

Being an Ally

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, CeCe Klueh

June 14, 2020

I have a hard time talking about my journey as an LGBTQ ally, because I feel that the best thing an ally can do is not make the movement about themselves, and instead lift up the experience of the people for whom they are fighting. So today, I'd like to walk through my experience with an LGBTQ organization that has helped me grow in my understanding of my own allyship, and what I've learned along the way.

I was raised to believe that love is love. I grew up around gay and lesbian friends of my parents, and I was never taught that there was anything wrong with their love. And as a young person, I thought that being friends with gay people was what made me an ally. In high school, I knew a few brave students who had come out. One friend from theater even had a photo in the couple's section of the yearbook with his boyfriend. But what I did not know was that two of my close high school friends were questioning their sexuality, and other friends were questioning their gender identities, and they did not feel safe sharing this information with anyone at school, including me.

In my senior year of high school, One Voice Mixed Chorus came to perform with our Concert Choir for a group of students. One Voice is an LGBTQ and ally chorus based in St. Paul and part of their season includes a day called "Out in our Schools." This is when the whole choir piles into buses and visits middle and high schools in the Twin Cities and greater MN, to sing for students. I was not able to see that performance that day, but years later as I made the plan to audition for One Voice Mixed Chorus, a friend who saw that concert let me know how important that moment was in their life. That day my friend saw many LGBTQ people, of different ages and gender identities, comfortable in their own skin and proudly lifting their voices together in song. At that moment, my friends saw themselves in a way they had never seen before, reflected in the faces of the singers on that stage. Those close friends who were closest to me and others, saw a group that day telling them, "It's ok to be you."

I have always considered myself an ally, but upon joining One Voice I understood I had so much more to learn about what that really means. One Voice's mission is "Building community and creating social change, by raising our voices in song." I had been practicing the singing part for years, but I had a lesson in building community during my first practice with One Voice. This practice included a new singer welcome dinner before we were introduced to the larger chorus. And during this dinner, I was asked to provide my pronouns (she/her) along with my name during an introduction for the first time. It's such a small gesture for an ally to make, but as we went around the circle, it allowed me to have a deeper understanding of the identities of my new friends, and opened a door to advocate for them moving forward by something as simple as using their pronouns. Now I try to provide my pronouns in group settings without being asked. I include them on nametags, and have them in my email signature, but at that first meeting in 2015, I realized I had a lot to learn about supporting the trans and gender non-conforming community. I needed to do more work on advocating for the "T" in LGBTQ.

I was welcomed with open arms into the One Voice community. My friends in that chorus are some of the most wonderful people I've ever met. They have so much to give as singers, artists, friends, organizers, and I am indebted to so many of them for allowing me into their lives and for teaching me everyday how to be a better ally.

I have already mentioned that part of our season includes school visits, along with our regularly scheduled concerts around the city, but I haven't mentioned what we sing. I feel so often we live our mission of building social change in what we sing about. In 2017 I was back at my high school, now a 27 year old woman, singing during an "Out in our Schools" tour with the Central High concert choir and looking out at a sea of students knowing we were changing so many of their lives just by being there. We were singing a piece called "The Man Behind the Dream," an oratorio written by Steve Molloy and Vanessa German about the life of Bayard Rustin. Rustin was a civil rights leader who taught MLK about non-violent protest, organized the famous March on Washington (in 8 weeks) and was nearly erased from the history of the civil rights movement because he was an out, proud, gay man. I may never

have learned about Bayard if I hadn't joined One Voice. And my education did not stop there.

Last year was the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and we sang a commissioned piece called Quiet No More, an 8 part collaborative choral work that walks through the events of the Stonewall Riots and how the LGBTQ movement grew from that moment.

The Stonewall riots were a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the LGBTQ community against a police raid that began in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. Very few establishments welcomed openly gay people in the 1960s and the Stonewall Inn was popular among the most marginalized people in the gay community like drag queens, and transgender people. Though police raids on gay bars were routine in the 1960s, on June 28 the officers lost control of the situation as protesters, led by trans women of color, decided they were tired of the perpetual discrimination and police brutality and took action.

I learned about this event just last year, and there is so much about this moment in history that resonates with what has happened in our city in the last few weeks. I am in a much better place to understand why people riot against systems that oppress and deny their rights, and I understand how events like Stonewall can create lasting change.

The Stonewall uprising is considered the most important event leading to the gay liberation movement and fight for LGBTQ rights in the United States. Within a few years, LGBTQ rights organizations were founded across the U.S. and the world. On June 28, 1970, the first gay pride marches took place commemorating the anniversary of the riots. This is why we celebrate pride in June.

My time in One Voice has helped me to become a better advocate for marginalized communities, not just the LGBTQ community. I have tools in my tool belt for talking about discrimination and inequality, and for understanding my own privilege as a straight, white, cis-gendered woman. I've learned that I don't know what I don't know and it's my job to educate myself.

So what can you do to be a better ally? Something as simple as offering your pronouns in introductions is a good start. Donate to LGBTQ organizations,

educate yourself on LGBTQ history, the spectrums of gender and sexuality, and especially on topics of trans rights. Call your elected officials to protect LGBTQ rights, vote for elected officials who will protect LGBTQ rights.

When we talk about Black Lives Matter know that fatal violence disproportionately affects transgender women of color. Just this week two black trans women were murdered. Their names are Riah Milton and Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells and they were denied dignity in their death by the authorities and the news by being deadnamed and misgendered in reports. Say the names of these women, and fight for the lives of trans women of color.

