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**Political Courage Essay for BCSH**

1 message

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To: kstern@bard.edu

Wed, Jan 16, 2019 at 10:13 AM

Dear Professor Stern,

My name is Darya Farooohar and I am a Y1 at Bard Manhattan. I have entered the JFK Political Courage essay contest and was informed to also send my essay to you to be looked at in the Bard Center for the Study of Hate. I have copied my essay below; please tell me if you would like me to attach it as a file instead.

Best,  
Darya

Bella Abzug: Gay Rights Crusader

The fear of rejection haunts everybody, be it from a romantic partner or workplace superior, but few fear it more than legislators. Many policy makers choose to invest their time and political capital only in bills they are certain will pass, not wanting to suffer the embarrassment and potential career ramifications of sponsoring a failing bill on Capitol Hill. In their fear of being snubbed by fellow legislators, they ignore public welfare in favor of preserving their reputations. New York representative Bella Abzug, however, was not one to easily renounce political courage when justice was in jeopardy.

In 1974, Rep. Abzug defiantly ignored conventional political wisdom, once described by John F. Kennedy as the inclination, driven by fear, “not to pursue a unique and independent course which would embarrass and irritate [one’s fellow legislators],” by introducing monumental legislation for the protection of LGBT rights in the form of the Equality Act (1955, p. 4). This bill extended the protections of the 1964 Civil Rights act to women, unmarried people, lesbians and gay men, something never before undertaken (Drushel and German, 2009, p. 89).

The history of discrimination against members of the LGBT community in the United States is long and painful, full of instances of harassment, arrest, and even conversion therapy, which continue today. In 1969, part of a decade full of positive change regarding civil rights, police cars still prowled the streets of neighborhoods with known gay communities, conducting raids on gay bars for serving alcohol without New York State Liquor Authority licenses, “something they did only because the SLA refused to grant bars that served gays licenses, forcing them to operate as illegal saloons” (Franke-Ruta, 2013). It was one of these routine raids that sparked the Stonewall Riots, which turned into a 6-day street protest after a large crowd accumulated at the site (Franke-Ruta, 2013). Even after the conflict had been resolved, the message was clear: the LGBT community was tired of their treatment as second-class citizens, and were willing to use force against the enforcers of their discrimination (the police) in order to change the status quo. But although they were eager to challenge the hatred they faced daily, they could not enact permanent institutional change without the law on their side.

It was into this hotbed of tension that Abzug entered. An activist since the age of thirteen, when she gave speeches on subway cars about the need for a Jewish homeland, she was well prepared for this battle (Rodgers, 1998, p. 1145). In her previous legal work, she fought against Jim Crow laws, defending African American Willie McGee from a death sentence in which he was accused of raping a white woman (Rodgers,

1998, p. 1145). On her first day in Congress, she introduced a bill for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam (“Abzug,” 2019). Although she faced slander from her more conservative contemporaries, she strode into the House of Representatives on May 14th, 1974, to present a bill that would redefine how the nation regarded gay rights— all while wearing one of her signature wide-brimmed hats.

The Equality Act, worked on by Abzug in collaboration with fellow New York Congressman Ed Koch, accounted not only for workplace discrimination but also for violence condoned by a loophole in legislation, allowing the Attorney General to take civil action in cases of discriminatory violence (Iovannone, 2018). This was the first time federal legislation had been introduced to protect gays and lesbians, but the bill failed to progress out of Committee— a fact Abzug and Koch had anticipated, knowing that equality for all citizens was perhaps a little too progressive for many of their fellow Representatives (Iovannone, 2018). Abzug realized that the Constitution, long a beacon of hope and freedom for U.S. citizens, was no more than a dimly lit candle for many oppressed groups, but she was not ready to admit defeat.

In 1975, she and Koch introduced the Civil Rights Amendment of 1975 with the sponsorship of another 22 members of Congress (Iovannone, 2018). This bill narrowed down the protections given in the Equality Act to just gay men and lesbians in order to increase the attention given to gay rights; it also defined sexual orientation as “manifesting an emotional or physical attachment to another consenting person or persons of either gender” (Abzug, “H.R. 166,” 1976).

This definition was extremely important, because it redefined what homosexuality, which had only just been declassified as a mental disorder in 1973, meant to Americans. In addition, this bill marked the first time that 24 members of Congress officially supported federal protections for the LGBT community (Iovannone, 2018). While it ultimately failed, Abzug’s attempt showed her determination to protect the rights of all Americans whether or not her fellow legislators agreed with her. Her background as an activist had taught her that one needs to fight to even be acknowledged by those in power, and she never stopped fighting for what she believed to be right.

This fight was not in vain; it made an impact on the country’s consciousness long after Abzug’s political career ended. The two bills paved the way for subsequent LGBT-rights bills, such as the Employee Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which added gender identity to its anti-discrimination policy but failed by one vote in front of the Senate in 1996 (Drushel et. al., 2009, p. 90). Today, there is still no comprehensive federal law protecting LGBT people from discrimination, though many are pending in both the Senate and House (Thompson, 2014).

The current situation highlights the importance of Abzug’s early battle, for if she had not ignited the flame of federal resistance to the discrimination received by the LGBT community, this hatred might have spread unchecked. Her spirit inspires people today fighting for the rights of this community in the hopes that one day her dream of equality for all can be realized. This dream is why Abzug was “able to keep alive the spirit of individualism and dissent which gave birth to this nation” and become a model for true political courage (Kennedy, 1955, p. 17).

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