

LGBT teens, RYSE Center, mobilize Richmond against hate speech



Yellow arm bands were distributed by the RYSE Center, and a pledge was signed by Richmond residents to protect its LGBT community from hate speech. Police Chief Chris Magnus said hate crimes are uncommon in Richmond, but that his officers are trained to recognize and deal with it. "That's something we take very seriously when it does occur," he said. (Photo by Tyler Orsburn)

By: [Tyler Orsburn](#) | June 6, 2012 – 4:52 pm

On Tuesday night at Richmond's City Council meeting, upset residents and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, mostly dressed in purple t-shirts and yellow armbands, signed a unity pledge against hate speech and asked council members to do the same. The standing-room-only crowd also heard 65 people voice their concerns about homophobic comments they heard during the last public meeting.

On May 22, Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and councilmember Jovanka Beckles presented a proclamation to a group of LGBT teens from the [RYSE Center](#) declaring June as Gay Pride Month in the City of Richmond. [That didn't sit well](#) with some in the community, citing Juneteenth as their focus of concern. Juneteenth is a widely celebrated African American heritage holiday acknowledging the abolition of slavery.

At the May meeting someone asked why gay pride had to be observed in June when June was the celebration of freedom from slavery.

"If everybody turns gay, it'll be the end of the world because nobody will be making babies," Richmond resident Mark Wassberg shouted Tuesday night before he was escorted out of the building by police.

Staffers from the RYSE Center in Richmond mobilized last night's LGBT turnout because they felt their youth were directly attacked by last month's insults. Aran Watson, a RYSE Center employee, said 100 people signed the unity pledge before meeting began. "The pledge is about continuing this conversation and building alliances across the community," he said.

At the most recent council meeting, Latino activist Andrés Soto said it was irrational to use Juneteenth as an excuse not to celebrate gay pride in June. "It would be like me speaking out against Asian Heritage Month in May because Cinco de Mayo is in May," he said.

Prior to the meeting Kimberly Aceves, co-founding executive director at the RYSE Center, said young people are vulnerable and that grown-ups should be standing up for them. "We all live under systems and conditions of oppressions," she said. "No matter if it's around young people, whether it's targeting people of color, LGBT people, or folks in poverty—it's really about coming together."



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Supervisor John Gioia, who also attended last night's meeting, said teenagers need adult allies and that, whether you're gay or straight, there's a place for you in Richmond. "We have a chance here tonight to be roll models for our young people," he said. "And to say when hate is wrong, we call it out and stick with them."

Local minister and NAACP member Wesley Ellis brought his weathered Bible to the podium. He said he had no problem with the LGBT community, but that homosexuality wasn't what God intended. "I want to quote the Bible," he said. "Leviticus chapter 18:22 'Thou shall not lie with mankind as womankind.' The Bible says it's an abomination."

Rev. Kamal Hassan of Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church got the biggest ovation of the night when he expressed disappointment with anyone who tried to use the Bible as a weapon to dehumanize others. "I am a father, pastor, friend and colleague of LGBT people," he said. "Gay pride and Juneteenth does not diminish one or the other."

Because last night's city council meeting was an open forum, no votes were taken on the matter, such as whether to support both events in the month of June. At the end of the session, Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and all city council members signed the RYSE Center's pledge to report and stop hate speech.

In other council business, the Honorable George D. Carroll was acknowledged prior to the open forum for his legendary civic service. Carroll was Richmond's first African American city councilmember and mayor. He was also the first African American judge in Contra Costa County.