

Remarks by Human Rights Campaign President Chad Griffin
to the 2014 Southern Comfort Conference

It's an honor to be here with all of you at Southern Comfort, where so many transgender people find strength and fellowship, and where so many allies can come to listen and learn.

I want to thank the organizers for the months and months of hard work that went into making this conference the success that it is—the Southern Comfort board members Lexie, Stefanie, Blake, Phyllis and Christy, and special thanks JoAnn and Lisa for all your leadership as well.

I want to cut right to the chase here today. There's an elephant in this room, and, well, it's me.

Some of you may be wondering what I am doing here. Some of the more skeptical among you, particularly those I don't yet know, may think I'm lost. I promise you I'm not. I'm here for a pretty simple reason. I'm here because I want to be here. And I'll tell you why.

A few months ago, I was at the Ohio State University in Columbus for an HRC event—our Columbus annual gala, as a matter of fact.

Anyone here from Columbus might know that the Student Union at OSU is this big open building with this huge atrium that stretches all the way to the top floor, with event space on each level.

Our dinner was on the second floor. And when I arrived the HRC crowd had already turned out.

But when I looked up through the atrium to the third floor, I saw that there was a conference going on. Some of the attendees had noticed the activity below; they were clustered around the balcony, looking down at us.

It was a Trans conference. The largest in Ohio. The 6th Annual TransOhio Symposium, organized by the courageous Shane Morgan. They were gathering after a string of trans women were murdered in Ohio last year. Another murder took place shortly after that conference was over.

And I'm going to tell you the honest truth: I had no idea the conference was happening before that night. And here all these committed transgender advocates and allies were—scholars, educators, everyday folks and their families there to support them. And instead of all of us working together, taking stock of all of our progress and the challenges ahead, and finding comfort in each other's company, “they” were upstairs, and “we” were downstairs.

And, in that moment, despite all the progress the LGBT movement and HRC in particular have made on transgender issues in the past couple of years...

No matter how many brilliant, new transgender and allied board members, volunteer leaders and staff members are helping HRC broaden our work...

Despite every inclusive state non-discrimination bill we've fought for...

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No matter how many thousands of hours and millions of dollars we put into the campaign for a fully inclusive ENDA...

There that divide was, for all to see. Plain as day.

I knew in that moment in the Student Union that something was deeply, profoundly wrong. I went up to that third floor. Introduced myself to as many people as I could. I felt like the biggest jerk in the world, because I knew that gesture wasn't nearly enough. It wasn't anything, really. I promised next year we would work more closely, that we would coordinate for the 7th Annual Symposium to ensure HRC had a deeper presence and a real partnership.

But all throughout that evening I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. We all know why that divide between the trans community and HRC exists, and taking a big step toward closing it is my responsibility.

So I am here today, at Southern Comfort, to deliver a message. I deliver it on behalf of HRC, and I say it here in the hopes that it will eventually be heard by everyone who is willing to hear it.

HRC has done wrong by the transgender community in the past, and I am here to formally apologize.

I am sorry for the times when we stood apart when we should have been standing together.

Even more than that, I am sorry for the times you have been underrepresented or unrepresented by this organization. What happens to trans people is absolutely central to the LGBT struggle. And as the nation's largest LGBT civil rights organization, HRC has a responsibility to do that struggle justice, or else we are failing at our fundamental mission.

I came here today in the hopes that we can begin a new chapter together. But I also came here to tell you the truth. We're an organization that is evolving. We may make mistakes. We may stumble. But what we do promise is to work with you sincerely, diligently, with a grand sense of urgency, listening and learning every step of the way.

And I also want to be clear that I'm not asking you to be the ones to take the first leap of faith. That's our job. My mom taught me that respect isn't given, it's earned.

Over the past two years HRC has dramatically expanded the scope of all of our programs to reach more trans communities than ever before, and I want to take just a few minutes to talk about that work.

First things first: an inclusive ENDA. It's an absolutely essential piece of legislation. It will change millions of lives for the better. And as an organization, HRC will continue to invest in and fight for an inclusive ENDA.

But even a broad, inclusive ENDA isn't enough.

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If you're trans, a fully inclusive ENDA doesn't do much good if you're living on the street because you've been kicked out of your apartment...if you haven't been able to finish school...if even getting a job interview in the first place seems light-years away.

That's why, in the next session Congress, HRC will lead the campaign for a fully-inclusive, comprehensive, LGBT civil rights bill. A bill with non-discrimination protections that don't stop at employment, but that finally touch every aspect of our lives—from housing, to public accommodations, to credit, to federal funding, to the education we all need to succeed and thrive.

And I'm going to keep being honest with you, this is not going to be an easy fight.

We're going to need everyone working together, arm in arm, and even then it could take years. As we've seen in non-discrimination fights from the city of Houston to, most recently, Fayetteville, Arkansas, our opponents will stop at nothing to halt our progress with their scare tactics and lies. Let me tell you what... The haters have got bathroom fever, and they've got it bad.

But I want to say something here today. Whenever the inevitable chant about “bathrooms” begins, they're not just attacking you, they're attacking me, they're attacking us. We can't let them win. We must hold the line. We will tell the truth. Because these are our lives, and this is the moral thing to do.

But even that's not enough, is it? After all, it was less than two months after a Maryland coalition, including HRC, helped enact a statewide non-discrimination law that two trans women, Kandy Hall and Mia Henderson, were brutally murdered in Baltimore.

