

SPEECH FOR THE DUNDAS ROTARY CLUB

March 31, 2009

My name is Lyla Miklos and I am a queer activist.

Coming to this identity and realization has been a lifelong and never-ending journey. I will share some of that journey with you today.

I was born on Baffin Island in 1974 in what is now known as Iqaluit, Nunavut; but was then called Frobisher Bay, North West Territories.

I lived a very sheltered life. My father (a former Rotarian) was running the Family Business - The Frobisher Inn - along with his parents. My Mother after working for the CBC as a journalist was now raising four young children. My parents both raised Catholic changed their religious affiliations as their children grew. My Father became agnostic. My Mother converted to becoming a Jehovah's Witness after connecting with a woman doing missionary work in the Arctic.

For the bulk of my formative years I had no context or perception of the words queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. They were not a part of my paradigm. Tom Boy though I may have been, the hormones hadn't kicked in yet and liking boys or girls on any level other than just friendship just simply wasn't on my radar.

Ironically it would be my homophobic faith that would introduce me to the concept of homosexuality. In a Watchtower magazine, there was an article about a gay man who rejected his homosexual desires and decided to dedicate his life to becoming a Jehovah's Witness.

This provoked a discussion between my Mother and I

ME: So Mom some guys like guys and some girls like girls?

MOM: Yes.

ME: Why is that wrong?

MOM: It isn't how God made us and intended us to be with each other.

ME: It would seem that some people are made that way. This guy likes other guys, but is trying to pretend he doesn't. Why would he do that? God must have made him that way, so why would it be wrong? Why would God care if some guys like guys and some girls like girls. If you are a good person, give back to your community, pay your taxes, and don't commit crimes why does it matter if you like guys or girls?

MOM: Homosexuals are the work of Satan. All these imperfections in humans are Satan's doing. After God's War of Armageddon all shall be restored to the way he intended. Then this man will longer have to fight against his unnatural desires.

This subject would not come up again between my Mother and I for many years. In 1982 I would move "down south" to Hamilton, Ontario.

While my hormonal teen years raged I started to get a little confused. I found come Junior High that both boys and girls were capturing my imagination and attention. I got a copy of Sassy - a young teen girls magazine - out of my school's library. There was a question from a young girl in the monthly advice column.

Dear Sassy,

I am attracted to another girl in my class. Is that normal?

Dear Reader,

It is normal and it is just a phase. Don't worry it will pass.

Well that took care of that! It's just a phase. Problem solved.

Then High School hit. Around this time in my life my family discovered a new subculture - Science Fiction fandom. My Father and my three younger brothers and I would regularly attend Science Fiction Conventions.

At a Con in Toronto I decided to attend a panel discussion while my Father and Brothers, went off to check out something else. The panel discussion was entitled "Homophobia and Heterosexism in Star Trek". I listened to folks discuss all kinds of ideas and subjects I had never heard discussed before using language that was both foreign and yet oddly comforting.

After the panel was done I approached the panelists and told them that what they had to say really spoke to me.

This elicited a chorus of "Oh my God! You're Coming Out! Good for you!" Spontaneous hugging. Lots of Welcome to the Team comments. They asked me to wait while they got some pamphlets and brochures about their homosexual organizations and told me to feel free to call them if I had more questions or needed support.

I hid all of their paraphernalia in my backpack and didn't look at any of it during what was perhaps one of the longest car rides of my life with my Father and my three brothers from Toronto back to our home in Hamilton.

Once I got home I started to read what I had been given. In essence it was just too much for me to process at that time. I also knew I couldn't keep this stuff in the house. My family had no concept of boundaries or respect for eachother's privacy.

Throughout High School I grappled with my sexual, political and religious identities. It wasn't until my final years of high school that I was able to grasp and get a clear picture of who and what I was and what I wanted to be.

I was fiercely independent.

I was highly opinionated.

I was a burgeoning Feminist.

I was passionate about politics.

And I suspected I was Bi.

