

# Queer New World

**Troy Williams, Executive Director, *Equality Utah***

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*Speech delivered at the Equality Utah Allies Dinner, October 20, 2015*

**H**i everybody! We are so excited to be together with you. Our favorite people all in one room tonight.

This past June, when marriage equality became the law of the land, I did an interview with our friends Kerry, Bill and Gina from [Radio program] *Radio from Hell*. I was there to help concerned listeners brace for the Rainbow Apocalypse. And Bill asked me: is your job done now? Are you going to close your doors now? My response was: Hell No – we are just getting fired up!

Marriage was a tremendous victory – an achievement all of you should be proud to own. The marriage movement was a vehicle that successfully shifted American attitudes toward the LGBTQ community on an unprecedented scale. We shared our stories, we shared our love – and we saw hearts across this nation open. That's how change happens.

But our job is not done, and it won't be done until all people are equal under the law. And, tonight, we are excited to lay out Equality Utah's priorities for the years ahead. It's the answer to the question that everyone has been asking: what's next? And let me tell you – it is fierce.

Despite our many victories, we have important work to change laws, open minds and challenge prejudice. Last year Laverne Cox

stood on this stage and declared a state of emergency for transgender women of color – who disproportionately experience violence and poverty in America.

In addition, our transgender brothers and sisters face discrimination in basic access to healthcare. There is not one insurance company in Utah that currently covers trans-related care.

**This. Must. Change.**

Tonight among us are members of Utah's dynamic trans community – we have representatives from TEA [Transgender Education Advocates] of Utah, Familia, the LGBT Resource Center, the Transgender Inclusion Project, among others.

Lourdes Ashley Hunter famously said, "Every breath a trans person takes is an act of revolution." We agree. Thank you for your breath, thank you for being part of our family.

*Priority: Trans Health Insurance*

In 2016 a major priority will be working alongside the transgender community to engage Utah's insurance companies. We will identify model policies in other states, work to implement federal guidelines, and get our trans family access to the healthcare they need!

*Priority: Hate Crimes Legislation*

We also need to address the issue of violence. We are all vulnerable; in 2006 the

Utah Legislature passed a Hate Crimes bill. But, because some legislators were so adamant that LGBTQ people not be named in the bill, they watered it down to no consequence. This means, as a statute it is utterly unenforceable – for any marginalized group. It is symbol, but with no substance. In nine years since the Hate Crimes law was passed, not one prosecution has come from it. Last December when our friends Rusty and Max [pseudonyms] were assaulted outside of [nightclub] Club Jam, Salt Lake County Attorney General Sim Gill lamented that the current law could do nothing to help them. It was a toothless tiger.

This. Must. Change.

In 2016 we will work with Senator Steve Urquhart, who will sponsor an enumerated hate crimes bill to protect all people – regardless of race, sex, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity. We are building a coalition that includes Sim Gill, the local NAACP, the Anti-Defamation League, the ACLU of Utah, the National Center for Transgender Equality and many faith groups. No Utahans should ever fear being a target of violence. In this we all stand united.

*Priority: Public Accommodations*

One hallmark of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was the extension of public accommodations laws. The idea here was that if you were a business operating under a state issued license, then you cannot discriminate against people regardless of their race, sex, ability or religion. Right now in Utah, it is still legal for a vendor to say, "we won't serve same-sex couples." Now, nobody here wants to have a homophobic baker sticking their fingers in our wedding cakes. But, we

don't ever want to live in a state where it's legal for any business to put up a sign that says, "NO QUEERS SERVED HERE."

This. Must. Change.

So, Equality Utah is working with the Kilo Zamora, the Human Rights Commission of Salt Lake City, members of the city council, and the mayor's office to craft a model public accommodations ordinance. And, we will go, city by city, county by county, passing ordinances until sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are protected equally under state law.



And I want to say a word about wedding vendors – because astonishingly this is the gay rights battleground in America right now. Here’s what I know. Gay photographers, hair-stylists, event planners and bakers have been helping straight people get married for decades! We’ve literally kept the heterosexual marriage industry afloat. And, we don’t discriminate because 1) we don’t want to, and 2) it is against the law. What we are asking for is nothing more, and nothing less, than equal protection under the same state and federal laws.

