

Chair Hambley, Vice Chair Patton, Ranking Minority Member Brown, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee,

I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act. My testimony is based in love and respect in contrast to the hatred and ignorance experienced by many LGBTQIA individuals. I'm going to share with you three people who taught me how to live my life: my mother, my aunt and my father.

- My mother epitomizes what one thinks about when you picture a strong woman and naturally understands the importance of LGBTQ inclusion because the women in our family all embody strength. Rita Walters taught for 35 years and has fought for the betterment of Ohio educators to this very day. She does so because she cares about people she has not even met and wants to use her voice for the betterment of her community. She is why I lead my enterprise LGBTQ Employee Resource Group: Aramark PRIDE – helping Aramark to be a more inclusive and accepting workplace.
- My aunt, another 30-year career educator, taught me to be unabashed in who I am as a human being. Mary Dierkes contracted polio at age 5 and was severely debilitated. That didn't stop her from teaching special needs students for 30 years, becoming a town councilwoman, sitting on the board of our church, traveling to Europe and helping to raise her nieces and nephews. When one would see my aunt, you'd see a person who looked different, but upon meeting her, those physical disabilities were erased from your memory. My sexual orientation is one facet of my life and to know me and love me, I insist you know all of me before judgment – just like my Aunt Mary.
- My father is more incredible than any word that could be used to describe him. Coming from rural Ohio in a town of 1200 people, boys grew up to play sports with their dads' coaching or cheering on the sidelines. David Walters still cheered for me, but I chose to sew at age 8 through 4-H and I remember losing a competition and angrily dismissing his questions about why I lost. He said, "Eugene, I don't understand a lot of what you do, but I want to so I can support you." I knew at that moment, he'd always have my back, like when he sponsored me to become a 3rd Degree Mason in the Grand Lodge of the Free & Accepted Masons of Ohio - an organization not known for its inclusive stances. He vowed that if they would have not accepted me, he'd leave an organization he has been with for over 50 years and I am for now 20.

For those three people and EVERYONE in my life who dispel ignorance and espouse acceptance regardless of beliefs, I urge you to pass House Bill 369, the Ohio Fairness Act. Each of you represent all Ohioans and you should want to protect them in any way you can with the power you have earned. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.