That massive disconnect...the disconnect between legal protection and lived experience...is what too many in this country don't understand or, quite frankly, even realize. We can't afford to just change laws.

In rooms like this one, for years, you have been making the case that we've got to change society at a fundamental level by lifting up more trans people, your lives, and your stories.

You're right. And if there's one thing we've all learned in this movement, it's that once Americans come to really know us, it starts to become impossible to discriminate against us. And at our best, HRC offers an unmatched communications and public affairs platform to amplify LGBT stories across the country.

In just the past few weeks we have demanded stronger efforts from local and state authorities to protect transgender people, particularly trans women of color...

We're proud to support Casa Ruby and Ruby Corado's courageous work to support trans people on their path to employment...

We've lifted up the stories of transgender Southerners like Andrea through our expanded work in the Deep South...

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And yes, we joined a group of national LGBT organizations in telling the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival that transwomen are women too.

But we're committed to doing more than just speaking out. It's essential that HRC be meeting transgender people where they are, listening, and acting to create positive change. And we have an incredibly important foundation to build on.

Over 10 years, for instance, our Corporate Equality Index has helped shift trans-inclusive healthcare plans from a rarity in corporate America to a best practice that is the policy of more than 340 major companies.

Our Healthcare Equality Index has helped bring transgender competency training and patient and employee non-discrimination policies to hospitals from the heart of the Deep South to each and every Veterans hospital in the country.

Our Welcoming Schools program has brought safer schools and well-trained teachers to thousands of transgender and gender non-conforming youth.

But we've got to do even more.

Over the past two years I have worked directly with HRC's staff to dramatically expand our work that distinctly impacts transgender people. From the workplace, to the schoolhouse, and from the hospital, to the church pew.

Think about it this way. Everywhere you've ever seen an equal sign sticker on the back of a car and even pick-up trucks—every small town in the heart of a red state—we can touch that place. We can change lives there, for the better, for good.

Andrea mentioned HRC's newly expanded work in the Deep South, work that is reaching more people than ever before. Today, we are also significantly expanding and modernizing our HIV/AIDS efforts, because we know that so many communities—including communities of color, LGB people, and especially trans women, battle silence and stigma because of this epidemic. So many have done so much to change that, and we want to lift up that work and expand upon it however and wherever we can.

But we can't stop there, either.

I talked a bit earlier about anti-trans violence. Horrific and senseless murders that stain every state in this country and too often go unnoticed and unsolved. It's time to call it what it is: anti-trans violence is a national crisis.

Look, this is a complicated issue that brings in race, employment, poverty and so many other factors, and none of us in this room have the solution today. But what we do know is we can never, ever accept this violence as a given. And together we have got to turn the tide.

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I'm here today to declare that a core aspect of our work moving forward will be to work with you to develop a national response to the epidemic of anti-trans violence in this country.

Some of our senior team members, folks like our Director of Foundation Strategy Jay Brown, our Senior Legislative Counsel Alison Gill and our new Deputy Chief of Staff Hayden Mora, as well as our trailblazing State and Municipal Equality team, are central to this work. And of course, our Board of Directors, including the tireless Meghan Stabler, who spoke to you here last year, and Molly Simmons, who is here with us today, is working with us every step of the way. All of us are undertaking conversations with movement leaders, community organizers and individuals who are already at the forefront of tackling this issue. We need all hands on deck.

None of this work I've talked about today—from state and federal legislation to changing hearts and minds, to tackling anti-trans violence--would be possible without trans advocates. I am so grateful for those who have been fighting for trans equality, literally, for decades and decades. From Shannon Minter, Mara Keisling and Ruby Corado, Lourdes Hunter, to Diego Sanchez, Monica Roberts and Masen Davis, and every single one of you in this room. You are not simply movement leaders, you're an inspiration. You're an inspiration to me personally.

By now it should be clear that I didn't come here today to tell you that HRC is perfect and that you're wrong for not seeing it. Because we're not perfect, and you're not wrong.

What I am here to say is what a young trans man told me in the heart of Mississippi. It was at a meeting with a bunch of local LGBT people in a church community center outside Jackson. There must have been 20 folks in that room, everyone telling their stories, sharing their struggle. But his story sticks out most of all.

You see, Bryson's a city worker. Transitioned on the job. And almost overnight, he began to face unprecedented harassment. They made him shave his dreadlocks, even though his other male colleagues wore their hair long. They even went after his wife at her place of work, so much so that she was forced off the job. He was just completely run down, with only his family standing beside him.

I couldn't believe it. Why did he come to that meeting in the church that day? Why risk so much to tell me his story, despite all he'd been through and was still going through? He looked me in the eye and said, "there's always going to be hope for a change."

On that night in Columbus, Ohio, standing on that third floor balcony, I thought about Bryson. I thought about that young man in Mississippi. How can we, all of us, ever make that change happen if this divide between us persists?

My friends, please continue to hold HRC accountable. Hold me accountable.

Please be in conversation with us as we do more than we've ever done before.

We have come too far together not to share our progress.

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We have come too far not to share the fight against the obstacles ahead.

There are a lot of people like Bryson out there hoping for a change.

And I promise you here, with my sweet Southern mom and all of you as my witness, that we won't stop fighting until everyone in this room and everyone across this country has the equal protection, equal opportunity, and equal dignity that we all deserve as human beings.

Thank you very much.