

Robin McHaelen

Testimony in Support of HB 6599: An Act Concerning Discrimination

March 21, 2011

Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, Distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, I am honored to have the opportunity to speak in favor of HB 6599: An Act Concerning Discrimination. My name is Robin McHaelen. I am Executive Director of True Colors, the only agency in Connecticut solely dedicated to the needs and concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning youth at home, at school, in out-of-home care and in the community at large.

I believe that HB 6599 is a matter of basic freedom and equality, that it provides much needed protections to some of the most vulnerable among our citizens, and that it is fundamentally in everyone's best interest to pass this bill. Here's why.

I have been working with LGBT youth for nearly 20 years. Over that time, one thing has become clear to me: the primary issue is gender. The more gender non-conforming the child, the more serious the sanctions – everything from name-calling to harassment to murder. I have worked with kids who have been thrown out by their families, rejected by their foster parents, harassed out of school and victimized on the street, simply because they express their gender in non-traditional ways.

At 16, \*Crystal went to school in a town that supported her identity as a girl, even though her foster mother didn't. The foster parent's abuse increased to the point where the home had to be closed and Crystal was sent to a new placement in a different town, in a different school that had no interest in supporting her identity and no laws that compelled them to do the right thing. She hasn't been to school since and she is now 19. \*Tim came into placement at 15 because his step father beat him for refusing to dress like a girl. He went to four different schools, four different placements before we found a school and a placement that would affirm and support his male identity. Research demonstrates that each new placement costs a child 6-8 months in emotional development. Look at what the lack of statutory protections cost these young people!

But gender stereotypes don't just impact and constrain the transgender kids – they impact everyone of us. Think about it. Can't everyone of us tell a story about a time in our lives when we were told we couldn't or shouldn't do something because of our gender? Boys who shouldn't feel or cry or show any emotion except anger. Girls who shouldn't excel at math or science or sports or be "too" good at anything.

Gender biases impact every aspect of our lives – from our clothes to our toys to what jobs or leisure time activities we are 'supposed' to want to participate in. And even though many, maybe even most, children find a way to fit in, you have to wonder at what cost? With gender non-conforming children and adults, I know the cost in lost families, lost jobs, and lost lives.

I support the passage of HB 6599 because it protects our most vulnerable citizens. I support it because human decency, basic fairness and constitutional equality demand its passage. And I support it because when we loosen the rigid boundaries of our gender rules, we are really creating more room, more freedom for every one of Connecticut's citizens. And that makes doing the right thing even sweeter, doesn't it?

Thank you.

\* names changed to protect their identity