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Speech made at Dayton Pride Banquet

By Matt Foreman, Executive Director, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Equality Ohio is simply one of the best statewide LGBT rights organizations in the country. We've been so proud to partner with you on so many projects over the last two years.

It's a tremendous honor to be with you tonight and I thank the Greater Dayton LGBT Center for inviting me, and especially John Gantt and John Zimmerman for their wonderful hospitality. I also want to congratulate the center for changing its name this year to embrace our entire community.

There are a couple of reasons I'm particularly happy to be in Dayton. One is that when I watched the election returns last November and saw Dayton rejecting that divisive bigot Ken Blackwell three to one, I said those are my kind of people.

The second is that I am able to be with family. One of the most wonderful things about our community is the way in which we create and sustain our own families, often against great odds. And in New York, my partner Francisco DeLeon and I have two sisters by love, not blood or marriage, Maureen Burnley and Tatiana Carayannis, and we've been promising Maureen's mother, Diane, that we'd come here for Rehabarama for the last 10 years. Diane, as I'm sure many of you know, is a founding member of Dayton's PFLAG chapter and a fierce advocate for all of us. So, I'm so proud to introduce to you my family that's here together in Dayton — my partner Francisco, Maureen and Tatiana, Diane Burnley, Maureen's brother Kevin and Kevin's two children, Cassie and Nick.

Your theme this year — and for as many years as it takes — It's All About Freedom — sums up exactly what our movement has been about since Stonewall. Tonight, in that context, I'd like to talk briefly about three things: pride in all that we've accomplished on the road to freedom in less than 40 years, anger at the injustices we still face, and then suggest two specific things for Dayton.

At this pride dinner, let's start with *pride* in our extraordinary accomplishments in the 37 years since Stonewall.

In 1970, not a single law protected lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people from discrimination. Today, 20 states and dozens of municipalities — with 52 percent of the U.S. population — protect LGB people from discrimination, and 37 percent of the

population lives in a jurisdiction that protects transgender people from discrimination. In fact, four states passed nondiscrimination laws this year — more than any time in our movement's history.

In the area of partner recognition, the progress is even more extraordinary. Just seven years ago, not a single state offered our families significant legal protections. Today, six states (covering 20 percent of the U.S. population) do, including marriage *equality* in Massachusetts.

On that point, I had the privilege of being at the Statehouse in Boston on Thursday when the state Legislature voted 151 to 45 to keep an ugly anti-marriage constitutional amendment from going on the 2008 ballot. In Massachusetts it takes 75 percent of the Legislature to block one of these ballot measures — 75 percent — and we lost the first round in January by 8 votes. On Thursday, we managed to flip eight more votes our way and I'm incredibly proud that Task Force organizers working day and night in the western, conservative part of the state over the last five months got two of those votes.

I wish each one of you could have been there to share in the unadulterated joy and relief that swept through the crowd when the vote was announced — just over three years ago we had less than a third of the Legislature on our side — Thursday, more than three-quarters. What caused that amazing turnaround — one-on-one conversations with voters, who in turn contacted their legislators. More than anything, it shows the rightness of our cause and the power of speaking heart to heart.

Closer to home, we also have much to be proud of. We can all take pride that just last summer, our brothers and sisters just an hour away blocked the right wing from trying to overturn Cincinnati's hard-fought LGBT rights law from being overturned by ballot initiative, and I am proud that our staff played a leading role in that.

We can be proud that in 2003 Cleveland Heights — thanks to Heights Families for Fairness — became the first and is still the only jurisdiction in the country to enact a domestic partner law by ballot initiative.

You can all take pride that, thanks to the leadership of Equality Ohio, Gov. Strickland signed an executive order May 17 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in any cabinet agency or state board or commission.

And right here in Dayton, you should take such pride in the institutions that you have built and nurtured over the years: the Center for 26 years, Eternal Joy MCC, PFLAG, the Dayton Gay Men's Chorus, YouthQuest, Diversity Dayton and its planned new billboard campaign, AIDS Resource Center Ohio, and of course, your own Joe Lacey and his partner Tony Ballis — talk about a power couple!

Let's take pride that right here on June 2 in front of the old courthouse downtown, 38 couples joined in a mass wedding and commitment ceremony — the largest in the state's history.

And in my family, I take enormous pride in the fact that one of the neo-Nazi's at the march approached Diane Burnley, Maureen's mom, and said, "You're not one of those queers are you?" She said, "Yes, I am!" and left him speechless.

And what makes all of this progress so remarkable, astonishing and amazing is that it has been accomplished in spite of hundreds of years of prejudice injected into every fiber of society's DNA, with meager resources, against huge odds and mighty and unrelenting opponents, and while we've been afflicted with a plague that killed a generation of our men.

I could go on and on about all we've done as a community, but to sum up, we have accomplished more in a shorter period of time than any other social justice movement in the history of the world, and our momentum has been accelerating over the last six years, in spite of the fact that so much of our government has been under the hard thumb of reactionary forces.

But while we can and should take incredible pride in all that we've accomplished, we cannot forget how far we still have to go.