One thing was certain. All of this was a complete disconnect with my identity as a Jehovah's Witness. It was time for me to leave the faith I was raised in. So much of who I am was wrapped up in my faith, but I knew it was the right decision. It was time to find something else to put my energies and devotion into. Being a Jehovah's Witness was no longer a part of who I was to become.

College Began. And somehow I managed to encounter the most screwed up student on campus. A fellow media student. 10 years my senior. And male. We

engaged in a rather tumultuous relationship, which was extremely dysfunctional and more often than not dangerously toxic, yet inspite of all the insanity this person showed up in my life at just the right moment in time.

One day he phoned me at home and told me that he thought he was bi. I told him I thought I was too. When the sentence "I am a Bisexual" was said out loud and came out of my mouth it felt like a lifetime of burdens and weights had been lifted off of my shoulders. Even more compelling was being loved and accepted by the person on the other end of the phone rather than feared and rejected.

Then began a series of one on one meetings with several of my closest friends as I came out to each one of them. The best part of this story is that I never lost a single friend during this process. If anything we all became closer and for the most part their responses were somewhat the same . . . "I kinda knew all along Lyly. I'm glad you finally figured it out."

Still I was not prepared to come out to my family. I already had a very rocky and unhealthy relationship with my parents. This could be the final cherry on top of the proverbial Sundae.

One morning fate was not my friend. I was using my father's very old and clunky fax machine to send off a resume. As per usual it wasn't working and I called my father down to the basement to help me out. He sent off my resume for me, but he also decided to read it from beginning to end. At the bottom of the resume under Volunteer Activities the following was listed.

Vice President of Mohawk Pride.

My father asked me what Mohawk Pride was?

I don't know what compelled me not to make something up on the spot, but I blurted out a Social and Support Group for Gay and Lesbians students at Mohawk College.

My father's response was a quiet Hmm . . .

Well, that went well I thought.

Until I came back home from college later that afternoon.

I walked in the front door of my parent's home only to hear my Mother bellow. Lyla Miklos come to the kitchen right now. What is this your father told me about you running a club for Gay students at your college? Are you saying your gay? Why do you need to tell everyone that your bi? Can't you just keep that to yourself? What if you are wrong? How do you think you are ever going to get a job in the media if people know that you are queer? Do you mean to tell me that you actually want to have sex with a woman? That would mean you would have to have oral sex with a woman? Don't you find that disgusting?

I won't quote everything that transpired in this give and take, but will only say that my coming out conversation with my parents abruptly ended once my mother revealed a little too much about what she does and doesn't do with my father.

Since I so dramatically came out to my parents this then meant that I also needed to have one on one conversations with each of my brothers. And again the responses from my brothers were the same as those of my friends: "Not all that surprised Lyla. Suspected all along. Kind of stumped that you digs guys, but glad you finally figured it out."

While in college I and my fellow GLBT students broke lots of new ground and started up many a controversy in our college. As a result of our activities some of us became know to the local media and other GLBT activists in the city.

A reporter from the Spectator asked me if she could interview me for a story she was writing about Ellen Degeneres coming out in her sitcom. I said sure. Talked to her for two hours on the phone. Was very honest and open, but asked her to please not use my last name in her article. I was still living at home with my parents. They were not handling my coming out too well and I didn't want them to be harassed with hateful phone calls because of what I said. She agreed to respect my request . . . kinda . . .

Here are some of the highlights from the front page 1997 Spectator story in which I was not to identified by the reporter . . .

Lyla's slow and painful awakening to her gayness . . .

Raised a Jehovah's Witness . . .

22 years old . . .

It wasn't until last year that she gathered the courage to come out as bisexual to her three younger brothers . . .

Vice-president of Mohawk College's gay club for students . . .

Thanks! Why don't you tell them my bra size and weight and height while you're at it!?! I had acquaintances of acquaintances coming up to me in the mall telling me they read the article about me in The Spec.

(groan)

There is nothing quite so humbling as having your local newspaper out you to the entire city.

And yes this also resulted in an extended period of tension between me and my parents who felt I had shamed the entire family.

