

To whom it may concern,

Hello. My name is Christopher Equizi. I am a Columbus resident who entertains in the art of drag by the stage name of Virginia West. I am writing to you in extreme opposition of House Bill 249. This bill is not what the majority of Ohioans are concerned about, nor want. It is designed as an attack on artistic expression, which is protected by the 1st amendment, therefore this ban would be unconstitutional.

Unfortunately I am unable to be there in person, but I would like to tell you a little bit about myself and what my art has done for the City of Columbus and the State of Ohio.

I have performed as the character "Virginia West" for 29 years. Over the course of those years, I have entertained tens of thousands of people. I have been an opening act for major concert artists that have traveled through Columbus, a featured performer at multiple conferences for many different organizations that come to our city, am the official emcee on NBC4's coverage of the annual Pride Parade, and am a nationally recognized Drag Artist. My drag has been consumed by all walks of life..not just the LGBTQIA community.

On top of all of that, myself and my "Drag Family" have raised over 3 million dollars for local and national charities. Those charities range from Children's Hospital and the Ronald McDonald House, to ALS and Cancer charities, The Trevor Project and Heartline Ohio to name a few. These charities have called on us for decades to raise awareness and money. Yes, Drag has done all of this.

I am also one of the owners of District West, a Drag Cabaret Bar in Downtown Columbus, Ohio that has been open for 6 years. Over the course of those 6 years, we have grown from a small business to a nationally known entertainment facility.

This bill threatens everything I have just mentioned to you. My business employs over 40 full time employees and entertainers and was recently listed as the 2nd highest LGBTQIA+ employer in the City of Columbus. This bill will completely demolish what has taken years to build. Not only will it shatter the lives of those employees, but the revenue that we bring to the city and state will drastically be diminished. It's harmful not only to us, but this bill sends a very clear message to our youth who may identify as LGBTQIA or may just simply feel different... that they don't matter. That they are wrong. I have personally spent decades helping my community and helping those who already feel like outcasts find a place, and that's exactly what drag does. Not only do we create art, we create family.

On top of the business aspect, our charity work will also cease. Millions of dollars raised across the state will now be gone as we will be forced into "adult cabarets."

Drag is not sexual. Drag artists, much like myself, are actors and actresses. We understand the role we play. We are able to change our characters to fit the crowd we perform to, the same as any others in the entertainment industry. This bill will directly affect not only drag and LGBTQIA spaces, but also touring professional theatrical productions that include any kind of "gender bending" roles. This is a very slippery slope into censorship.

I would like to hope that Ohio is better than this fear mongering. Other states have had similar legislature come up. Most states realize that these discriminatory bills are not just inherently wrong, but also bad for the state. Do you really want to send the message that Ohio is not a place for everyone? That we are a state of bigoted people who's only real perception of life is that within their own surroundings? I hope not. We matter. Art Matters. Ohio is better than this bill. I ask that you all do the right thing, and dismiss this bill.

Sincerely,

A Tax Payer, Entrepreneur, Business Owner, American, Friend, Brother, Son.. and yes..

a Drag Queen.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher Equizi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent initial 'C'.

Christopher Equizi , Aka Virginia West