

**Remarks**  
**Ambassador D. Brent Hardt**  
**Opening of SASOD/U.S. Embassy's**  
**Media LGBT Sensitization Workshop**  
**Saturday, April 13, 2013, 9:00 a.m.**  
**At Moray House Trust, Georgetown**

Zenita Nicholson, Secretary of SASOD,  
Dr. Roberto Brant Campos, Country Representative of UNAIDS,  
Representatives of the Guyana Press Association (GPA),  
Media Executives, Publishers, Editors, and Columnists,

Good morning. Thank you for being part of this path-breaking human rights workshop. In 1776, the United States Declaration of Independence boldly proclaimed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." There were no qualifications or fine print that said one's rights depend on who you love or what you believe. Human rights, as we have discovered often painfully in our own history, are for all human beings, or they are not rights at all.

We all know that the issue of LGBT rights is considered sensitive for many people and many governments. We know that the obstacles people seek to place in the way of protecting the human rights of fellow citizens who are LGBT are often said to arise from deeply held personal, political, cultural, and religious beliefs. But the issue is rightly most sensitive and essential to those in the LGBT

community. For the rights at stake are your rights. Others may ponder and pontificate about what rights you should or should not have. But at the end of the day, we are talking about your rights, your exercise of equality, and your enjoyment of freedom. This affects you, not others. Efforts of others to constrain your rights, by contrast, do not directly affect them, but do affect you.

While progress in advancing LGBT rights has never been easy, I believe we are beginning to witness a profound shift in global understanding of such rights. In the United States, public opinion has shifted dramatically over the past decade. A decade ago, for example, the public opposed gay marriage by a solid majority, with nearly 60 percent opposing and only 34 percent in support. Today, by contrast, around 52 percent support gay marriage, while only 42 percent remain opposed. In the 1990's, the only way gay people were accepted within the military was on the basis that they keep their sexuality to themselves -- that they "don't tell." That barrier toppled two years ago, and today gay service members serve without hindrance and with full respect. The purveyors of gloom and doom who had said African Americans could never serve alongside whites, or that women could never serve alongside men, have also been proven wrong in this case. And that is an important lesson of history for societies and governments today. When people tell you things just can't be done, that's when you know they can.

In the United States and in countries throughout the world, including Guyana, it is long past time to put our shared belief in the universality of human rights into action: into new laws and a new spirit of respect and solidarity for our fellow citizens. It is in this spirit that I am pleased to have this opportunity to meet with you this morning to discuss the way forward to a stronger local, national, and international consensus that fully recognizes and respects the rights of LGBT citizens, our brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, friends and family.

### **LGBT Rights are Human Rights**

Some have suggested that gay rights and human rights are separate and distinct; but, in fact, they are one and the same. Sixty years ago, the governments that drafted and passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were not thinking about how it applied to the LGBT community. They also weren't thinking specifically about how it applied to indigenous peoples or children or people with disabilities or other marginalized groups. Yet in the past sixty years, we have come to recognize that these so-called groups of people are entitled to the full measure of dignity and rights, not because they are a member of a distinct group, but because they are simply people with whom we share the common bonds of humanity.

It is a violation of human rights when people are beaten or killed because of their sexual orientation, or because they do not conform to cultural norms about how men and women should look or behave. It is a violation of human rights when governments declare it illegal to be gay, or allow those who harm gay people to go unpunished. It is a violation of human rights when lesbian or transgender women are subjected to so-called corrective rape, or forcibly subjected to hormone treatments, or when people are murdered after public calls for violence toward gays, or when they are forced to flee their countries and seek asylum in other lands to save their lives. And, it is a violation of human rights when life-saving care is withheld from people because they are gay, or equal access to justice is denied to people because they are gay, or public spaces are out of bounds to people because they are gay. No matter what we look like, where we come from, or who we are, we are all equally entitled to our human rights and dignity.

### **Religious and Cultural Values**

One of the most challenging issues arises when people cite religious or cultural norms and practices as a reason to violate or not to protect the human rights of LGBT citizens. This is not unlike the justification offered for some allegedly traditional violent practices towards women, such as honor killings,

widow burning, or female genital mutilation. Some people still defend those practices as part of cultural traditions. But violence toward women isn't cultural; it's criminal.

