



Remarks by Elyse Cherry, Recipient of the Susan M. Love Award

The Women's Dinner Party, hosted by Fenway Health

March 29th, 2014

Thank you very much for that extraordinarily kind introduction, and let me say how absolutely delighted I am to be here with you this evening.

Are you all having a good time? I certainly am. In fact, being in a room with 1100 lesbians and all of our friends and allies is my idea of what heaven might look like.

One of the best parts of being in this room with you this evening is the recognition that you and I, together, can publicly claim our identity as lesbians. In Massachusetts and in a quickly expanding number of states across the nation and in countries around our world, we can publicly claim our partners and our spouses and our children -- and have those claims be recognized by our social institutions, our religious institutions and our legal system.

Notwithstanding all that, the first person I want to talk about with you tonight is not a lesbian. In fact, she's a woman most of us have never heard of -- Candy Purl is her name. Candy Purl lives in Hitchcock, -- a small Texas town on the way from Houston to Galveston -- and she's married to the President of the local branch of Prosperity Bank. One day, her son Ethan brought a friend home -- a friend who was a member of a large family notorious in town for being from the wrong side of the proverbial tracks. Candy Purl did not question her son's choice of friends nor did she close her door. She simply invited him to dinner. And when it became clear that the family of her son's friend could not provide what he needed to thrive, she made up the bed in an extra bedroom and, along with her family, welcomed Ethan's friend into her home. Eventually she and her husband drove him to the University of Missouri, where he became the first of his family to attend college.

Candy Purl did not know that that the young man she welcomed into her home would develop into a National Football League prospect -- nor did she know that he would choose to come out as a gay man ahead of the NFL draft. That gay man's name is Michael Sam.

Sports news continues to follow the Michael Sam story -- how will fans and his future team mates react, what will happen in the locker room, will Michael Sam make the cut, or, as I think about it, will he have an equal opportunity to suffer traumatic brain injury. But what's hard to find is ongoing coverage of Candy Purl.

I have been thinking about why I was sufficiently moved by Candy Purl's story to share it with you tonight. Some might say that Candy Purl engaged in an extraordinary act. And she did. But what I found most moving is that Candy Purl engaged in a perfectly ordinary act. What Candy Purl did is what women do -- what lesbians do -- every single day. We build families that some might call non-traditional. We reach across the potential divides of class and culture and race and sexual orientation and, like Candy Purl, we set another place at our table.

But it was not always so. Our ability to reach out to our friends and neighbors, to welcome others into our homes -- to provide a sanctuary, for example to a young man from a troubled

family -- was limited by the secrecy that, of necessity, ruled our lives -- because our very identity could be cause for criminal prosecution. "Monday morning pronouns" were the order of the day as those of us who were gay and lesbian engaged in conversation with our co-workers without revealing the gender of our intimates. Our community remained hidden. Even finding community was a challenge.

By claiming our identity as lesbians -- by coming out as a community -- we opened our lives to our friends and neighbors and families. And we caused a sea change across our nation. Coming out became a rite of passage, a way not just to claim our own identity but also to remove the cloak of invisibility that separated us from our straight friends and family and neighbors.

Our world changed, because we all changed it.

As a result of that change, recognition of our families and our relationships is becoming the norm rather than the exception. We not only integrated our lives we also became free to publicly pursue the values that are important to each of us and to begin to build the world we want.

Public activism and political action soon followed our new openness. Governors and legislators and senators -- and yes, even, Presidents -- came to seek the endorsement and the financial support of our community. And our community began to produce its own candidates -- one of whom, Maura Healey, is here with us tonight as an outstanding candidate for Attorney General. I encourage you to meet her.

Along the way, we built strong, vibrant institutions -- like GLAD and MassEquality and the Center for New Words and WAM. And tonight I want to salute all the unsung heroes -- many of whom are in this room -- who organized house parties, and sang at state house rallies, and knocked on their neighbors' doors, and staffed the phone banks, and talked to their legislators, and sat through long meetings, and tirelessly engaged in all of the tasks that are necessary to the challenging work of building a social movement -- even at those moments when we might not have seen eye-to-eye about the right way forward.

Our goal, however, was not just to serve the needs of the LGBTQ community but also the needs of all the communities we care about. And the organizations we created were not just focused on the legal or the political. They were intended to help build the world we want -- within the LGBTQ community and within our larger world. And build, we did!

In 1971, whoever imagined that the work of a small band of volunteers meeting in a basement would eventually morph into Fenway Health -- an extraordinary institution with a staff of 400 and more than 100,000 annual patient visits, an institution that is renowned throughout the world for its work on behalf of LGBTQ health.

