

Opponent Testimony on Ohio House Bill 249 - Veranda L'Ni
Ohio House Judiciary Committee

Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in opposition to Ohio House Bill 249.

My name is Veranda L'Ni, and I am a Cleveland drag artist who has created and cultivated Drag Story Hour programs for children and families in our communities. I'm here today not only as an entertainer, but as someone who believes deeply in literacy, creativity, and the importance of welcoming community spaces for families.

What happens at these story hours is a mixture of colorful storytelling, movement breaks and interactions while reading the books. The kids can sit right up front or with their loved ones. They intently listen and respond when I use silly voices and dramatic gestures. When the program ends, more often than not, the kids and parents express their gratitude for creating a fun, safe environment for their family to attend. And how the parents wish this was around when they were younger.

The families who attend story hour bring curiosity, kindness, and their children. The only threats have come from people who were never in the room.

And because of the growing hostility surrounding drag artists, my work has come with consequences I never expected.

For several years, I received threats of violence for reading children's books in theaters and other venues. People actually believe I am 'grooming' or 'indoctrinating' children to be gay or trans by reading book titles like, *It's Ok To Be A Unicorn*, *Ada Twist Scientist* or even *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*.

And because of these misinformed beliefs, I have been doxxed, cyber-bullied and have received many many threats of physical violence and threats that events would be attacked. Which actually happened in Chesterland, with the firebombing of a local church. These threats have not only been directed at me—they have also targeted the families who attend these events with their children, the staff and volunteers at the venues and the surrounding establishments. These malicious actions, by no fault of their own, extend outward to my husband and 83 year old father, who I care for.

The emotional and mental toll of that kind of harassment is very real. Every time I walk into a story hour, or any other venue for that matter, there is a moment where I wonder if someone might try to hurt me.

Despite that fear, I keep showing up, because the joy on children's faces when they discover the magic of books is so worth it.

But this bill introduces another serious consequence for me.

Outside of performing, I am also a licensed real estate agent. I have worked hard to build a professional career and maintain my license. The penalties associated with Ohio House Bill 249 could put that livelihood at risk.

A criminal charge or conviction can jeopardize professional licenses and employment opportunities. That means someone like me could potentially lose the career I depend on to financially support me and my family — not because I harmed anyone, but because I read a children's book while wearing a costume as part of a storytelling program.

4th and 5th degree misdemeanors and child sex offender status is an extraordinarily pointed punishment for artistic expression.

Drag is performance. It is costume, character, and theatrical storytelling. Like theater, comedy, or dance, it is a form of expression protected by the First Amendment.

When government attempts to single out a particular form of artistic expression and restrict it because some people disapprove of it, that raises serious constitutional concerns.

This bill would not make our communities safer. Instead, it risks reinforcing the same stigma that has already fueled harassment and threats against artists like me.

I'm not asking anyone here to personally enjoy the art of drag. But I am asking you to recognize that artists, storytellers, and performers deserve the same constitutional protections as anyone else.

Drag is theater. Story hour is literacy. Neither should ever be treated like a crime.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to oppose Ohio House Bill 249.

Thank you for your time and consideration.