

Dear University of Rhode Island Community,

I can't stop crying. As so many other LGBTQ and ally people are today, I'm devastated. Early this morning, I turned on my television and learned that the largest gun-related mass murder in the recent history of the United States has claimed more than 50 lives and 50 livelihoods and was enacted, at least in part, on the basis of anti-LGBT motivation. I thought to myself, "this can't be real. But this is LGBT Pride month! This can't be happening. The bar told them to run. That could've been any of us, gathered in community love." The tears started falling and they haven't stopped since, for me and all of the staff of the Gender and Sexuality Center. This is a stark reminder. A stark reminder of fear, degradation, oppression, and... hope.

As a professional in higher education, I've often counseled LGBTQ people to never be afraid of who they are and to embrace their identities, especially when they are in the strong forces of group power: things like being at a queer bar/club, where you can be yourself freely. Even while espousing these messages, I knew that wasn't entirely, and certainly not historically, true. Indeed, even the unofficial claiming of the Stonewall Rebellion as our collective historical uprising as a queer community is rooted in experiencing terrorism in spaces that were supposed to be OURS. So, have I, have we, been telling a lie to students and others for years now, encouraging them to feel safe in queer spaces? For all of the goodness that exists in me on a day like today (and the feelings that this brings up are often contradictory to goodness), we still have to assert that we MUST claim our spaces; we MUST exist in harmonious and celebratory goodness in who we are and what we provide as a community; we MUST provide safety and protection in spaces that are ours and will remain ours. So, no, it's not a lie. We can and MUST feel safe in our lives - at least somewhere, sometime. Let's name our where as everywhere. Let's make now the time.

This is LGBT Pride month. What does that mean? It means that, for decades now, we've celebrated, through grassroots community uprising, our FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT and UNRELENTING RECOGNITION that our queer community has the capacity to be all of who we are in any and all spaces. That's what Pride is about in history and now. That's why we march. That's why we march in all of the ways that people express - in shorts and t-shirts, in leather and chains, in makeup and heels, in feathers and boas, in dykes on bikes, in drag, in nothing, in wheelchairs, in cars and on floats, in love and solidarity. And this moment calls upon us all to march together toward those ends.

At the University of Rhode Island, we are dedicated to promoting and achieving a campus community that is holistically inclusive, affirming, and safe for all people, regardless of identity spectrum. That requires us to be steadfast in ensuring this is the case by directly addressing times, spaces, and incidents that are contradictory to that goal. Today is one of those times. To that end, here is how we collectively plan to directly address this tragedy in Orlando:

1. Tomorrow, June 13, at 1:30pm, we will hold a Vigil and Rally on the URI Kingston campus Quad. We invite all community members at URI to attend, speak your minds and feelings, and mourn for all of the victims of this tragedy. President David Dooley and many campus leaders will be present at this event to share in our community response.

2. Wear your pride this week. We'll be handing out rainbow ribbons at the vigil and rally on campus, as well as at the Gender and Sexuality Center (19 Upper College Rd.) all week. Please wear a ribbon, button, pin, etc. to show your pride and support for the LGBTQ community this week.
3. Talk about your feelings and reactions to this incident. Our URI Counseling Center staff are available to assist students in processing throughout this week. You can reach their staff by calling (401) 874-2288 or visiting their offices in 217 Roosevelt Hall. Additionally, our Gender and Sexuality Center staff will be available all week and thereafter in our center at 19 Upper College Rd. Our hours are 9am-5pm everyday. For this next week, we will be offering special discussions on this topic in particular from 4-5pm everyday. Please come by for community or personal discussion.
4. Come to RI Pride. The RI Pride celebration is this coming weekend, on June 18 from 12-8pm with the Illuminated Night Parade immediately following. You can learn more at www.prideri.com. Terroristic and hateful acts like these are meant to ingrain fear in our actions and minds. Counteracting that fear means not letting it affect your daily actions in the longterm. It means coming out more to celebrate and demonstrate our togetherness and support for each other. Come join our URI students at staff in solidarity at RI Pride. Additionally, a Vigil will be held on Monday, June 13 at 8pm at the Dark Lady/Alley Cat in Providence, followed by a Vigil in downtown Providence at 6pm on Tuesday, June 14.
5. Find a way to help. Reach out to LGBTQ and ally loved ones to check in on them and see how they're doing. Go to your local blood bank and donate blood, as gay and bisexual men still aren't allowed by federal policy to do so. Check out Equality Florida's website (www.eqfl.org), where they have created ways to donate to the victims and their families. Whatever you do, do something. Do something that counteracts this violence with head and heart.

There are a plethora of emotions that this day has brought upon so many. We're angry, sad, despondent, motivated, furious, depressed, re-energized, and the list goes on. It's important to acknowledge and feel those emotions. It's important to process and share those emotions. It's crucial to never forget how this day made you feel. It's crucial to make sure this never happens again. Now's the time to come together. Now's the time to realize that Islamophobia will never solve homophobia/transphobia/biphobia, nor vice versa. Now's the time to refuse to be a part of any effort to divide and conquer by hate. Now's the time to overcome hate with love.

"All young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential. ... I know that you cannot live on hope alone, but without it, life is not worth living. So you, and you, and you, and you... gotta give 'em hope. Gotta give 'em hope." - Harvey Milk

Annie Russell, Ph.D.
Director, Gender and Sexuality Center
Community, Equity, and Diversity
University of Rhode Island