### *Priority: Conversion Therapy Ban*

Another area of focus deals specifically with LGBTQ youth. We have in the audience a group of remarkable women. They are Mormon mothers who love and support their queer children.

Now, I don’t know what it is – but for some reason or another, Utahans seem to have a large number of gay and transgender babies! And, every single one of them is born perfect. Conversion therapy is the odious practice of trying “cure” individuals of their same-sex attraction. The American Psychological Association and every reputable therapeutic organization in the nation condemns conversion therapy as dangerous and inhumane.

In our audience tonight is a young woman named Alex. Her memoir, *Saving Alex*, is being published this spring [2016] by Harper Collins. When Alex came out as a lesbian at 15 she was sent to an unlicensed residential treatment program for 8 months to “cure” her homosexuality. What she described during her captivity in therapeutic boot camp is harrowing and abusive. Thanks to legal support from [Utah law firm] Ray Quinney and Nebeker, Alex won the right to be legally protected as a gay teen. We are all going to be seeing and hearing a lot more from Alex.

We will work together to expose these practitioners who offer false promises while

profiting off their client’s fear and shame. In 2016 Equality Utah will introduce a bill sponsored by Senator Jim Dabakis to ban conversion therapy for LGBTQ minors.

This. Will. Change.

Thank you for being here Alex. Thank you for your courage to tell your story. In our Queer New World, we don’t Pray the Gay Away, We Pray the Gay to Stay!

*But we are not stopping there!*

As Harvey Milk so eloquently spoke, “Rights are not won on paper, they are won only by those who make their voices heard.” Harvey was the first openly gay city supervisor in San Francisco. Here in Salt Lake City, Stan Penfold was our first openly gay city councilman. Please welcome to the stage, executive director of the Utah AIDS Foundation and councilman of District 3 in Salt Lake City, Stan Penfold.

*Stan:* Thank you Troy. Harvey Milk is a true icon for the LGBTQ community. He set the standard for coalition building and collaborative leadership. We all wish Harvey could have lived to see this day, where so much progress that he worked for has been achieved. He gave our community everything that we might live equal -- including his own life.

Harvey was murdered by a gunman on November, 27 1978. He foresaw his own death when he uttered the words, “If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door.”

In 2015, the closet doors are at long last being destroyed!

Salt Lake City has a proud tradition of honoring our nation’s civil rights icons. We immortalize their names so that future generations will be inspired to further the work. We named 600 South after the great civil rights leader: Martin Luther King Jr.

We named 200 East after the hero of the Montgomery Bus Boycott: Rosa Parks.

On 500 South we pay tribute to the Hispanic labor rights organizer: Cesar Chavez.

Tonight, on behalf of Salt Lake City, and with the support of Mayor Ralph Becker and the City Counsel, we announce our intent to rename 900 South: Harvey Milk Blvd!

We propose that the street run from 1300 East to Central 9<sup>th</sup>. Equality Utah approached the city last year with this request. We loved this. It is fitting in 2015, a year where so many of Harvey's hopes and dreams have been actualized, that we honor this visionary. Harvey's name on a prominent downtown street will continue to send a message to LGBTQ Utahans that they have value, they are loved, and they too can change the world. Thank you.

*Troy:* Thank you Stan. We have the opportunity now to inspire the next generation. The world needs us to boldly live our equality. And, we can't do it alone.

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**Troy Williams** has been a community organizer and a leader in the LGBTQ community for over a decade. He was the recipient of the 2013 Allies Award from Equality Utah. Much of his work have been featured in print (e.g. Salon, The Nation, and OUT Magazine) and on television (e.g. Anderson Cooper 360, State of the (Re)Union, and the 2012 SHOWTIME Special Larry Wilmore's Race, Religion and Sex). Troy won Utah Broadcaster Association awards in 2013 and 2014. Troy was also the producer on the TLC original series *Breaking the Faith*.

**Editor's Note:** In April 2016, the Salt Lake City Council approved the resolution to establish Harvey Milk Boulevard.