Here, the example and history of slavery is instructive. Slavery was once justified as sanctioned by God, but it is now properly reviled as an unconscionable violation of human rights. Racial discrimination was once widely accepted as justified on the basis of alleged genetic superiority or inferiority of different ethnic groups, but this has long been recognized for the gross fallacy it was. In each of these cases, we have come to learn that no practice, tradition, or custom trumps the universal human rights with which we are, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, "endowed by our Creator." And the same is now is happening to the antiquated beliefs that inflicting or accepting violence or even murder on LGBT people, criminalizing their status or behavior, expelling them from their families and communities, denying them the right to legal partnerships or marriage is acceptable. Perhaps the best retort to such discrimination is the remark that Abraham Lincoln made in 1865: "When I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally."

In this context, it is essential to point out that most religious traditions and teachings are not in conflict with the protection of human rights. Indeed, our religions and our cultures are most often sources of compassion and inspiration toward our fellow human beings. In fact, our common commitment to defend freedom of religion and the dignity of LGBT people emanates from a common source. For many of us, religious belief and practice is a vital source of meaning and identity, and fundamental to who we are as people. And likewise, the bonds of love and family that we forge are also vital sources of meaning and identity. Caring for others and loving others are both reflections of our faith and our family bonds, and both are expressions of what it means to be fully human. It is because this human experience of faith and love is universal that human rights are universal and cut across all religions and cultures.

### **The Way Forward: Legislation**

History teaches us many lessons about how we progress as humanity toward universal rights for all people. Progress starts with honest and open discussion. Happily, universal human rights include the freedom of expression and freedom of belief, even if words or beliefs may denigrate the humanity of others. But human rights do not end with discussion, and understanding takes more than speech. For while we are individually free to believe and to say whatever we choose, we cannot

*do* whatever we choose if, in our acting, we infringe on the rights of others. That is why we respect the rule of law and protect the rights of all, including the most vulnerable. For it is in the debating and shaping of laws that we define as a society the constraints imposed on our exercise of individual freedom by the demands of the rights of others.

Achieving good, just, and equitable legislation that balances rights and often stark differences of opinion must begin with a willingness to discuss and debate openly in public forums and in the National Assembly. While there may be differences of opinion, that difference is a reason to begin a conversation, not avoid it. And that conversation and debate must lead to legislation that protects rights for all.

It is important to note that, while changing attitudes can lead to changes in law, the opposite is also true. Many times in the history of my own country, the first step toward progress has come from changes in law. Legal protections have preceded, not followed, broader recognition of rights. Our civil rights laws in the mid-1960s came at a time when racial discrimination was still widespread, and attitudes in many states remained mired in quagmires of racial hatred and distrust. In so many cases, the laws -- whether the Voting Rights Act or others -- forced

people to reconsider old traditions and attitudes. They had a teaching effect that helped build new practices and attitudes. Laws that require equal protections reinforce the moral imperative of equality. So, practically speaking, it is often the case that laws must change before widely accepted attitudes and fears dissipate and evolve. That is why U.S. President Millard Fillmore once observed: "The law is the only sure protection of the weak and the only efficient restraint upon the strong."

### **The Way Forward: Global Efforts**

So how do we do our part to advance the global effort to ensure respect for human rights for all people, including LGBT people? The LGBT community, as we see here today, can help lead this effort. Your knowledge and personal experiences are invaluable, and your courage is inspirational. While it is too often true that those who are denied rights are least empowered to bring about the changes they seek, by acting together as in SASOD, you can achieve much more to spark new thinking, new attitudes, and new laws than by acting alone.

When any of our brothers and sisters cannot enjoy their full and equal human rights, the rest of us cannot sit on the sidelines. Every time a barrier to progress has fallen, it has taken a common and united effort from people on all

sides of a racial, gender, cultural or religious barrier. In the fight for women's rights, the support of men remains crucial. The fight for racial equality has relied on contributions from people of all races. Combating Islamophobia or anti-Semitism is a task for people of all faiths. And the same is true with this struggle for equality. People of all sexual orientations must come to see this for what it is -- a fight for our common humanity.

Conversely, when we see denials and abuses of human rights and fail to act, that sends the message to those deniers and abusers that they won't suffer any consequences for their actions, and so they carry on. But when we do act, we send a powerful moral message.

### **The Way Forward: Guyana**

I firmly believe we can work together here in Guyana and in every region of the world to galvanize more support for the human rights of LGBT communities and individuals. The Government has been conducting a National Consultation on LGBT issues, and that conversation is a positive step. But as I noted earlier, conversation and dialogue must lead to action, and specifically to legislation that replaces antiquated colonial laws with modern, national laws that advance the rights of all Guyanese people. Leadership, by definition, means being out in front

of the people one leads. It requires courage in standing up for the dignity of all fellow citizens and persuading others to do the same. And that is what is now required in the National Assembly and among all parties.

