

Why I'm Marching From the Rural South

by Butch McKay

There has been a lot of discussion regarding the Millennium March on Washington for Equality, to be held April 30, 2000. Some of the most often asked questions are "Why march?" and "Why now?" and "What are we marching for?"

Everyone has an opinion and I'm not here to support or reject anyone's personal views, only to offer you reasons why I will be marching. Growing up in the South and being gay was not always a comfortable life. Early I learned and mastered the art of living a double life. While I prided myself on never denying my homosexuality when asked about it, I never took a stand or spoke out on issues affecting the gay community. I was afraid of losing my employment, afraid of losing my friends, and fearful of bodily harm from rednecks in my neighborhood.

Active in my Southern Baptist, I had been taught that to be gay was the ultimate sin. Thankfully I had a wonderful and supportive family that assured me that there was nothing wrong with me, and I was able to deal with the rejection of my church. So one of the reasons I'm marching is to send a clear message to the religious right that I'm reclaiming my spirituality. I want gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth to know that the churches cannot deny them a spiritual life.

I live with shame of standing silently at the grave of my friend John who was brutally murdered and his naked body dumped beside a busy highway outside of Birmingham, Alabama. He was murdered by a person he had provided a home for and with whom he had shared a bed.

The guy said he murdered John because he made a pass at him. He was found not guilty. I failed to speak out against this injustice for fear of repercussions.

I live with the shame of silently attending the funeral of my good lesbian friend Janice. She loved motorcycles, and while working at a gay bar in her hometown, she met a guy who was riding a new Harley. He offered her a ride home. She had previously waited on him and felt safe with him, thinking he was gay. Her dream ride was to be her last. He took her into the woods and raped and murdered her and hid her body. She was found days later. Again I said nothing. I only mourned. I wasn't alone in my silence; few people spoke up for fear of being outed. I will never be silent again! I will be marching for John and Janice, with a guilty heart. I will march for Mathew Shepard and Billy Jack Gaither and all victims of hate crimes and call on the national leaders to pass and enforce hate crime legislation.

I have a loving partner of 22 years. We have no rights or protections when it comes to employment [in our state]. Our

straight married friends enjoy a lot of benefits denied to us. We have been together longer than most of them. I will be marching for fair and equitable employment practices. We live in a wonderful atmosphere in which to bring up children. But Florida remains the only state where gays cannot legally adopt. I will be marching for legal unions or marriage for gay couples and the right to adopt and raise children.

I cannot think of a more appropriate time to take a stand and be visible on issues that are so critical to our future. We need to tell those who would represent us, that the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community can make or break their chances of getting elected or staying in office. I will be marching to draw attention to the importance of the voting booth. I will be calling on all our community to register and to vote. I will be marching for political gain.

As Director of an AIDS service, I have another reason to march. AIDS is not over and it is time to recommit our community, our time, and our resources to fighting this war. I will be marching for the thousands of

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lost lives claimed by this epidemic. I will be marching for the millions of people living with HIV/AIDS. I will be marching for AIDS awareness, funding, education and prevention.

Perhaps the most important reason I will be marching will be to call attention to the plight of sexual minorities in rural America. Our issues and goals are similar to that of all our brothers and sisters regardless of where they live, but there is a big difference in the way in which we achieve them. [Many of us] cannot afford the same level of visibility in small towns that people can enjoy in metropolitan areas. [We don't always] have the backing of our local officials or the support of our friends, neighbors, and often our families.

Coming out is a very difficult choice, but one which I believe is necessary. I attended the March on Washington in 1993 and it changed my life. Returning home, I faced my own homophobia, and gained the strength to deal with the larger community. I agreed to an inter-

view with the local paper to talk about the March and the issues that gay people face living in the Bible Belt. That interview was total liberation for me and made me stronger and prouder than I have ever been. I will be marching for equal rights for our citizens in all our communities, especially those in the rural areas of this great nation.

Each of us has to make our own decision about supporting and participating in the Millennium March on Washington for Equality. You can support the March and still support the important local issues facing you at home. I encourage you to do both; both are empowering and important and each can contribute to the strength of the other. Please join me in Washington.

Let's march together with pride! Pride is not a birthright, it is a commitment! ▼

Butch McKay is a member of the Board of Directors for the Millennium March on Washington for Equality.

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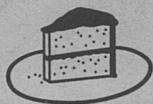
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