

Good afternoon. My name is Antonia Loconte, and today is March 19, 2008. I have been asked why it's important to me to pass House Bill 5723 this year, which would prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression. Here are my answers:

This bill matters to me because in every moment, there still lies the prospect of a gender-variant person being denied a job interview, a promotion, an educational opportunity, an otherwise available apartment, a bank loan, a fair price on an automobile sale, a place to try on clothes or use a restroom, or a bed at the shelter on a cold night, as long as we fail to explicitly protect one's right to express or identify gender the way they see fit. This includes me. There are hundreds of thousands of gender-variant people in this country. If we are to keep functioning as a society, with a healthy economy and a sense of shared purpose, our state needs to recognize their existence and the challenges they face from powerful customs that are outdated, limiting, and exclusionary.

This bill matters to me because, after lifetimes of having been "corrected," rebuffed and excluded, gender variant people need to be told that they are included, or they won't have any basis to believe it's true.

This bill matters to me because a 17-year-old girl sat in my workplace yesterday visibly upset and angry because a stranger had identified her three-week-old daughter as a boy even though she had dressed the infant in pink pajama bottoms, leading her to blurt out, "I would only dress a boy in pink if I wanted to raise my son to be a faggot." What lessons are we teaching our children if they are emerging from adolescence with such divisive fears, prejudices, and rigid views of gender?

This bill matters to me because it is the role of government to set standards for the treatment of its citizens in the public and civic spheres.

This bill matters to me because every teenager who winds up on the street after they have been kicked out of the house, left school, or found themselves unable to find work because of their gender identity or expression, is at risk of being forced into doing something they wouldn't otherwise choose to do.

This bill matters to me because my family continues to worry about my safety and my opportunities in life.

This bill matters to me because our society is losing the imagination, creativity and skills of talented and courageous individuals by discouraging them, ostracizing them, underemploying them, and portraying them as undesirable, in the interest of promoting conformity to idealized concepts of acceptable male and female gender expression. If we are going to escape our cultural obsession with pursuing movie-star ideals of physical beauty, we should be urging people to make room to find and be themselves, rather than pretending that the human race is merely two sets of matching chromosomes and anatomies with corresponding, sharply defined genders and gender identities.

This bill matters to me because I spent my childhood in a very rigidly-gendered environment, learning that it was inappropriate and unsafe for a boy to express feelings of identification with girls or women, and learning to avoid anything that was associated with a female gender schema. “Don’t walk that way,” “don’t talk that way,” etc. I don’t want today’s children being bullied into living out someone else’s idea of what childhood development should look like, and I fight against that.

This bill matters to me because I want to feel fully included in our society as soon as possible, instead of contributing to an entity that reserves the right to exclude me, or others who don’t conform to traditional notions of gender expression.

This bill matters to me because it is damaging to the freedom and self-esteem of young children when they make fun of each other by characterizing their behavior or appearance as inappropriate for their sex.

This bill matters to me because, as a society, we need our government to recognize that, before the people can work together peacefully and in common pursuit of knowledge and fulfillment, they must be free to participate in civic life and society as themselves, with mutual respect and appreciation for others’ identities. Our nation has struggled to get there, and our history includes a legacy of inequality. Past and present indiscretions include American Indian genocide, African slavery and the resultant stripping of family wealth, history and social status from the descendants of its victims, the development of racist ideology to justify the perpetuation of oppression and division, women’s disenfranchisement from economic, political, institutional and educational opportunities, anti-Semitism, various forms of witch hunting from Salem, Massachusetts to the Congressional halls of Washington, D.C., the internment of Japanese-Americans and Italian-Americans during World War II, continuing waves and displays of homophobia, the tracking of students in schools according to culturally and gender-biased testing methods, and racially disproportionate incarceration rates. Random killings now occur every year in schools and workplaces with no apparent motive other than the perpetrator’s anger and frustration at society. The message to me is this: we have not fought hard enough against stereotypes and surface judgments, and too many lives have been wasted. In my travels, I have met transgender people who were institutionalized and subjected to electroshock therapy because their parents wanted to zap the gender identity disorder out of them. (Surprise...it didn’t work.) I also have a friend who tells me that her father pushed her off a roof when she was a young teenager because she was not masculine enough for his tastes. At what point do we learn the lesson that defining other peoples’ identities, capabilities, and rights according to our beliefs or prejudices about the way things should be only results in a shared future of interwoven oppression, frustration, and disempowerment?

This bill matters to me because it is the voice of transgender people, young and old. Every time it fails to pass, it is the equivalent of saying that we are not really being heard. It is a representation that our right to participate fully in society is outweighed by the vague, fear-based discomfort of so-called “normal” people, people who are apparently unwilling to take a little bit of time out of their lives to clear up any confusion they might

have about sex and gender and gender identity, so that we may coexist. Their right to avoid confronting their own prejudice should not outweigh our right to live authentically.

This bill matters to me because the opportunities of gender-variant people should be protected explicitly, instead of depending on interpretive agency authority, and the discretion of employers, storeowners, lenders, and public officials who may choose not to hire or serve someone because of their gender identity or expression. Our society should not give one person that kind of power over another person.

This bill matters to me because I work hard and I deserve my dignity. I deserve better than to be objectified by having strangers poke me and prod me or attempt to feel certain parts of my body because they think they have a right to determine my sex for themselves. Though we do have laws about sexual assault, society still sends a contrary message by perpetuating its traditional models of gender conformity in every other arena. This allows people to remain ignorant of the lives and realities of other human beings, and to feel threatened when they have to confront those realities.

This bill matters to me because it shouldn't fall on me to have to explain myself to anyone who picks up on my gender variance, or happens to learn of my personal history, in order to preserve my access to rights and privileges others get without question.

This bill matters to me because I can work, and produce, and be an asset to my community. The same goes for hundreds of thousands of other transgender people, and many organizations and communities across this country have recognized that through policies, ordinances and statutes. Though I cannot speak for anyone else, I know that I'd rather be able to make myself useful here, in my home state, than move on to some other city where my rights are better protected.

Thank you for your time.

