

Remarks by Carol Speser for Erie County public hearing February 8, 2018: In support of Conversion Therapy ban legislation

My name is Carol Speser. I'm a longtime leader in the LGBTQ community. I'm retired. I was a children's librarian for many years....my second career has been as a chaplain.

Some of you heard me speak at the committee hearing last year. I've been asked to speak again. No doubt because I have a compelling story of being subjected to conversion therapy.

Two years in a mental hospital.

I wound up there because my college boyfriend John and I confessed to each other that we thought we were homosexuals.

Back then, there was only one way to see homosexuality. It was bad. A mental illness ...an abomination.

John went to a psychiatrist for help. The doctor told him it would take 20 years to cure him of his homosexuality.

20 years – that's what he said.

We were only 20 years old.

We felt doomed.

Our shame and self-loathing were overwhelming....but it was the hopelessness we felt about not being able to change what we were...who we were....that was catalyst for us making a suicide pactand acting on it.

I woke up in intensive care and was eventually whisked away to a mental hospital.

Johnhe died.

I'll be 70 soon. John – he is forever 20 and forever gone.

That shrink though....back in 1970 was right – he understood that it was close to impossible to change someone's sexual orientation. That's because....the wise words of Lady Gaga: we are born this way.

In the mental hospital, I wanted to change. Because I believed there was something wrong with me. I endured shock treatments, sheet packs, the isolation room, heavy duty medication... but conversion therapy didn't work. So I sunk deeper and deeper into a spiritual abyss.

All that conversion therapy does for sure, is assault the heart and break the spirit.

Being a librarian, I spent time recently doing some in depth research – weaving through various data bases ...to try to find testimonials in favor of conversion therapy.

They are rare and extremely hard to find.

look around.... there's nobody here to speak up for it.

I found a huge amount of literature condemning conversion therapy – and as you would expect, and many testimonials from those who were subjected to it.

But one thing I found that was surprising ...was that there were testimonials from people who ran these conversion therapy programs who talked about how conversion therapy doesn't work.

These were the Directors of these programs...of these conversion therapy summer camps.

They had come to the long hard conclusion that conversion therapy just didn't work. They talked matter-of-factly about it.

If you go online - it's almost impossible to find information on current conversion therapy programs. This treatment is now relegated to the shadows. It is fringe.

There are no national professional organizations...mental health...psychiatric, pediatric – none whatsoever ...that endorse conversion therapy. In fact, they take a strong stand – and condemn it.

And... there are no mainstream religious organizations that endorse conversion therapy.

Most religious leaders across the spectrum have turned away from the use of conversion therapy. They pretty much echo the sentiments of Pope Francis. “Who are we to judge?”

It's important to note – that this proposed legislation does not (and I quote)”prohibit clergy from pastoral counseling, teaching, or relaying of their religion's doctrine.”

What it does, is prevent minors from being subjected to a *formal treatment* which is defined as: “ a continued effort through a program or through many sessions or meetings to change a minor's sexual identity or orientation.”

We have a history in the United States - of protecting children. We have child protection laws. We have norms in our country that override certain religious practices. You can have your religious beliefs. But we draw a line. Some acts stemming from religious beliefs, you cannot do.

You cannot marry off your 12 year-old daughter.

You cannot subject your daughter to female circumcision.

You cannot abuse children, physically or emotional.

We have a history of protecting children through legislation.

This proposed Erie county conversion therapy ban is above all else, a child protection law.

This legislation protects *all* children under the age of 18 in Erie County – from being subjected to an archaic, fringe, brutal treatment.

Let's put conversion therapy where it belongs - in a history book about all the ignorant, horrible things we don't do anymore.

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