



**Transcript of Governor David A. Paterson's
Remarks at the Empire State Pride Agenda's Fall Dinner
Sheraton New York Hotel and Towers, New York City
Monday, October 20, 2008**

Thank you. We are all very pleased to be here this evening.

I remember that, on December 1, 1984, there was a demonstration outside of the South African Embassy to the United Nations. A number of the demonstrators were arrested as they protested apartheid. One of them said, "It's time for this government to represent itself as a voice for freedom among all nations and within its own nation." The person that uttered those words is my father, Basil A. Paterson, the former Secretary of State of New York. [Applause]

He enunciated the values that I feel, that I was bred with, as I grew up, my brother and I, that he and my mother gave to us. These are the values of the succeeding generations, the values that were promised to us in the founding Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence. But they seem to have been delivered intermittently, and rather slowly, over the past 225 years. [Applause]

And so, as we fight to make the words of our foreparents, who wrote those documents, real, we recognize that there have been rather significant intervening obstacles.

When I was sixteen years old, I saw the vicious beating of six hundred people at the Edmund Pettus Bridge right outside Selma, Alabama. Unfortunately, my daughter, when she was ten years old, saw film clips of a gay man who was beaten with the barrel of a gun and left on a fence to die in Laramie, Wyoming. And so what we hope is that the next generation only knows about these tragedies by reading about them in the history books—because there will be no such bias and hatred in their time. [Applause]

But if we're going to get past the violence, we are going to have to deal with the issues of legal inequality that are experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people right here in New York State every day.

There are too many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people whose partners are in hospitals where they can make no decisions in terms of their medical care, and cannot even take a leave of absence from work to care for them. That cannot be allowed to happen any more. [Applause]

There are too many people who lose their homes because the property belonged to their significant other who died—and because there is no transference of rights, they lose the opportunity to live where they spent their life and happiness with that other person. That cannot be allowed to happen any more. [Applause]

There are too many students who are hoodwinked, and cajoled, and at times even become victims of violence for who they are, and then drop out of school because they don't think it's safe enough to go there. That cannot be allowed to happen any more. [Applause]

These are the values that we try to bring to New York State, and these are the ones I have tried to champion.

As Jeff said, when I was Lieutenant Governor, we thought it was very important to pass the Marriage Equality Act in the Assembly. And so I left my role as Acting President of the Senate, since there was nothing going on over there that was interesting. [Laughter] And I came over and joined the debate, and we won, 85 to 61, on June 17, 2007. [Applause]

I am most pleased that a number of African-American and Hispanic legislators—who, at first, were unable to see the congruent connection between rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and our own struggles waged throughout the centuries—were able to see it that night, and voted for that legislation. [Applause]

But all of the 85 members who voted for that piece of legislation sent a message around this state. We don't know what time it will be that the Senate will address this issue, but when it does, it will be the tremendous ability that they had to stand up and go forward on that night back in June in 2007 that will be the reason we will celebrate marriage equality in this state—hopefully as soon as possible. [Applause]

When Jeff referred to the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act, it actually occurred on my first day as the Democratic Senate Leader. And I'm proud to tell you I never had a better one since. We were able to pass that legislation 35 to 25 in the New York State Senate on December 17, 2002. [Applause]

Now we are still waiting for the Senate to pass meaningful legislation that addresses the issue of marriage equality in this state. I know the Senate has a lot of different issues that it has to work out; I knew they were busy. So, on May 14, 2008, I signed a memorandum that would respect marriage equality in any states that permit it right here in New York State. [Applause] Thank you. I thought you would like that. [Laughter]

The reason I signed that memorandum, the reason we issued that memorandum, is a little-known section of the United States Constitution known as the Full Faith and Credit Clause of the Constitution, which gives rights to individuals that have received them in other states. I knew some of the opponents would take court action, and I pleaded with them not to waste their money—but now I'm glad they did, so they can't participate in the upcoming elections on November 4. [Applause]

When we look at what we've accomplished, we recognize that only a charlatan would say that we're not getting closer to equal rights for all citizens in this state. But only a fool would insinuate that we're anywhere near the fulfillment of that cause.

This is the reason why we have the Empire State Pride Agenda. This is why all of you have fought courageously and unremittingly over the past couple of decades to bring economic, political and social justice to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender New Yorkers—and to make sure that, as we move forward in our state, that the only way we can have true equality for all people is by having

people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender in leadership positions in government, in politics, of education, of business, of labor, and even our faith-based institutions. [Applause]

These, I believe, are our goals, and these, I believe, are our principles. And let no one confuse our ranks with the assertion that this is the promotion of an “agenda.” Because to fight for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—to have the same rights as any other Americans—is as American as reciting the Constitution or singing the Declaration of Independence. [Applause]

Going back to those civil rights struggles I observed as a child, I always took note of the people who were Hispanic, the people who were white, the people who came from other countries, who often risked their lives to go on the Freedom Rides or march in some of the most famous marches in this country.

I always thought it was so interesting, like the tale of the heralded black elk that got to what he thought was the highest mountain, which was Harney Peak in South Dakota, and realized that there were other mountains around him—that there were other epicenters of religion and other beliefs—and he prayed for them as well as his own.

I always hoped I could be a person who could be in a movement that might not reflect my orientation, or my race, or my color, or my ethnicity, but that I would understand the human kindness that brings us all together and that so connects us. And if, in any way, I’ve accomplished that over the past few years, then I will know that my service has achieved the dreams I wished for myself. [Applause]

I only would hope that those who, unfortunately, have been victimized—either by a lack of understanding, or ignorance, or just plain hatred, all of which have stood as obstacles and barriers between us and those values that we all profess but very few of us practice—that we will continue to persuade more and more of them of the real freedom that this country should offer and bring to our state. Not just marriage equality, but an opportunity for everyone who lives in our state, in every city, in every town, in every village, to have an equal opportunity in education; an equal opportunity of employment; an equal opportunity to receive fair housing; and an equal opportunity to live their lives in whatever way that expresses their beliefs, their feelings and their truest love. It is in that vein that we move forward from this dinner, knowing that we will accomplish this goal.

So know that we’re still fighting. We’re still speaking for those who don’t have a voice. We’re still going to go to Albany. We’re still going to agitate at times. We’re going to persevere. And we’re going to do it with a new sheriff in town who’s going to sign the Marriage Equality Act as soon as it passes. Thank you very much. [Applause]

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