

COC SPEECH BY JLS
7 MAY 2019

I. INTRODUCTION

What a wonderful night! Welcome, old friends and new.

My name is Jessica Stern, and I am the Executive Director of OutRight.

First, congratulations again to the incredible honorees and I want to recognize OutRight's staff, interns, volunteers and Board members. You work with such integrity and love. Thank you!

II. PERSONAL STORY

I want to share a memory with you. In 1999, when I was 22, I learned that a new 'women's bookstore' was opening in the East Village: Bluestockings. I cruised over to Allen to check it out and felt like I found LGBTIQ nirvana.

The books were amazing, including everything from post-colonial and queer theory to how to DIY! (Which, as you know, is a lesbian pastime.) The walls were plastered with zines. And there were queers of all stripes! What was called a women's bookstore was actually an evolving community space for women (primarily lesbian or bisexual); trans; and non-binary people plus a few fabulous men.

So...I did what you do when you finally come home. I became a volunteer, which ultimately led me to co-found the Bluestockings Collective.

Through Bluestockings, I came alive. I met my first love, and I found community. Political, unapologetic, and *defiantly queer* community. We read Audre Lorde and James Baldwin; we excavated LGBTIQ history through Martin Duberman and Blanche Weisen Cooke; we devoured LGBTIQ art by Cheryl Dunye. After the customers left, we blasted music by Le Tigre and danced into the night.

I tell you this story because I personally value the transformative power of LGBTIQ organizations. They connect you with community. They make you safer. There was no script for us as young LGBTIQ people; we couldn't simply walk in the footsteps of our parents or mimic the lives we saw on TV. To become ourselves, we would need to be very brave and build something unpredictable, challenging, beautiful and new.

III. ABOUT OUTRIGHT

headlines this year --- like Brunei, Tanzania and Chechnya --- were tragic but not entirely unexpected. In fact, attacks are increasing as governments see how effective LGBTIQ organizations are, and many other stories didn't make the headlines at all. For example, in January, the local government in Ghanzhou, China banned 2 LGBTIQ organizations from operating, including one dedicated to gender identity recognition.

Thus, OutRight's data can prevent the next crisis. We cannot call every anti-LGBTIQ attack an 'emergency' when we know that most of these problems are long-standing and require long-term investments in community solutions.

V. IMPACT AND NEXT STEPS

Happily, OutRight's report on legal registration had a huge impact.

- One government made their first-ever grant to an unregistered LGBTIQ organization, and they told us it was possible because our data made them rethink structural barriers.
- Another government told me that they are reexamining their criteria for LGBTIQ grants based on OutRight's data.
- In other words, OutRight influences the distribution of millions of dollars and helps set government policy internationally. We also used this data to help 5 LGBTIQ organizations legally register, including Jamaica's first trans organization.

On top of that, the data is informing our new programs.

Remember those 30 countries where we couldn't find even one LGBTIQ organization? Well, OutRight has a new project, "The Heart of Africa." We will help LGBTIQ activists in Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of Congo establish their own organizations.

OutRight is uniquely positioned from our 29 years of experience and offices around the world to help catalyze progress, potentially changing LGBTIQ people's fate for generations to come. Every movement has a beginning, a Stonewall, and this could be theirs.

VI. CONCLUSION

Let me offer a few final thoughts.

The Right is not slowing down. It's not only about Trump, Putin, or Bolsonaro. It's not about just one kind of religious fundamentalism. There is a growing alliance of right-wing forces globally that have decided that attacking LGBTIQ people is an effective way to distract citizens for their own benefit.

Good evening.

My name is Rikki Nathanson & I identify as a trans woman & my pronouns are she, her and hers. It is an absolute honor to be addressing you all here tonight -- and receiving this award from people doing critical work to improve trans visibility.

Thank you Transparent for shining a light on our lives - and bringing acceptance - and hope to for the trans community.

Has anyone here been to Zimbabwe?

It's a beautiful, and a generally peaceful nation, but it is a country steeped in transphobia, homophobia and patriarchy, coupled to fiscal mismanagement, corruption and impunity of government officials with regard to the basic rule of law and human rights.

LGBTI people have suffered the brunt of stigma, discrimination and systemic and institutional violence. Unfortunately, I also experienced first hand what it meant to be someone who was part of a community that once was described as being "worse than pigs & dogs" by our former President Robert Mugabe.

In January 2014 I was arrested, at a hotel in my city - Bulawayo. The crime? Simply using a female restroom. I had upset a high ranking ruling party official who was at the same hotel, who used his position of power and connections to have me arrested by riot police for no other reason than appearing as I do here today. These riot police were in full riot regalia - complete with helmets, visors and rifles - and ordered me to the police station.

Upon arrival I was charged with criminal nuisance for using the restroom. I was taken to a side office where, at gunpoint, I was forced to strip so that they could "verify" my gender. They mocked me and ridiculed me, and denigrated me, saying that I was a poor excuse of a man, and what I was doing was unAfrican and going against culture. I was then thrown into a prison cell. I'd rather not go into details, but during that time there was no respite in the verbal abuse, humiliation and mental cruelty I had to endure. After 3 days, I was finally let go -- and fled to a safe house until the time of my hearing - when I was acquitted.

I responded by filing a civil suit for the violation of my constitutional rights. But that didn't stop the harassment -- when my case was finally going to be decided, a strange car began following me around, my mobile phone was bugged and my home was broken into twice. The first time I returned home to find it completely trashed. Exactly a week later, four men again broke in and physically assaulted me with clenched fists and batons, while hurling insults at me, -- saying I would disappear!

Finally late last year, I came to New York to participate in Advocacy Week at with OutRight, participating in high level advocacy at the United Nations and other government embassies. I cannot express how impactful this time was, working with OutRight and connecting with other activists from all over the world.

But at the same time, I learned that back home government agents broke into my home again. They also went to my office and when they learned that I was overseas, they asked to see my itinerary wanting to know when I would be back. It was then that I realized the gravity of the danger I was facing, and decided to not return to Zimbabwe, but rather stay here in the US.

It was a really tough decision for me to make, considering the work I had done back in Zimbabwe, Southern Africa and internationally. In Zimbabwe, I started the first trans specific and trans led organization that has come a long way in bettering the lives of the trans diverse population. Through my organization, the trans community is now accessing holistic gender affirming health care. The trans movement has grown throughout the country. Regionally, I was instrumental in the formation of the Southern Africa Trans Forum, which has grown from 6 partner organizations in 2016 to 18 by the end of 2018. My international ties have seen me work globally on addressing the HIV scourge on trans women as well as challenging the World Health Organization. And thanks to OutRight, I have done global advocacy at UN level, seeing results with massive impact.

It's a great pleasure to be honored by OutRight tonight -- Because I want people here to be aware of the conditions we are facing in my country and around the world, and because I believe OutRight is a critical champion for global equality. It is a strong ally to those of us coming from countries that still have draconian laws, which punish our mere existence, sometimes to the point of our death. A case in point is the recent law passed in Brunei, where

gay men could be punished by death. OutRight has always been the first to react and garner up support to fight these cruel systems of oppression, aggression and repression.

In these seemingly dark times where strides that were made in the past are being subverted by new administrations and regimes, we still cling on to that sliver of hope and knowledge that we the LGBTIQ community are resilient, tough and smart. We have been through the worst times but still do we not only survive, we grow and even flourish in our fabulousness!

With those thoughts I humbly accept this honor and I pledge to continue to advance our shared mission to change lives for our community in places where it's needed the most. Thank you OutRight for this honor, and thank all of you for being here tonight as an ally in this fight - your support is helping save lives like mine all over the world.

Thank you.