Since I had now become something of celeb in GLBT circles in town I caught the eye of the Hamilton Pride committee.

The year previous I went to Toronto Pride for the very first time. The overwhelming feeling of belonging when you are surrounded by thousands of people who look and feel and understand who and what you are was soul refreshing. I didn't feel alone.

But my jubilant sense of the world being a better place was tempered by the sudden reality check that the GLBT community doesn't think as one monolithic whole. As I came to my first Hamilton Pride meeting I saw divides in vision based on gender, class, age, race . . . and so on.

The most disappointing moment was when elders and leaders in my GLBT community talked about having a Pride Event by secret invitation only. No media. No politicians. The room was filled with fear. No one who was organizing this event wanted to be out, loud and proud. I decided to remove myself from the group as pride and closeted were two thoughts that didn't connect for me.

I joined again a year later and stayed on organizing events for a decade. And what a decade it was. From a secret afternoon picnic that wasn't even publicized outside of our local GLBT bars and social spaces to a weeklong event that gets national coverage and includes mayors at our rallies, hundreds marching in our

parade, local businesses supporting our awards dinner and an outdoor daylong festival among other events.

I was there to witness and be front and center to so many firsts in my local GLBT community as a result of being connected with the organizing committee of Pride. One of those being then Mayor Wade's Chief of Staff asking our committee to meet with the newly elected Mayor to forge a new and positive relationship with our GLBT community. Mayor Bob Morrow had made quite a stink a decade earlier when he refused to proclaim Gay Pride Day and was taken to court as a result. Wade wanted to signal a new beginning with his administration. He was the first Hamilton Mayor to speak at our rally and march in our Parade.

But sometimes it felt with every step forward we made, we then took five back. One of these moments was in 2004 when Ronn Mattai a local business owner and gay man was brutally beaten nearly to death by a young homophobic man. This vicious, violent, brutal and horrific attack knocked the wind out of our entire community. We all started to retreat to varying degrees into our closets of fear.

As a result of making a connection with Evelyn Myrie and Wayne Marston the year previous - I unsuccessfully ran against them for an NDP nomination in Hamilton West - I became a member of the Community Roundtable of Strengthening Hamilton's Community Initiative. SHCI had been formed in response to the destruction of Hamilton's Hindu Temple shortly after 9/11. I had approached Wayne during our nomination race and told him that I checked out his campaign website and looked into the anti-racism and anti-hate group he was affiliated with. I told him that it was curious that a group that was fighting hate didn't have any GLBT representation on it when my queer community is one of the top groups targeted by hate crimes. On the night of our nomination meeting he told me he shared my comments with SHCI they wanted me to come on board as a representative for the GLBT community.

Within a week of the attack on Ronn, then Mayor Larry Dilanni called an emergency meeting of SHCI. That Saturday morning at City Hall leaders from every faith, business sector, cultural group and political stripe agreed collectively that Hamilton will not be a city that promotes or tolerates hate. Perhaps the most moving moment was to hear Ali Cheaib the head of the Arab group in town and Javid Mirza the head of the Muslim group in town both proclaim that in spite of their religion's anti-gay stance they could not idly sit back and accept anyone in their city fearing for their lives just for being who they are. After experiencing irrational hatred from people following 9/11 they understood this kind of fear. They

vowed to go back to their communities and share this stance and help educate them too. This was a profoundly powerful and moving moment. It was a ray of hope in a time filled with far too much darkness.

Another pride came and went, but soon my personal life would be going into overdrive. I had been estranged from my family for almost five years. After far too many years of conflict and strife I abruptly left my parents home shortly after college and never looked back nor communicated with them again. Their insistence that my queer activism was a blight on my family's good name and reputation was one of a collection of reasons for this decision.

During this time of estrangement my mother was slowly and painfully dying of breast cancer.

