

Allies Dinner 10/18/10

Speech by Faculty Advisor, Dr. April Householder

I want to start by thanking everyone who came out tonight and express the deepest gratitude on behalf of the UMBC Freedom Alliance for the ongoing support of our Allies. As we look around in 2010, it may seem that we have come a long way as a society on issues related to the LGBTQ community (we have hate crime legislation), as a community (Lady Gaga!), and as a campus (an anti-discrimination policy), but I can assure you, that there is no more important time than NOW to continue to share your love and support for this community.

I've been asked to speak tonight about how to be an Ally but I also want to share some thoughts on what it *means* to be an Ally. Perhaps some of the things on this list are things you already do on a daily basis; maybe some you haven't thought about as things that would be helpful to our community; and maybe others, you aren't ready to take on at this time. Whatever your investment or limitations, I hope that the following will inspire you to keep working for the justice and equality of your friends, family, students, teachers, and co-workers. So, how can you be an Ally?

1. Be a **friend**. This means being there for your LGBT friends and letting them know that they have your support. Lending an ear, talking with your queer friends about things that affect them, and not making any distinction between their experiences and yours to truly understand their lives, goes so far. This also means speaking as a member of this community when your gay friends aren't around. Saying NO to participating in hurtful speech; not laughing at homophobic jokes; not being a bully or condoning harassment either actively, or by being silent when you see this happening; being vocal about your beliefs in interactions with friends, family, and co-workers; choosing not to be indifferent. Speaking for someone who doesn't have a voice or is not present to share that voice is not acting like a radical- it's simply the right thing to do. Do not validate a culture of intolerance. Refuse to live in a world where homophobia is tolerated. It may mean marching next to your queer extended family and fighting for equality as an activist on behalf of LGBTQ rights. It could mean giving to organizations that support the LGBT struggle. Consciously choose to not participate in things which give you privilege as a straight person at the expense of the rights of gay people. Vote to elect public officials who will work on behalf of LGBT Americans.
2. To **parents**: Being an Ally means loving your LGBTQ children and participating in their lives as parents. Allowing them to make mistakes and fail and succeed unconditionally. Protect them. Be present and try to understand their experiences are not that different from your own. Consider what it means when you dress your daughters in pink and your sons in camouflage. Refuse to raise children according to a binary system of gender. Work to eradicate prejudice in your interactions with school staff, other parents, other children. Create a safe home environment in which your children are free to express themselves and

communicate with you openly. Tell them you're proud of them for being who they are. Let them know that they are normal. Make them feel that they can be comfortable expressing affection towards their partners in your family setting. Get active in PFLAG or other organizations. Use your experiences to educate those around you. Consider that your children are special and strong and courageous.

3. **Children:** be kind to everyone and don't miss the opportunity to be nice. Think of a time when someone was mean to you and remember how it felt. Don't be a bully. If you see someone being a bully, tell an adult, be a friend to the person being bullied, stand up to the bully. When you hear someone say, "that's so gay" or "that is queer", don't agree with them. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't be afraid to let people know that all families are different- some have only 1 mommy or daddy, some have a mommy and a daddy, some don't have a mommy or a daddy, and some have 2 mommies or 2 daddies. Love your mommies or daddies. If you have 2, you are very lucky! Being different might seem hard because right now everyone is trying to fit in, but you will grow to learn that not being the same as everyone else is a really cool thing! Think of how boring the world would be if everyone were the same.
4. To **students:** Join the Freedom Alliance! If you are able, Come out; be visible. Get active on campus and in your communities off-campus. Take every opportunity to educate your fellow students. Realize that if you don't speak for yourself, someone else will speak for you. Write letters, participate in teach-ins, fundraisers, boycotts and girlcotts. Hold your university accountable for your safety, and recognition. When your university doesn't uphold its end of the bargain, speak up. Realize that in doing this, you are expressing love and concern for UMBC, and are working to make it better. Learn about the history of UMBC and where you fit in. See yourself as part of a legacy that you will leave to future Retrievers. Also realize that your experiences as an LBGT individual are not limited by the loop that encircles our campus- you are part of a larger community that has a history, an on-going dialog, and a politic. Spend your money in places that respect queer people. Increasingly, your role as consumers will dictate what happens in business, the media, the law. When you graduate, choose to work for and with employers who respect LGBT people in their policies and practices. Whether you go into business, medicine, industry, politics, advertising, teaching, or service, say no to manufacturing things/ideas that harm LBGT people.
5. To **Faculty:** Participate in safe-space and ally programs. Make your classroom and office safe spaces. Include policies on your syllabi which address diverse perspectives in the classroom. Include LGBT content in your courses. Understand how racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia are all profoundly connected. Inform yourselves about campus resources.

6. **Staff:** Continue to work for inclusivity when working with students. Support gender-neutral housing, work for gender-neutral bathrooms, participate in creating change around LGBT issues on campus.
7. And to the **Administration:** Continue to support queer faculty, staff and students on campus. Inform yourself about issues that effect the LGBT community. Create a top-down environment in which homophobia is not tolerated. Be proactive. When issues arise, REACT. Solicit input so that you can respond from an informed perspective. Respond to issues that effect queer students with clarity and specificity to the queer community at UMBC. Be transparent. Be self-reflective. Set a precedent in which homophobia will not be tolerated on our campus; join as a visible ally to other campuses who have been affected by the horrors of homophobia. Be a leader in our state, as an institution that prides itself on being inclusive of the interests LGBT Faculty, Staff, and Students, when it makes public statements about diversity. Uphold UMBC's anti-discrimination policy in words and actions. Understand that gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation are a real part of the term "diversity." See UMBC's reputation as an "up and coming" and "diverse" institution as speaking to potential students which includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans recruits, and lets them know that they will be safe and supported at this institution. Devote resources to this. Know that the world is watching. Be a leader to other schools who look to UMBC as a standard of excellence. Create a standing advisory committee that deals with LGBT issues similar to other standing committees on ethnic minority and multicultural issues. Include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression issues in new faculty/staff/student programs and training opportunities. Create a hate crime reporting system and train campus police on reporting bias incidents. Work to bring LGBT scholarships to campus. Create a Queer Studies program. Reach out to LGBT alumni as a valuable resource. Meet regularly with the Freedom Alliance and other groups to ensure that the safety and interests of our queer community is an on-going priority.
8. And finally, for everyone: Cultivate your imagination. Understand that injustice toward one person or group is injustice for everyone. In the words of Ghandi, "no one is free when others are oppressed." Imagine how different things might have been for Tyler Clementi, or Seth Walsh or Asher Brown or Billy Lucas or Matthew Shepard, or Tena Brandon if they had an ally, or if the people who terrorized them heard from an ally who may have changed something in them before they decided that being gay was something that was somehow ok to ridicule. Imagine.