th president of the United States of America. Each of these events, each of these parts of the movement, contributes to my soundtrack of social justice.

And what of our piece of the social justice movement? What about equality for LGBT people? Do we have a soundtrack? I believe we do...and like a mix tape from your high school sweetheart, each person's may be a little different... but when I think about the soundtrack of our movement the things I hear include the voice of Elton John who is a hero in his own right for the work he's done for HIV and AIDS. I hear the opening sounds to the Ellen Degeneris show (the original one, y'all) and to Will & Grace. And I hear the heartbreaking lyrics of Melissa's Scarecrow, reminding us all of the pain one young man endured because of hate.

But I don't only hear those things. My soundtrack of equality also includes the Cleveland North Coast Men's Chorus and their performance with Bernadette Peters. It includes the Columbus Gay Men's Chorus production of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat with the Columbus Children's Choir. It includes the Twin Cities Chorus trip to perform in Birmingham, Alabama to help raise money for Equality Alabama. And it includes the sounds heard in the Rotunda of the Ohio Statehouse as all of Ohio's choruses came together to celebrate the victories we experienced as a statewide community here in Ohio in November of 2006.

I believe that the part of the social justice movement that is focused on LGBT equality must include the incredible sounds of our choruses. You are a significant part of our soundtrack. The opportunity you have to touch people, to make them think about things differently than they may have before, to challenge their world view, is special among the work that it will take to achieve our equality. You alone occupy a space where the message of equality can be shared, and therefore heard, in Longfellow's "universal language".

Each decision you make: about where you will perform, how you use your resources to reach an audience, and what the songs are that you will sing...each of those decisions has the opportunity to impact the type of soundtrack we have in the movement. You literally can choose between singing to the choir – or not.

Will you only advertise in LGBT spaces? Or will you use the resources you have to advertise in places where an ad about a "GAY CHORUS" might cause some eyebrows to shoot up over the morning coffee? Will you only perform in our safe urban centers? Or will you challenge your family and season ticket holders to join you in the rural areas of your state where a show from those singing gays might touch that one parent who has been struggling to reconcile with her daughter's orientation...or where that isolated young boy can see that "yes, Virginia, there are other people like me in the world".

Will you actively seek out opportunities to partner with non-GALA choruses, or will you stay working within the community because it is easier and we're all strapped for time and if there's anything that successful collaboration takes, its lots of extra time? Will you, ultimately, put yourself and your choirs out there to take the opportunity in fresh and scary and totally unsafe ways not only continue to be our soundtrack for LGBT equality within the social justice movement.... But maybe, just maybe... impact the individual soundtrack that a person has in their own life by providing access, open a heart, or changing a mind.

Pablo Casals said that *Music is the divine way to tell beautiful, poetic things to the heart.* As a member, director or staff of a GALA Chorus in the United States, you have the divine gift to reach hearts, and therefore change minds, with your musical poetry. Like our local activists across Ohio who have used their passion to make change happen, through your passion for music you have the opportunity to help us see a better tomorrow. I would challenge each of you to use it for all its worth.

From those of us working beside you in the movement – thank you for making our jobs a little lighter. From those of us living in the US as LGBT people – thank you for making our lives a little better. And from those of us who just plain love choir music – thank you for making our souls a little happier.