

## Statement Re: HB 160

Chair Blessing III, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Minority Member Clyde, and the members of the House Government Accountability and Oversight Committee, my name is Titus Drake, I am a 50 year old gay man, a productive citizen, an Ohio native, and an Ohio taxpayer.

I regret that I am unable to make this statement personally, but I welcome the opportunity to have it placed in the record.

Among LGBT people, I am one of the lucky ones. My parents, although products of their generation in terms of social attitudes, always treated me well. I came of age in a school system, South Euclid-Lyndhurst Schools, which was known for its diversity and tolerance – even as far back as the 1980s. As a student who'd known he was "different" from the first day of Fourth Grade, I'd learned to mask my true feelings. Deception comes at a personal cost, and the cost to me was an emotional detachment which became part of my persona. School friends sometimes referred to me as "Mr. Spock" because of my outward demeanor. It wasn't until my junior year at Brush High School that I began to explore my feelings and learned that there were others like me. It wasn't until my senior year in high school that I told a few selected friends my truth. They were supportive, which made me grateful – not only for them, but for the fact that I did not come of age in a school system that would have been less accepting. Even today, 32 years later, lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are up to five times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight counterparts, and 40% of transgender adults report having made an attempt at suicide.

I am one of the lucky ones. Because I can "pass for straight," I have seldom been subject to harassment. But even for me, there have been exceptions. At age 18, shortly after I came out, a relative told me that if there was a pill that could turn me straight, he would "force feed" it to me. Imagine how you would feel if at age 18, someone told you they would force feed you a pill to change your sexual orientation, or your religion, or another innately personal characteristic – I felt my whole identity was threatened. I have also been subject to more crude forms of harassment: Like many gay men, I've been called a "faggot" while waiting in line outside a gay club, and even while walking my dog with a friend. At the time, I didn't feel particularly threatened – the harassers were shouting from the safety of their cars and didn't seem likely to start a physical altercation. It didn't occur to me until later that, in our gun saturated society, they could well have shot us and sped away.

I am one of the lucky ones, but my luck has its limits. In 2006, I happened to meet the man who would become the love of my life, who had just moved to Ohio. We bought a home together in 2008, becoming investors in our community, with which we've developed deep ties. But in order to get married, we had to leave Ohio and travel to Vermont – which we did in 2010. It was five long years before our marriage was recognized by the United States Supreme Court. While I am grateful that Ohio put the Supreme Court's ruling into effect with relative speed, I will always remember that the

voters of Ohio voted to deny that right to LGBT people. This is one reason why HB160 needs to be given the force of law.

There has been much debate over the last few decades as to why some people are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Transgender. I am luckier than those in older generations, as today the bulk of scientific evidence and general consensus is that being LGBT is an immutable trait – as integral as eye color or handedness. Unfortunately for many young people, it is still legal for parents to force children into conversion therapy – which can lead to psychological damage and even result in suicide.

Of one thing I am certain, it is wrong to deny someone a job, unjustly fire them from a job they are performing well, deny them housing, credit, or access to public accommodations simply because they are LGBT. And while I do not believe anti-LGBT prejudice is as widespread in Ohio as in, say, Mississippi, it remains a problem. There are critical legal gaps which must be addressed legislatively.

I am one of the lucky ones. But for those who are not so lucky, I urge the Ohio House to pass this necessary bill.

Respectfully Yours,  
Titus H. Drake