Beyond legislative progress, it is vital to recognize that the lives of our gay brothers and sisters are shaped not only by laws, but also by the way they are treated and accepted every day by families, friends, business colleagues, and neighbors. "Laws can restrain the heartless," Martin Luther King observed, "but they cannot restrain the heart." That is why respect for rights must also begin in the small places close to home – the streets where people live, the schools they attend, the factories, farms, and offices where they work. The actions people take in these daily interactions, the words they express, and the ideals they embody, will determine whether Guyana will ensure that human rights for all Guyanese, regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation, will flourish.

### **Way Forward: The United States**

Under President Obama's leadership, the United States has moved with increasing vigor to defend the human rights of LGBT people in the United States and worldwide as part of our domestic commitment to equality, as part of our comprehensive human rights advocacy, and as a priority of our foreign policy.

In 2011, President Obama put into place the first U.S. Government strategy dedicated to combating human rights abuses against LGBT persons abroad. Building on efforts already underway at the State Department and across the government, the President directed all U.S. Government agencies engaged overseas to combat the criminalization of LGBT status and conduct, to enhance efforts to protect vulnerable LGBT refugees and asylum seekers, to ensure that our foreign assistance promotes the protection of LGBT rights, to enlist international organizations in the fight against discrimination, and to respond swiftly to abuses against LGBT persons.

At home, the President repealed the discriminatory: "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy within the U.S. military, he signed historic hate crimes legislation, he ensured hospital visitation rights for LGBT partners, ended the practice of defending in court the Defense of Marriage Act, and announced his support for repeal of the Act. Political leaders across our political spectrum are increasingly speaking out in defense of LGBT rights and gay marriage. The tide has turned.

### **U.S. Embassy LGBT Efforts**

In our embassies around the world, our diplomats are working to raise concerns about specific cases where human rights have been violated and laws continue to discriminate. We are working globally with a range of partners to strengthen human rights protections for all. Our public support for the human rights of LGBT individuals sends a powerful signal of support for the efforts of civil society groups and individuals under threat. We report on the human rights of LGBT people in our annual, country-specific Human Rights Reports. We host public discussions and private roundtables, publish opinion editorials, and support Pride events. We also seek to engage governments and stakeholders on a bilateral and regional level to encourage countries to repeal or reform laws that criminalize LGBT conduct or status. The U.S. government is determined to reinforce the human rights of LGBT people in multilateral fora. We are identifying effective partners and working with the broader human rights community to build greater recognition and respect for the human rights of LGBT persons. This weekend's workshop is a wonderful example of such collaboration.

Our Embassy in Guyana will continue to support LGBT human rights defenders and civil society groups. Last year, we sent a reporter to the United States to participate in a Foreign Press Center Tour: "A Developing Narrative: LGBT Issues in the United States." We also hosted an LGBT Roundtable at the

Embassy to discuss issues of major concern directly with stakeholders. Embassy representatives also participated in SASOD's UPR meetings to learn more about their efforts to lead change in Guyana. Last week, we supported a workshop on Human Rights documentation. We seek to reach the broader public through social media, exchange programs, and speaker programs. We look forward to future opportunities for collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

President Barack Obama once said: *“Every single American - gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, transgender - every single American deserves to be treated equally in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of our society.”* I speak today recognizing that my own country's record on human rights for gay people is far from perfect. Many LGBT Americans have endured violence and harassment in their own lives, and for some, including many young people, bullying and exclusion are daily experiences. So we, like all nations, have much more work to do to protect human rights at home.

There is a phrase that people in the United States invoke when urging others to support human rights: “Be on the right side of history.” The story of the United States is the story of a nation that has repeatedly grappled with intolerance and

inequality. People from coast to coast joined in campaigns to recognize the rights of women, indigenous peoples, racial minorities, children, people with disabilities, immigrants, migrant workers, and many more. Throughout all of these ups and downs, dark chapters and brighter visions of our history, the march toward equality and justice has continued. Those who advocate for expanding the circle of human rights have been and remain on the right side of history, and history honors them. Those who have sought to restrict human rights were on the wrong side, and history reflects that as well.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. best observed: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Today, I am confident that we are on the down slope of the arc, accelerating every day toward the goal of equality and justice for all citizens, regardless of sexual orientation. Belief will once again converge with truth, the immutable truth that all persons are created free and equal in dignity and rights. So let us be on the right side of history, for our people, our nations, and for future generations, whose lives will be shaped by the work we do today.

Thank you very much