



Michelle Obama's Speech Addressing GLBT Rights and Equality

Delivered at the DNC's Gay and Lesbian Leadership Council annual dinner on June 26, 2008

"Thank you Howard Dean, for all your hard work building our party. We are proud to have you as our party Chairman. I want to recognize the members of UNITE HERE Local 6 who are working this event tonight. And thank you all for inviting me to spend some time with you.

I'm honored to be with you in a week that reminds us just how far we've come as a country. Five years ago today, the Supreme Court delivered justice with the decision in Lawrence v. Texas that same-sex couples would never again be persecuted through use of criminal law. And on Saturday, we recognize the anniversary of the day people stood up at Stonewall and said "enough."

These anniversaries remind us that no matter who we are, or where we come from, or what we look like, we are only here because of the brave efforts of those who came before us. That we are all only here because of those who marched and bled and died, from Selma to Stonewall, in a pursuit of that more perfect union that is the promise of this country.

Over the course of this campaign, we've seen a fundamental change in the level of political engagement in this country. We've seen a renewed sense of possibility and a hunger for change. We've seen people of all ages and backgrounds investing time and energy like never before; writing \$20, \$30, \$50 checks; investing for the first time ever in a political candidate. We've seen people talking to their neighbors about candidates and issues; working hard to clarify misperceptions; challenging one another to think differently about the world and our place in it.

It's precisely this type of individual engagement and investment that has been the mission of my husband's life. Barack has always believed that there is more in this country that unites us than divides us; that our common stories and struggles and values are what make this country great; that meaningful change never happens from the top down but from the bottom up.

I'll never forget the first time I realized there was something special about Barack. It was nearly 20 years ago this summer. Barack and I were just getting to know one another, and he thought the best way for me to get to know him better was to get a better sense of the work he cared about most - his work as a community organizer.

He took me to a small church basement on the South Side of Chicago, where a group of neighborhood residents were gathered; folks he knew from his years as a community organizer before he went to law school. They were desperate for change. They were regular Americans struggling to build a decent life for themselves and their families. Single mothers living paycheck to paycheck; grandparents raising grandkids despite an income that wouldn't allow it; men unable to support their families because jobs had disappeared when steel mills closed. Like most Americans, they didn't want much; they weren't asking for much: just dignity and respect.

I watched as Barack walked into the room, took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and instantly connected with each and every person in that room. He spoke eloquently of "the world as it is" and "the world as it should be." He said the key to change is understanding that our job as citizens of this nation is to work hard each and every day to narrow the gap between those two ideas. He explained that we often settle for the world as it is even if it doesn't reflect our personal values. But he reminded us that it is only through determination and hard work that we slowly make the world as it is and the world as it should be one in the same. His words were powerful not only because they made us believe in him - they challenged each of us to believe in ourselves.

One of the many reasons I'm proud of the way Barack has handled himself in this campaign is that he is still the same man I fell in love with in that church basement. His unyielding belief in that simple idea - closing the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be - is precisely why he'll be a President you can be proud of.

Barack is not new to the cause of the LGBT community. It has been a conviction of his career since he was first elected to public office. In his first year in the Illinois State Senate, he cosponsored a bill amending the Illinois Human Rights Act to include protections for LGBT men and women. He worked on that bill for seven years, serving as chief cosponsor and lobbying his colleagues to reject the political expedience of homophobia and make LGBT equality a priority. In 2004, his efforts paid off as that bill finally became law, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of both sexual orientation and gender identity in the workplace, in housing, and in public places.

He's led on gender-based violence with his work on the Illinois Gender Violence Act, successfully reaching across the aisle to put in place the nation's strongest law giving the survivors of sexual assault or domestic violence legal remedy against their attackers. He joined his colleagues in fighting to include explicit protections for the LGBT community in that act. He lost that battle, but his efforts brought gender violence in the LGBT community into the political consciousness like never before.

In 2004, after hearing from gay friends and supporters about the hurtful impact of DOMA, Barack went on record during his U.S. Senate race calling for its complete repeal. And as a U.S. Senator, he voted to protect our Constitution from the stain of discrimination by voting against the Federal Marriage Amendment.

Barack's record is clear. There is so much at stake in this election. The direction of our country hangs in the balance. We are faced with those two clear choices: The world as it is, and the world as it should be. We have to ask ourselves: Are we willing to settle for the world as it is or are we willing to work for the world as it should be?

Despite the extraordinary challenges we face today, we have a candidate who believes that the country is moving in the right direction, despite the inequalities created over the last 8 years.

And then we have Barack Obama, who believes that we must fight for the world as it should be.

A world where together we work to reverse discriminatory laws like DOMA and Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

A world where LGBT Americans get a fair shake at working hard to get ahead without workplace discrimination.

A world where our federal government fully protects all of us - including LGBT Americans - from hate crimes.

And, a world where our federal laws don't discriminate against same-sex relationships, including equal treatment for any relationship recognized under state law.

A world that recognizes that equality in relationship, family, and adoption rights is not some abstract principle; it's about whether millions of LGBT Americans can finally live lives marked by dignity and freedom. Barack has made crystal clear his commitment to ensuring full equality for LGBT couples. That is why he supports robust civil unions. That is why he has said that the federal government should not stand in the way of states that want to decide for themselves how best to pursue equality for gay and lesbian couples -- whether that means a domestic partnership, a civil union, or a civil marriage. And that is why he opposes all divisive and discriminatory constitutional amendments - whether it's a proposed amendment to the California and Florida Constitutions or the U.S. Constitution. Because the world as it should be rejects discrimination.

But, it's not just about the positions you take, it's also about the leadership you provide.

Barack's got the courage to talk to skeptical audiences; not just friendly ones. That's why he told a crowd at a rally in Texas that gays and lesbians deserve equality. Now, the crowd got pretty quiet. But Barack said "now, I'm a Christian, and I praise Jesus every Sunday." And the crowd started cheering. Then he said, "I hear people saying things that I don't think are very Christian with respect to people who are gay and lesbian." And you know what? The crowd kept cheering.

That's why he told evangelicals at Rick Warren's Saddleback church that we need a renewed call to action on HIV and AIDS.

That's why he went to Ebenezer Baptist Church and said that we need to get over homophobia in the African-American community; that if we're honest with ourselves, we'll embrace our gay brothers and sisters instead of scorning them. And that's why he stood up at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and told all of America that we refuse to be divided anymore.

That's the choice in this election. Between slipping backward and moving forward. Between being timid or being courageous. Between fighting for the world as it should be, or settling for the world as it is.

My husband is running for President to build an America that lives up to the ideals written into our Constitution. We have just come through a historic primary election where a woman and a black man were running to become President of the United States. It hasn't been painless, but change never is. As I travel this country, I am certain that we have arrived at a moment in our collective history where we are ready to move forward and create the "world as it should be."

I know which world Barack will fight for each and every day as your President. But he can't do it alone. As he said in that church basement, change happens when ordinary people are ready to take the reins of their own destiny. He needs you by his side every step of the way. That kind of change won't be easy. There will be powerful forces who believe that things should stay just the way they are.

That's where you come in. Your voices of truth and hope and of possibility have to drown out the skeptics and the cynics.

If you stand with my husband; if you reach for what is possible and if you refuse to let this chance get away; we can begin building that better world in November.

Thank you."