



EQUALITY GROWING A FIGHT WE CAN WIN

2012 has been an historic year for LGBT equality. President Obama's endorsement of marriage equality was a watershed moment in American history. Two legislatures, in Washington state and Maryland, voted to pass marriage equality and give LGBT couples the power to recognize their love and commitment under the law. The repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell has been fully implemented and June marked the first-ever pride celebration at the Pentagon. In short, it's been an amazing year.

But the events of 2012 did not come about in a vacuum. It is astonishing how far we've come in such a short amount of time, but the momentum we have today is only possible because of years of tough work and slow, hard-fought victories over the course of decades. Since Stonewall, courageous men and women have chipped away at long-held prejudices and discrimination through their activism and the sheer force of their examples as pillars of their communities. Every advance and every changed mind lays the groundwork for the next success, and we are, I hope, reaching a tipping point.

When I came to the U.S. Senate in 2009, the passage of the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Act was seen as far from certain. Those who opposed the fight for progress did everything they could to stand in our way. But we got it passed that year, and as a result it is finally no longer any less a crime to attack someone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity than for their religion or the color of their skin.

Likewise, the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell was considered an uphill battle in 2010. Even as military leaders and activists alike urged Congress to bring an end to this unfair policy, opponents dug in, and for a moment it appeared they had won the day. But that December, we redoubled our efforts, and Congress passed the legislation repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell just before that year's session ended.

Now we must build on those victories and take on the challenges that still lie before us to bring full equality to LGBT Americans. Marriage equality is still out of reach for far too many of our citizens, and DOMA is still on the books.

And because Congress has not yet passed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), it is still legal to fire or refuse to hire someone on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity in a majority of states. One of my proudest accomplishments as the Speaker of the Oregon House was passing Oregon's version of ENDA, which outlawed this form of discrimination in Oregon. Now, I am leading efforts in the U.S. Senate to adopt ENDA. It is important that LGBT citizens in all 50 states have the same rights and protections they do in Oregon. Just this past June, we held a Senate hearing to address this issue of fundamental fairness, and I will keep fighting – alongside you – until it has passed Congress and been engraved into law.

The world of politics has many uncertainties, but there is one thing I am sure of: the momentum for LGBT equality will only grow. We've come too far to turn back. Full equality never happens without a fight — as Martin Luther King once said, “change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle” — but it's a fight we can and will win, thanks to you.

Oregon's Senator Jeff Merkley, the son of a millwright and first in his family to attend college, has spent his whole life fighting for opportunity for Oregon's families.