Know that 40% of all homeless youth in MN identify as LGBTQ, some of those youth as supported by Oasis, just down the hall in this building. Help those youth with your dollars and love. Many of them were thrown out of their homes by families who would not accept them for who they are. My work at United Way includes supporting the Arise Project, which partners with local agencies to provide grants that support LGBTQ homeless youth and raises awareness around the issues faced by that community in our area. There are many non-profits doing this work.

Know that this week, on the anniversary of the Pulse massacre in Orlando, the Trump Administration rolled back Transgender Protections in the affordable care act, making it possible for health care workers to deny lifesaving health care to transgender people.

Be willing to listen, learn, and change your mind.

I'd like to leave you with the verse and voice from Sojourners on Thursday, because it really resonates with the work we have to do moving forward:

From 1 Corinthians 12: If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

And from Dante Stewart: Sympathy feels bad about a situation. Solidarity joins in as a co-laborer to change the situation. Sympathy calls for love without risk. Solidarity calls for risk as love. Sympathy centers the comfort and timetable of those who benefit from a system of difference. Solidarity calls for a revolution of value in a system in which we build a loving and just common life together.

My Gay Truth by Kevin Muur

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, read by Pastor Mary Koon

June 14, 2020

All of my life I have lived in FEAR...fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of success, and fear of being outed. I grew up in a small rural village in Northwest Illinois. My parents farmed so I was very isolated as a kid until I went to school. I went to a consolidated school system for the community with grades K-12 all in one building with a gymnasium separating the grade school and junior high rooms from the high school. This also meant that I went to school with many of the same people for all 12 years of my elementary and secondary education.

My recognition of being “different” started with wanting to spend more time with girls and their activities on the playground instead of hanging with the boys. One incident that I remember distinctly is one where the teacher who was supervising recess that day “forced” me to stop playing with a group of girls and guided me in the direction of the proper group of boys with whom I was to associate.

Whenever I would play at my female cousins’ or parental friends’ who had children who were female, I liked to play dress up with them. As early as first grade, I had a close female friend with whom I liked to play dolls. Now, of course, I was labeled early on by my peers as being a “sissy” because I sucked at sports and hated PE with a passion. Attempts were made to help me be more “boyish” by signing up for little league, basketball, Cub Scouts, and even Boy Scouts. Still, it just never made sense to me why these things were so important and I suffered ridicule by peers in all instances because I just didn’t fit the mold.

From first grade to my senior year of high school, I endured some type of bullying. But through all this it was music that kept me sane and from possibly just giving up. As early as preschool, in the church of my youth, the Sunday

school and Catechism teachers, nurtured this gift during our song times. As I grew up it progressed to the choirs both in church and in school.

The gift kept on giving during my four years at Northwestern College. It was there, however, that I came face to face with who I really was! During my junior year, I started to become more aware of my sexual attraction to men. I even had what I know now was a major crush on one of my fellow classmates. This revelation devastated me and I was an emotional wreck! I tried talking to a trusted professor, and then to a college dorm supervisor in one of the girls' dorms...she was from California so I thought she might understand me better. Instead of being understood, I was told that it was just a phase and that I wasn't gay. So I started dating a girl my senior year who I thought that I was very much in love with. In fact, I wanted to marry her, but am thankful that this never materialized.

When this relationship ended, I started experimenting and exploring my sexual feelings for men. I wasn't able to come out totally, but when I did come out to my parents, a pastor was very instrumental in counseling them that I didn't choose this lifestyle -- and did they really think I'd choose a life of being a social outcast? Yet this didn't change my mother's view of homosexuality. She truly believed that I was bound for hell! My father on the other hand, shared with me later on that even though I felt that they didn't support me, he said that he prayed every day for understanding -- because he didn't understand it.

For many years afterward, I have tried to find my place in the gay community. It has been a huge struggle for more than 40 years now. I've never had a lasting long-term relationship. The rejection and attitude of many gays has added to my low self-esteem issues. So I've clung to what I knew which was the Church. I did leave the Reformed Church in America (RCA) for a while and ventured into the Evangelical Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), and even the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Although some have said they were open and affirming I still have believed a lie of Satan for many years. That lie was that God could NEVER love me because I was gay! This self-loathing has led to anxiety and depression issues that have been debilitating at times.

Let me share with you how I believe God led me to Oak Grove. Back in August 2018, I was in Minneapolis looking for housing. I had decided it was time to live my TRUTH and move to a more diverse community. As I was apartment hunting on a Sunday afternoon, I got lost and missed a turn for a particular complex I was interested in. I noticed this church with its LGBTQ flag flying proudly in the sky. So I did a U-turn in the Oak Grove parking lot just as the service was letting out. This wonderful couple stopped to talk with me and shared how much they loved Oak Grove. They invited me to come visit when I got settled, but I never did!

I tried other congregations, yet none of them seemed right!

Then along came Lizanne, one of your wonderful members. I was in Transitional Care Unit at Masonic Home and she was my physical therapist (for my second time there). That's a whole other story. She asked how I was doing and I told her I just hadn't found the right match for my new church home. She replied, "Well, I think you should try my church." It's Oak Grove Presbyterian in Bloomington. I was amazed to realize it was the SAME church I had done the U-turn in sometime back! So after I was finished with rehab I visited and was overwhelmed by the welcome I received. The service was great, especially the choir and the organ prelude and postlude! I felt I had finally found a church that accepted me as I am. For the first time in decades, I was sensing the SPIRIT OF GOD in a very powerful way. So when it came time for me to request membership it was a no brainer.

Now I can't say that I've mastered the self-hatred and self-defeating thoughts and actions. I'm still a work in progress in accepting myself as a gay man. But now at least I have some safe place of support where I don't have to be AFRAID anymore!

To Kevin, we affirm your worth and are proud that you consider Oak Grove your spiritual home. AMEN