

Good afternoon, thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you. I have to start by saying how impressed I've been with how you all have been handling yourselves throughout this entire ordeal. Your courage, determination, and persistence is not just commendable – it's quite admirable. The whole world has been watching these events unfold, and you've not only made Franklin County proud – you've made people around the entire world burst with pride! I've gotten quite the geography refresher just looking at all of the places around the country, and around the world, that are sending you their love and support. You are not just taking part in history – you are helping **write** history. I want you to just take a second to look around you and take this all in. These are truly days you'll remember for the rest of your lives.

Let me start by saying that all of us up here today are fully committed to equality for everyone. Please forgive me in advance if I misuse a pronoun, or if I don't seem fully inclusive by sometimes lumping the lesbians in with the gay men, and so on. I understand there is a full spectrum of LGBTQs, but sometimes I may simply refer to all of us as “gay” just for simplicity's sake. Just know it's not my intention to misclassify or leave someone out, so if that happens – please forgive me.

So, who the hell am I and why am I here? My name is Gary Wright II and I am here to support your GSA. I want to briefly share my personal story with you, tell you why your GSA is so important to me, and then let's talk about the path ahead of us. I know none of you here today are interested in hearing my life story, so I'll try to be brief. My intention is to share the life lessons I've learned with you, so please bear with me.

I was born in Tuscumbia, AL, which is a small rural community much like your own. I knew I was gay from a very early age, but because I had never been exposed to any LGBTQs, I had no concept of gays and lesbians. As a teen, I moved to Huntsville, AL which is a somewhat larger town. It was there that I first fell in love with someone of the same sex, but I was **so** young, naive, shy, and confused. His name was Aaron. One night we camped out together, and all night long I stayed awake, just staring at my wannabe boyfriend as he slept. All of society was telling me one thing, but my heart was telling me something totally different. That night I accepted the fact that I was gay, and so I decided to finally profess my love to Aaron. But before I could muster up the courage, Aaron told me his mother was moving out-of-town and he had to go. I was devastated, and so I never told Aaron that I loved him, and I never found out if he felt the same way. All of my life I have regretted that mistake. One day out of the blue, I get a call from Aaron who's upset and tells me he's considering suicide. I did everything I could to talk him out of it, but after we hung up the phone, I never heard from him again. I'm assuming he carried out the act, and it completely destroyed me. I had no one to talk to about it, so it pushed me so far back into the closet, that I decided I'd **never** come out. In high school, I chose to just not date anyone, or go to any dances or proms. I grew up feeling so isolated and I felt like I was broken. I missed out on so many things in life. I don't want any of you to make that same mistake. It sounds incredible now, but would you believe that until I was 20 years old, I honestly thought that there were only three gay people in all of north Alabama? Yeah, I told ya I was naive!

Seriously though: As a young man, there were so many days I that I contemplated suicide, and there was **absolutely no one** I could talk to about it. If my school would have had a GSA, I would have had someone to turn to for support. Sometimes it doesn't take a phone call to prevent a suicide. Just knowing that there **is someone** to call can be a great comfort to someone who is in crisis. I can also say without a doubt, that if we had a GSA in my school, there are several of my friends who might still be

alive today. That's just one of the reasons why your GSA is so important to me, but there are many other reasons. Reasons why we should **all** care about the fate of this GSA.

On October 1st, 1991 I enlisted in the Navy and I took an oath to "support and defend the Constitution against all enemies – foreign and domestic." At the time, I had no idea what was meant by "domestic enemies" but **now** I certainly understand what it means. I was stationed near Washington DC when the huge gay March on Washington took place. A shipmate of mine, who I guess had good gaydar, grabs me and says, "We're going to DC this weekend!" I had no idea the March was that day. Y'all remember when CNN Headline News used to repeat itself every thirty minutes? Well, okay, some of you are too young to remember that, but there we were - two sailors at a massive gay pride parade. The next thing I know, that video of us is "going around the world every thirty minutes" and I had no clue what to do about it. *Did I really just get outed by CNN???* Well, I proclaimed my innocence and talked my way out of trouble, but I was still too scared to come out of the closet. My eyes had been opened, though! I went from never being exposed to an LGBT, to being in the middle of the largest gathering of them in US history. It was so liberating... And then I had to go back to the real world. I remained in the closet and rose through the ranks of the Navy in record time, and even became a work center supervisor on my ship. Before and during the days of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, everyone in the military openly expressed their animosity against gays. One day, a guy on my ship was being bullied, and, as I was required to do, I reported the incident to my chain of command. They wanted to know **why** I cared so much if "a gay" was getting picked on. Well, They Asked – and so I Told. I told the truth. And, just by speaking up for someone being bullied, I found myself being quickly discharged from the Navy and my military career came to an abrupt end. Since the Navy broke the rules by asking me first, my attorney said we might could win my case and overturn DADT. But by that time, I was receiving death threats and several people made it known that if I returned to the ship, I'd be going for a "very long swim." I chose to accept an honorable discharge, but as a civilian I started my work as an activist. Even though we'd always been on the right side of history, it took us 17 long years to repeal DADT. I know it's hard, but we have to be patient. The great Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.*" These great battles of justice aren't won overnight. They can take much longer than we might like, but they **are** eventually won if we persist in the right ways. My, look how things are accelerating, and look how far we've come! [Talk about theories on why things have accelerated so quickly]

