

Thank you for inviting me to be with you today.

For decades, we told young people that “it gets better”. Those of us who grew up in schools where we had to hide to survive or face violence and abuse were told the tides were shifting and the world would finally let us simply be. And for a while, it did get better. But, we are witnessing a violent backlash to that progress and I’m here to say we must recommit to the work of making America better than those who have placed a political target on the LGBTQ community, on trans youth and families, on our access to life-saving health care and who now seek to erase our existence from every school and every library.

Being LGBTQ in America -- in 2022 -- means looking over your shoulder before holding hands with someone you love. It means watching as your very humanity is litigated on every cable news network and across each social media platform, wondering which faces around the Thanksgiving dinner table will have been indoctrinated and emboldened to challenge your right to exist. It means wondering when those hateful words will come from someone with an assault weapon and the directions to the bar you and your friends are in seeking refuge from a world that has been made more dangerous by the extremist rhetoric of extremists and opportunistic politicians.

My day came on June 12, 2016. Pulse Nightclub was one of the first places I *didn't* look over my shoulder, stiffen my wrist, or deepen my voice. And that night, everything about it was normal. I went to the same bartender I always went to, ordered the same drinks I always ordered. And as the night wound to a close, I stepped into the same bathroom I had been in hundreds of times before. There was a promotional poster on the wall with the painted faces of familiar drag queens. There was a half-empty glass teetering on the edge of the sink. The water from the faucet was ice cold. There were gunshots. Endless gunshots. The hair standing up on my neck. The stench of blood and smoke burning the inside of my nose. The nervous huddle against a wall. A girl behind me trying so hard not to scream that she trembled against the tiles beneath us. There was a sprint for the exit. Relentless gunfire.

That night, a man filled with hate and armed with a weapon designed for war charged into Pulse Nightclub, shattering our normal and murdering 49 of those we loved. My best friends, Drew and Juan, took 19 of the over 110 rounds he pumped into the club. I'll never forget the thousand of desperate calls I made to Drew only to get his voicemail every time. Or the families' heartbroken screams when I had to tell them that their children would never be coming home. And I can never unsee their lifeless bodies in cold, hard caskets.

For years, cynical, power-hungry politicians and influencers have joined forces with right-wing extremists to dredge up age-old anti-LGBTQ hysteria and put our community squarely in harm's way. My own Governor Ron DeSantis has trafficked in bigotry to feed his insatiable political ambition and march toward the White House over the bodies of our children. We have been smeared and defamed. Some with powerful platforms have insisted that the greatest threats we face are a teacher with they/them pronouns or someone in a wig reading Red Fish, Blue Fish at the local library. Hundreds of bills have been filed to erase us. And all along, we have warned that these short-sighted political maneuvers would come at a human cost. But they have continued. Even as hate violence escalated. Even as children's hospitals faced mounting bomb threats. As armed protestors began showing up at pride festivals and drag brunches. As Nazi's marched proudly to threaten us and any business who stands up for our right to simply live. Even as queer kids told us they were scared – that life was getting less safe for them. Even as a donut shop in Oklahoma was firebombed for daring to host a drag show. Even as 5 innocent people in Colorado Springs went into a space that was supposed to be safe for them and came out in body bags. The attacks have continued.

We can be better than this. We *must* be better than this. Right wing extremism relies on the manufactured belief that its poison is inevitable, that resistance is hopeless. But rejecting extremism is our only hope. We must demand a better way forward. We need to say without apology that people who smear entire marginalized communities for social media content and fundraising fodder have no place in our body politic. We need to hold accountable those who traffic in venomous bigotry to score cheap political points. We need to put real resources behind efforts to combat anti-LGBTQ hate and the threats of violence that come with it. We need to address how our obsession with easy access to guns takes dangerous bigotry and makes it fatal. And we need to say unequivocally that LGBTQ lives matter. That trans lives matter. And that in this country, that is simply not up for debate.

In the moments after Pulse, I was heartbroken. I wondered if the next day was worth waking up for. Now, I am angry. I'm angry because we tried to warn you. I'm angry because we knew what was coming, we could see what was brewing, but we were gaslit – told that our desire to be seen and valued in our communities was to blame. I'm angry because this community deserves better – my best friends deserved better. I'm angry because 5 people who went to Club Q and never made it home to their families deserved better – they deserved to live. I'm angry because we just want to live. You have a responsibility to act.