Young LGBT people are still at least three times more likely to attempt and commit suicide. Why? Because the forces of political and religious intolerance continue to instill self-loathing in our young people and *that's an immoral disgrace*.

A report that our Policy Institute recently released on homeless youth that I mentioned earlier found that between 20 to 40 percent of homeless young people in this country are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender and have been thrown out of their homes simply because of who they are. *This epidemic is a national disgrace*.

Survey after survey shows widespread anti-gay discrimination in employment, with between two-thirds and three-quarters of us hiding our sexual orientation on the job or on the street for fear of discrimination or violence.

But it's still perfectly legal in the state of Ohio and the city of Dayton and the county of Montgomery to fire someone simply because they are gay and *that's a disgrace*.

According to the FBI — whose own statistics notoriously undercount anti-gay hate crimes — consistently show that in proportion to the U.S. population, anti-gay hate crimes exceed those against any other money. Yet, the Ohio Legislature refuses to include LGBT people in its hate crimes law and when the federal hate crimes bill came up for a vote on May 5 and passed by a vote of 237 to 180, your own member of Congress, Michael Turner, voted against it and *that's a disgrace*.

And, of course, the examples of injustices in the area of partner and family recognition are too many to list — from grossly disparate taxation to from partners of 20 or 30 years being denied pension or line of duty death benefits to the unending stories of someone not being able to say goodbye to his or her partner of 40 or 50 years in a hospital Intensive Care Unit because they're not "family."

Indeed, an entire industry has been built around demonizing, defaming and dehumanizing LGBT people. In less than 15 years, this industry has succeeded in getting 41 states to prohibit the recognition of same-sex marriage, including 27 state constitutional amendments of which 18 also prohibit the recognition of any form of relationship between persons of the same gender, including domestic partnerships and civil unions. And, as you know better than anyone, Ohio's amendment is as bad as they come *and all of this is a disgrace*.

My point is that we have made significant strides, but the finish line is a long way off and getting there requires new energy, new determination and anger at the injustices our people still face because, as our hero Coretta Scott King said — you cannot fight for justice unless you are angry about injustice.

So finally, with pride in our accomplishments and anger at the injustices that remain, I want to offer two challenges for moving ahead during the coming year, one broad and one specific.

The first is that when we press forward during the year under the banner “It’s all about freedom,” let’s remember that what we are ultimately seeking is the freedom to be who we are, not the freedom to be like everyone else.

Over the years, I’ve seen ever-increasing pressure for us to present the “right” face to the world, to push into the closet the true diversity of our community, or to insist that when people come into our movement they can only come in with their “correct gay” hat on and they must leave every other part of themselves behind, including their race, class, gender, age, gender identity, and even their own sexuality.

But this is not who we are; everyone needs to be able to come into our movement as a whole human being, to be able to express who they are and the range of issues that are important to them and be accepted and welcomed. That means meeting people where they are, honestly embracing people across race and class lines, not judging people by the neighborhood in which they live, and celebrating everyone’s freedom to be — from the couple with a white picket fence in the suburbs, to leather people, to transgender people, to butch dykes, to sissy boys.

Next and last, because all politics is local, I offer a specific challenge: By next year’s pride dinner, Dayton must amend its nondiscrimination law to include protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. If Athens, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Cleveland Heights, Columbus, East Cleveland, Lakewood, North Olmstead, Oberlin, Toledo and Yellow Springs can do it, so can Dayton.

Mayor McLin, we need your leadership. Commissioners Whaley and Joseph, we need you to back up the mayor, work with your colleagues on the city commission and make this a unanimous vote.

This is about more than protecting LGBT people from discrimination — it’s about sending a clear message to the nation about Dayton’s values and about getting other cities and townships in the county to do the same, because as the mayor frequently says, “As Dayton goes, so goes the region.” It’s also about building pressure on the General Assembly to pass Equality Ohio’s Equal Housing and Employment Act.

Of course, passing this law requires more than leadership from the mayor; it requires the commitment from everyone in this room to support the effort.

I guarantee you that someone will say, “I can’t do this because my church or my constituents will have my head.” It’s up to us to prove them wrong — by getting phone calls and letters and faxes of support to those legislators from all parts of the city. By being willing to go door to door and have face-to-face discussions about why this is

important. I can tell you from doing just that all across this country — in places like South Central L.A.; Topeka, Kan.; Springfield, Mass.; Cincinnati and Cleveland Heights — that once people have had that conversation, they support us, overwhelmingly. And, I can say it's a myth that African-American people do not oppose discrimination against gay people. In fact, they do and in overwhelming numbers.

This effort is going to require something else, however, and that is a commitment from all of us to reciprocate. That means an ironclad agreement that if some bigot — sorry to use the word, but it's true — challenges one of our supporters, that we are there to insure that challenge is defeated. And it means that when another community — whether it's choice, racial justice or labor — supports us on this bill, we're they're to support them on their issues.

I promise that the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force will provide training and organizers to help you in this campaign if you want them.

There is one thing I know for sure: With your energy, your support and your leadership, winning is not only possible, it is inevitable.

Thank you.

