

Chairman Bird, Vice-Chair Fowler-Arthur, Ranking-Member Robinson, and members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee, my name is Cole-Finley Nelson, my pronouns are he/him, I am trans, and I am here to elevate the voices of those you are targeting by demanding that you oppose HB8.

As is clear in all the anti-lgbtq+ bills plaguing the nation at the moment, the overarching purpose is to enforce patriarchal control, suffocate self expression, and restrict growth and change.

I get it. Change is scary. It contains multitudes of unknowns and space for uncomfortable self awareness. All things that formulate free-thinking, promoting creativity that pushes one outside the boxes that the compliance you strive to enforce thrives in. And I know that you, seeing any ounce of your power slip out of your hands, terrifies you.

Fear is one of the biggest motivators for violence, creating the illusion of a threat where a human being once was. And that is the problem. Once you decided that we are less than, that since we are not existing in alignment with your vision of how everyone should, we are no longer human to you. Our joy found in freedom of expression is a threat to your status quo and therefore must be eliminated.

Just because you do not understand something, you do not identify with the queer community perhaps, does not mean we should not exist. By requiring the reporting of things like requested name change in a class and the vague “sexually explicit content,” you are deciding to put control over safety. Control and safety are not intrinsically connected, not when the control comes from people who are trying to snuff out your existence.

Some of the most dangerous times in my life have been when I was outed to my parents. The images play so clearly in my mind: the phone call I was forced to sit and hear- full of disgust

and rage, the fearfulness in waiting for them to arrive, the unrelenting punishment, beatings, and years of attempts to “change” me through physical and mental abuse- it all stands out vividly in my mind, haunting my every breath.

The bruises and pain heal, but the emotional effect of knowing you are seen as a mistake, that you are rejected, and being told it would be better to see you die as their “little girl” than become who you are today, those things don’t fade.

Those words are forever branded into my soul.

As I stood and shared with some of you in my previous testimony for HB6, these stories from my life are not spoken lightly. Like my queer siblings, there is the looming threat that at any point these morsels of my experience could be weaponized and used against me.

Those of you who sit here, blindly standing behind this bill, your perspective is one of privilege and power. You are not the ones who will hold the children who were outed to their religious and conservative parents, who are beaten for just the thought of being gay or trans alone. You will not clean or stitch up the self-inflicted gashes of youth who feel trapped in a world of parental barriers based on the lies of politics. You will not stand with us at the graves of the ones who felt it better to leave the earth than fake an existence rooted in denial of who they are. You not bearing witness to the tragic results of bills like this does not mean they don’t exist. It highlights that you should not be the ones with the power to pass them.

At 9 years old I had turned to taking blades against my skin multiple times a day to find safety, control, and comfort in being the one to hurt myself, instead of others being the only ones with that power. I learned to express my own fears and instilled shame around my identity through self-destruction to hide it from others.

Imagine what it is like for the only time you feel safe to be when you are watching blood spill out from your own skin. Now, I am left with scars lining my body, citing the reasons I turned to self-harm. Reminding me that the world does not want to see me thrive. That people like you do not even want to see those like me survive; declaring the hate you are inflicting and encouraging against me and my community through consideration of these bills.

The people this bill will impact the most cannot be here because they are the lgbtq+ youth who find it unsafe to come out, the ones who have unsupportive parents, who risk real harm and danger if they expressed their truth. I am here to be their voice. To urge you to see the harm that will come from this bill and demonstrate you care about the youth of Ohio by opposing HB8.