In the summer of 2004 after not seeing or speaking to my Mother for five years I prepared to finally reconnect with her. I was filled with dread. I didn't really want or need this, but some sense of duty and a need for closure for the both of us was pushing me forward. Our relationship had always been filled with turmoil. I didn't think this moment was going to be all that different. It was a shock to my system to finally see her. She was a shell of her former self. She was nothing but skin and bones and could barely speak above a whisper. I thought it best if I just sat beside her and just be there for her. I think that was all she really wanted. Then something amazing happened . . . she asked me a question . . . "So how did Hamilton Pride go this year?" My two brothers who were in the room with me had expressions on their faces just as stunned as mine. So I entertained my devout Jehovah's Witness Mother with stories of my adventures attending and organizing Pride events that year. Things had come full circle. My mother finally had accepted who and what I was. It was a stunning moment I will never forget. Only two and half weeks later my mother would pass away.

As I was making funeral arrangements for my mother I got a phone call and an e-mail. The Hamilton police had raided one of our local Bathhouses.

A bathhouse for those of you who don't know isn't a place to go and have a bath. It is a space where men who like to have sex with men meet to have sex with each other. These spaces have been an historical part of our queer movement and integral part of our gay male culture. Toronto Pride was born out of the violent gay bathhouse raids by Police in the early 1980's. Police destroyed and vandalized bathhouses then beat and arrested the male patrons. These men (many of them married and in the closet) would then have their names and

pictures posted in the local paper. The majority of these men had their lives destroyed and many of them took their own lives and committed suicide. Only four years prior to the Hamilton raid I attended my first women's only bathhouse in Toronto. It too was raided by Police. The violation I felt by having someone else's sense of what is morally right and acceptable imposed by force and intimidation was both repugnant and frightening.

Yet here it was happening all over again. Our community was outraged and in-between funeral plans I was rallying the community, the media, politicians and fellow activists to wake up and pay attention. Pay attention they did, but it was sad to see so much progress regress yet again.

Two years later in 2006 I would be organizing the tenth anniversary of Hamilton Pride. As we got our vehicles and marchers in place for the journey from City Hall along James Street to Pier 4 Park a young Portuguese boy with a huge Portuguese flag asked if he could join our parade as his team had just won a game in the World Cup and his community was celebrating and we would be marching right into the heart of it. Why not indeed!?!?

Sadly all of this would go horribly wrong. As we passed York Street and got closer to the thick of the James Street North Business Area we saw a sea of green and red shirts and they didn't look happy. For the first time in 10 years we were being taunted with homophobic slurs from onlookers and some people were getting violent. I was nervous and afraid and also feeling a profound sense of guilt for leading my GLBT community into this hate filled mob. I kept my cool and asked my fellow GLBT leaders to do the same and to not respond to any of the taunts or threats. I didn't want to see anyone get hurt. As we got to Christ Church Cathedral where the bells would toll to honour every year the AIDS Network had been in existence and honour all those we had lost to this horrible disease the mob got louder and larger. The Police had to form a human barrier between us and the "soccer fans". It was horrifying and demoralizing on a profound level. I stayed with the Parade until every last marcher got through the mob without incident. Once I got to the Park I checked in with all the vendors and volunteers to make sure they were OK. I got a lift from a friend who dropped me off at Jackson Square shortly thereafter. I needed to get some rest before I was to sing at a Pride concert later that night at Centenary United Church. I stopped at a store to grab something to wear for the concert. As I took a shirt off a rack I started to shake uncontrollably. I hadn't realized just how much shock and fear I was in until that moment. So many people retreated back into closets because of this incident. A young man who came to the event from a small town near Caledonia tried to kill

himself. It was his first Pride event ever. It was a struggle to keep our fragile community united and out.

It is now 2009 and Hamilton's queer community has evolved yet again. Now the acronym is LGBTQ for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. We have a community centre called The Well. We still have Pride and The AIDS Network. McMaster University has a LGBTQ Centre. The City and Police have GLBT Advisory Committees. There are a large handful of faith communities who are now open and welcoming to the LGBTQ community. The Pride Pages I gave out to all of you lists all the GLBT owned or friendly business in the area along with community groups.

