

Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg, and members of the House Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 249. My name is Jimmie Vera, and I was born and raised in Columbus. I am proud to be an Ohioan because our state has long represented opportunity and freedom. Historically, Ohio was seen as a place of refuge—a land where people escaping hardship, discrimination, or danger could come to build a better life. Growing up here, I saw people from all backgrounds—LGBTQ+ individuals, heterosexual families, artists, professionals, and community members—gather together peacefully in shared spaces. That spirit of openness and acceptance is what makes Ohio special. At seventeen years old, I left my childhood home during my senior year of high school because it was not a safe place for me. Living on the streets was incredibly difficult, and I was beginning to lose my direction. That changed when I met a drag family called Hit Em Ent. In the drag community, families are built around creativity and mentorship—whether that creativity is drag performance, singing, acting, modeling, dancing, or other artistic expression. They welcomed me into their home, helped me get off the streets, supported me in finding a job, and encouraged me to pursue the performing arts.

Through their encouragement, I began training in dance—ballet, contemporary, jazz, and hip-hop—and discovered a passion for the arts. This drag family protected me, supported me, and treated me with dignity. Even though I grew up around drag performers, it was never forced on me, and it was never sexualized; it was simply art, entertainment, and a community built around creativity. Because of the stability and encouragement they gave me, I stand before you today as a successful professional. I hold a bachelor's degree in business and marketing, I am currently in my second year of my MBA program, I own a digital marketing agency, and I work as a real estate asset manager. I am living proof that mentorship and community support can change a life. Drag is also an important part of the arts and culture in Columbus, where venues such as District West host large-scale productions similar to theatrical shows. These performances create jobs, attract tourism, and contribute to our local economy. If this bill passes, it risks silencing an art form, eliminating opportunities, and dismantling supportive communities that help young people who may otherwise have nowhere to go. I respectfully ask you to consider the positive impact drag has had on my life and the lives of many others. Please do not pass this bill. Instead, choose to protect the creative expression, community, and opportunity that make Ohio a place where people can thrive. Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to share my story.