And, in 1985, who ever imagined that Boston Community Capital would grow from our initial \$3500 grant from the Social Action Committee of the Old South Church into an organization with an extraordinary Board and staff that is now closing in on \$1 billion of investment --- investments that have supported the development of 15,000 units of affordable housing and 4,000 jobs, that have provided hundreds of families with the ability to remain as homeowners in their homes even after foreclosure, that have supported the development of schools and youth programs serving more than 3700 kids, health care facilities providing a comprehensive range of services to over 80,000 patients, and 10 million kilowatts of solar energy through panels installed on the roofs of affordable housing developments and non-profit organizations -- the energy equivalent of reducing automobile travel by seven million miles.

Along the way, we have come to understand the connections between health and gender and economic development -- that families at all income levels need access to high quality and affordable housing, health care, education, jobs, and communities free from blight and crime. We have come to think about our community investments in a more holistic way -- focusing on the social determinants of health and the relationship between health and wealth.

Wealth and economic justice is a difficult topic in the lesbian community. For some women, wealth is a source of power and influence; for others a source of oppression. On the one hand women represent the face of poverty in America. 42 million American women live in poverty or on the brink of poverty. Women still make \$.77 to a white man's dollar. For African-American women at \$.64 and Hispanic women at \$.55, the disparities are even greater. I often worry that, as lesbians, too many of us will be impoverished as we age.

On the flip side, women in the United States today control \$14 trillion in assets. Over the next forty years, we will control another \$28 trillion -- 70% of the wealth that will pass from one generation to the next. Our challenge, it seems to me, is to use our wealth, our political power and our determination to bridge our differences, to create the world we want, and to elect leaders who share and promote the common values that we support.

Political and social movements affect communities; but they affect each of us, individually, as well. For me, my work within the LGBTQ community and my work for economic, social and political justice form a seamless web. No matter how much I like hanging out in our lesbian community, our world is broader than that; I choose to play a role in that larger world -- and I choose to play that role as an open lesbian.

That's one reason that I joined the Board of LPAC -- the lesbian super PAC and a sponsor of tonight's dinner. It's an organization that proudly claims its lesbian identity while also focusing on reproductive freedom and economic justice for all.

Right now, members of the LGBTQ community can choose to enter the mainstream, to disappear into middle America, to live in the suburbs with 2.2 kids and a Ford Explorer -- or maybe a Subaru Outback. That can be a wonderful, rewarding, full, rich and engaging life. But let us not forget that our difference means that we see the world from a unique perspective and that we can help others see that perspective, too. In my view, our strength as a nation is in the diversity of our people, in our ability to hear and debate differing views, to accept a wide range of personal philosophies and lifestyles, in our respect for our differences.

I'm glad that the struggles of yesterday mean that no one sitting in this room, tonight, must move through the world as an outlaw; but I do want to encourage all of us, nonetheless, to preserve the independence of thought that outsider status often confers. I've never wanted to live my life in the mainstream of anything. My preference is to stand at the intersection -- in the traffic of ideas and people, where multiple streams cross. It's the most interesting place. Come join me there. Avoid the siren song of assimilation. Embrace the wonderful and special characteristics that make us who we are.

As we go forward, let us remember the lessons that we have learned from our struggles and from our work together. Let us use the positions in which we find ourselves and the power that we amass to further not just our own interest but also the values that we hold important, not just profits but also the ideals of justice, not just the private interest but also the public good. Let us translate our values and our compassion and our idealism into a movement that continues to change the very fabric of our society. Let us remember that we can take heart from our successes and that we can be optimistic about our power to continue.

But let us also note that our work is not yet done. The fight for LGBTQ rights is far from over. Our LGBTQ brothers and sisters in Russia as well as in Uganda and Nigeria and in other countries on the African continent struggle with the increasingly virulent presence of homophobia – driven in part by hate exported from the United States. Even here in Massachusetts we suffer the disappointment of a Republican platform that discourages our access to the rights and privileges that the rest of our citizens take for granted.

And the larger fight, for ourselves, for women, for the world we want, needs all the passion and intellect we can bring to bear. Women's health is about more than our bodies. It's about more than healthy minds; it's even about more than a healthy spirit. Women's health is about the health of our planet and all the souls who make their lives here. Women's health is about building the world we want -- a world in which justice and equality are a given rather than a goal, in which women and all of the beings we love have what we need not just to live but also to thrive -- a world in which we are all Candy Purl. That's my vision of women's health and that's why I am honored tonight to accept the Susan M. Love award from Fenway Health. Thank you very much.