I don't know how closely you've been following the fight for marriage equality in other states, but down in Alabama, it's been one hell of a fight. Even after the Supreme Court ruling, today we still have 14 counties in Alabama who aren't issuing marriage licenses to anybody just so they don't have to issue one to a same-sex couple. Trust me, we're still working on that! Much like Tennessee, we have some religious zealots and some real lunatics in public office. Y'all might have heard of Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore and his crazy legal antics. We won marriage equality in Alabama nearly a year before the Supreme Court ruling, yet Moore slammed the brakes on it. In Alabama, our county probate judges issue marriage licenses, so Moore uses his power as Chief Justice to order them around. Well, we remained calm and just worked smarter than him. The probate judges had traditionally married people at the courthouses, but they stopped performing weddings so they

wouldn't have to marry a gay couple. In their minds, they thought that no Alabama preacher would dare perform a gay wedding, but they miscalculated. Again, we remained calm and just worked smarter than them. A large group of us became ordained ministers, and we held a massive Wedding Week in Huntsville. I think we performed 127 free same-sex weddings that week. It was an amazing event! Seeing the majority of our community supporting us. So, then the Alabama Supreme Court completely fabricates a legal case and stopped all of the wedding bells. They wanted us to fight it out in each of the 67 counties, thinking none of us would have the money or courage to do so. Again, they miscalculated. Again, we remained calm and just worked smarter than they did.

Much like I did for y'all, I called up every attorney and rights group I knew and asked for help. With the help of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, I filed a class-action lawsuit to cover every same-sex couple in the state of Alabama **and** we got a federal injunction against all 68 probate judges. And, the Alabama laws that were enshrined in our state constitution that block same-sex marriage have been found to be unconstitutional by a federal court. My lawsuit is still ongoing, but Alabama has lost every appeal at every level. We won at the 11th Circuit federal court of appeals and even the Supreme Court denied Alabama a stay from our injunction. Now, the Supreme Court ruling in Obergefell has permanently cemented our victory, and we expect the federal court to make our injunction a permanent one very soon. So, in January, we organized a rally in Montgomery to remove Roy Moore from office. And get this: Just to hammer the message home, after the rally we held a **legal** gay wedding on the steps of the Alabama Supreme Court building.

So, think about how fast things are moving and the time interval between each big civil rights victory. From Stonewall to the March on Washington was roughly 20 years. The lifespan of DADT was 17 years. The latest round of marriage equality battles took less than a decade. Even without a national ban, getting rid of the practice of conversion therapy will only take a couple of years. And, I think we'll see more LGBT discrimination protections fall into place within a few years. We are living in such an exciting time, and I'm so glad we're not standing on the sidelines as spectators. As you can see, there's a much better view, and it's much more exciting from the middle of the playing field!

Let me quickly tell you a little about one of my heroes and inspirations, Bayard Rustin. He was a gay man who was responsible for the success of the Civil Rights Movement. He helped Martin Luther King organize everything, but because he was gay man, you'll only see him standing in the background. There's a big lesson for us there: **Even when you're pushed to the role of an outsider – you can still change the world!** Bayard once said, "*We need, in every community, a group of Angelic Troublemakers.*" Think about that phrase for a moment. Angelic Troublemakers. That was his way of saying that for change to happen, we need troublemakers to stir up the status quo and to question authority. The troublemaking is pretty easy, it's being Angelic that's the hard part. Bayard was saying that we can never win using harsh words or insults. We have to cause trouble, but do it in an Angelic way. That's why it's so important to choose your words carefully, and to carry yourself about in a respectable manner during activities like this. We can't let the other side goad us into behaving badly. They'll only use our harsh words against us. Please remember that phrase "Angelic Troublemaker" as you move forward in your activism.

I do understand how hard it is to act Angelic when you're being beaten over the head, though. Our Roy Moore, just like your **John Wimley** is completely deluded and misguided. And Roy does the exact same thing that the opposition to your GSA does. He paints us to be this big gay conspiracy who have some big gay agenda to destroy all of the civilized life in the universe. They have portrayed us as these evil stereotypes who are spiteful and angry. That's why it's so important for us to control our public image. We have to choose our words carefully, or else we only flesh out the stereotypes they want to stick us with. I am so proud of y'all for handling this the right way, because when we're happy and respectable people – it really makes them look like total idiots. But if we behave badly, it only reinforces the negative stereotype that some people have of us. We have to be those Angelic Troublemakers that Bayard talked about.

I want to share some lessons that I've learned from my own massive legal battles, that I hope will help you. First, Be persistent! Realize that even if you're right – you don't always win on the first try. If you're denied at the first level, keep pushing it uphill. There's always a higher level. We have three branches of government: Executive, Legislative, and Judicial. They act as checks and balances to each other. If you exhaust all of your options with one branch of government – never forget about the other two! For full LGBT equality to happen, we have to engage **all three** of those branches. If you exhaust all three, then you just vote in new leaders in each of those branches. None of this happens though, unless people like you and I take responsibility, take action, and hold our government accountable. Use Your Voice!

The Future: Don't Worry!

"The [Alabama Supreme] Court has alternate pathways from which to choose, but not a choice of destination." -- J. Stanton Glasscox (Amicus Curiae in Alabama Policy Institute v. King)

Changing Times / no gay bars – instead of being segregated, young people now intermingle with each other.

Coming out: No need to “come out” when you live as your true self.

So in closing I just want y'all to know this: Each of you are so bright, and you each have so much to contribute to society. I want all of you to know that you are truly loved and appreciated. You are not broken. There is nothing wrong with you. It is society that is broken and needs to be fixed. It may be hard to see that from your current perspective, so I hope you will trust me on that. Thank you for patiently listening to my story, I hope you can take something away from what I shared with you today. Please remember to continue to use your voice and to never give up! Love Wins. No, scratch that. Love has already won – we just need to go into this Board meeting and prove it to some folks who apparently haven't heard that news yet.

Thank you, and best wishes to all of you!

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