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Gay Rights Are Civil Rights

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Our biggest tragedy as a country was the enslavement of Black people who were stolen from their native lands and forced into slavery. In order to end this tyranny, courageous people risked their own lives in what has become known as the Civil Rights Movement. This movement was forged on the backs of People of Color and has become a force that has changed the face of America. Because of its success it now serves as a powerful model for every civil rights movement that followed.

There is a saying that history repeats itself and without a doubt that is what is currently taking place in this country with the gay rights movement. People who supported slavery, denied white women and people of color the right to vote, were all on the wrong side of history by denying people's basic human and civil rights. And today, there are many who are still on the wrong side of history by denying gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gender Americans basic civil rights.

We are governed, in theory, by a document that allows all citizens the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and where all people are treated equal. Yet it is very apparent that gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gender Americans are exempt from these equal rights. That is how it is now, but not as it always will be, because as history demonstrates, justice will eventually prevail, but unfortunately it always takes a fight.

This country was founded on the premise of protecting the minority view, of allowing all voices to be heard and to provide equal rights for ALL Americans. Democracy has never been a majority rules proposition and nor should it be. Many fled to this country to escape religious persecution. Now, many of those very people's ancestors are the same people persecuting gay Americans today.

Same-Sex Marriage

The religious-right has taken it upon themselves to be the torchbearers for denying equal rights to gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gender Americans. They assert that permitting same-sex marriage would jeopardize the institution of marriage. It is challenging to take this claim seriously given that heterosexuals have a divorce rate of close to 50%. You can't blame that failure on gay people. In fact, it is hard to believe that same-sex couples could do any worse than their heterosexual counterparts in the marriage department.

As a lesbian couple, my wife Dawn and I were legally married in the great state of Massachusetts, which was the first state to permit same-sex marriage with all of the rights and benefits that go along with it. We have since moved to Maryland, a state that does not recognize nor permit same-sex marriage. As a result, we no longer have the rights that we had once experienced in Massachusetts including health care. We are now once again relegated to second-class status.

Yet history is repeating itself. Just as same-sex couples are now denied the right to marry in most states, there was another group of people in our history as a nation who were also denied the right to marry. It was not until 1967 that inter-racial marriage was legalized. As a result of the case of Loving v Virginia, all race-based legal restriction on marriage were prohibited. Opponents believed inter-racial marriages to be repugnant, abhorrent and an attack on morality. Sound familiar?

In 2006, South Africa became the 5th country to legalize same-sex marriage. This is impressive given apartheid was legal until 1994 and where the impact of unequal treatment is still apparent today. South Africa has done what the United States has yet to fully grasp; they have taken a lesson from their own history and are determined not to repeat that painful chapter by imposing injustice on a different group of people.

Military--"Don't Ask Don't Tell"

Until the 1954 decision of Brown versus The Board of Education, legal segregation existed in the U.S. Military. Black soldiers have participated and died in every war this country has fought and has done so with distinction.

The 1994 passage of the Clinton's administration of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy prohibits anyone who "demonstrate(s) a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts" from serving in the armed forces of the United States, because it "would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that are the essence of military capability."

To date, over 12,500 gay and lesbian soldiers have been forced out of the military as a result of "Don't Ask Don't Tell". These soldiers have served with distinction. They are willing to lay down their lives to bring democracy to other countries, yet they are denied equal treatment in their own. Military men and women have been trained to handle all situations and yet we have dismissed 12,500 well-trained soldiers because some of the heterosexual soldiers are afraid they may make a pass at them? The United States military is over-taxed with our involvement in so many regions of the world and we cannot afford to lose so many qualified and talented people.

It is time that we as a country learn from our past mistakes. These mistakes have taken a huge toll on all of us. Some history does not bear repeating.

flow is now coming from the other person, the one who just said the offensive comment. Your role becomes much like that of an interviewer, asking them questions about their experience and how they arrived at the perspectives they hold. Soliciting information from them serves two important functions. First, the burden of conversation is placed upon them. They have to explain their position and ignorance, providing you insight and a better understanding of why they believe what they do. Second, it provides you with the opportunity to ask questions that will challenge their perspective and perhaps will leave them questioning their own behavior.

Just remember that the measure of a successful intervention is not that the other person's attitudes and beliefs are changed, for we have no control over that outcome. The success comes in speaking our truth.

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Dr. Maura Cullen is the author of the bestselling book "35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen the Diversity Gap". She is a highly-acclaimed diversity trainer who has educated and inspired people worldwide in over 400 universities and organizations on how to be more inclusive and authentic when communicating with others. She is widely considered one of the nation's foremost authorities of diversity issues today.

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