On the surface it certainly seems like we have achieved everything we need to and won every battle. Gay Marriage is legal. There are all kinds of laws in the books stating that it is illegal to discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation. We have such an embarrassment of riches in Canada when it comes to LGBTQ rights far too many queer Canadians have fallen into some kind of malaise when it comes to recognizing that they are still members of an oppressed minority.

We are programmed as queer folk to always test the room to make sure it is safe before openly talking about our queer selves. We talk in code. We self censor. We are always aware that the threat of violence against us is real. We are made to feel inferior and not normal about our sexual identities. We are told that we are some kind of an aberration that needs to be fixed or examined as if we are an exotic plant. Our society politely tolerates us, but that is not the same as accepting us.

Last December, I went to see the movie *Milk* starring Sean Penn. As I watched the real-life story of Harvey Milk unfold - one of the first openly gay men to ever be elected to public office in North America - I flashed back to so many moments in my queer activist life. Harvey Milk was a City Supervisor in San Francisco. There was a moment in the film where a young gay man who is on the verge of suicide calls him. This was a moment that I have experienced far too many times. It is a responsibility that as LGBTQ leader can be daunting at even the best of times.

I was also sadly reminded that despite how far we have come not much has changed. In the film *Queer Elders* in the community in positions of power and privilege advise younger activists to keep their heads down and not to make too much noise. Harvey Milk fighting Prop 6 in California in the 70's had an eerie

parallel to the battle against Prop 8 in California in 2008. Only a few months ago thousands of gays and lesbians had their marriages null and voided due to a referendum question. The will of the people was to revoke civil rights. All of these startling events reminded me that we must always be vigilant and never become complacent about our rights. For if Prop 8 proved one thing. Our rights can be taken away as easily as they were granted.

After watching the film Milk my political fires started burning again. I've had friends tell me for years that I should run for office. I've always told them to save their pipe dream for someone else. After getting a taste of politics a few times I knew that the grueling gristmill of a full fledged political campaign is not the kind of stress I want to put myself through. Nor is having every bit of my personal life become public fodder. But then I heard Sean Penn speak the words of Harvey Milk and I started to become inspired again.

Here is an excerpt from Harvey Milk's famous hope speech

I know we are pressed for time so I'm going to cover just one more little point. That is to understand why it is important that gay people run for office and that gay people get elected. I know there are many people in this room who are running for central committee who are gay. I encourage you. There's a major reason why. If my non-gay friends and supporters in this room understand it, they'll probably understand why I've run so often before I finally made it.

You see there is a major difference - and it remains a vital difference - between a friend and a gay person, a friend in office and a gay person in office. Gay people have been slandered nationwide. We've been tarred and brushed with the picture of pornography. In Dade County, we were accused of child molestation. It's not enough anymore to have friends represent us. No matter how good that friend may be.

The black community made up its mind to that long ago. That the myths against blacks can only be dispelled by electing black leaders, so the black community could be judged by the leaders and not the myths or black criminals.

Like every other group, we must be judged by our leaders and by those who are themselves gay, those who are visible. For invisible, we remain in limbo - a myth, a person with no parents, no brothers, no sisters, no friends who are straight, no important positions of employment. A tenth of a nation supposedly composed of stereotypes and would be seducers of children. We must give people the chance

to judge us by our leaders. A gay person in office can set a tone, can command respect not only from the larger community, but from the young people in our own community who need both examples and hope.

The first gay people we elect must be strong. They must not be content to sit in the back of the bus. They must not content to accept pabulum. They must be above wheeling and dealing. They must be - for the good of us all - independent, unbought. The anger and frustrations that some of us feel is because we are misunderstood, and friends can't feel that anger and frustration. They can sense it, but they can't feel it. Because a friend has never gone through what is know as coming out. I will never forget what it was like coming out and having nobody to look up toward. I remember the lack of hope - and our friends can't fulfill that.

The only thing we have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world. Hope for a better tomorrow. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us'es, the us'es will give up. If you help elect gay people that gives a green light to all who feel disenfranchised.

And you and you and you, you have to give them hope.

. . . I hear yah Harvey and I'm working on it.

Thank you.