

Gay Idahoans Meet With Rep. Paul Shepherd

By Chelsea Gaona Lincoln

It's not everyday an elected official compares you to dregs of history on the floor of the Idaho House. But that's exactly what Rep. Paul Shepherd (R-Riggins) did to gay and transgender people last month. Speaking in favor of a bill, he equated the gay and transgender community to slave owners, saying we are good people who make terrible decisions.

As a gay woman, being disparaged isn't anything new. But those words were especially hurtful coming from a legislator -- a community leader.

Something had to be done. Yet, it had to be done with grace.

Being raised on a small dairy farm in rural Wilder, I was taught that grace is an exercise of love, kindness, and goodwill. That's why I asked Rep. Shepherd to join me for a public forum to discuss the lives of gay and transgender people. I couldn't stop thinking that he hurt more than me. He hurt an entire community.

A forum would have provided Shepherd a chance to see that we're just people. It would have also given us an opportunity to see Rep. Shepherd for what he is: a husband, a father and a grandfather whose grandchildren light up when he enters a room.

By simply humanizing ourselves, we would have been on a better path to understanding. Alas, no such forum happened. Instead, Rep. Shepherd asked to meet with me in his office. So on Thursday, I went with two other gay Idahoans. We sat down with Shepherd, Rep. Janet Trujillo (R-Idaho Falls) and House Republican Caucus Communications Director Cindy Agidius.

I'll be honest, Agidius did most of the talking, not Shepherd.

Regardless, we had an opportunity to tell him our coming out stories.

Just to be clear, there is nothing more personal than a coming out story. That moment where you are either embraced or pushed away by the most important people in your life carries an emotional enormity that never goes away.

In other words, we shared our vulnerability. It's something we understand very well. Being vulnerable is part of our lives. Whether it's the fear of being rejected by our families, fired from a job or evicted from a home, we are always vulnerable.

In the end, Rep. Shepherd said he didn't intend his comments to be hurtful. I believe him. I take him at his word.

And that's a step forward, which are the steps I like to take. Each step brings us closer to the ultimate goal of meeting each other until there's no longer a reason to meet. When that day comes, when two sides have become one people, when we're all treated as equal, when the only name we call each other is "Idahoan," that will be the day that grace has won. What a wonderful day that will be.

I thank Rep. Shepherd for the opportunity to meet with him and congratulate him on a taking a step with me. I wish him a happy Easter and I look forward to meeting with him again.

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