

March 14, 2011

Dear Chairman Sonju and Members of the Senate Local Government Committee:

I was born and raised in Montana, in a Protestant and military family. I'm a 4<sup>th</sup> generation Montanan. I've lived here nearly all of my life. I'm a member of the LGBTQ community, and this is my home.

It's tough to be queer in Montana. We face discrimination, mistreatment, and constant uncertainty. If we sit in a restaurant and discuss our relationships, or hold hands with our partners, we're uncertain if we'll draw hateful looks or comments from the people around us. If we come out to our boss, we're uncertain if we'll still have our job the next day. If we come out to our landlord, we risk losing our home. If we live our lives honestly, openly and shamelessly, we risk alienating ourselves from our friends and families.

In 2005, I decided to leave Montana and move to Seattle, because I knew I'd find there a community more accepting of me, and where I could learn to be more accepting of myself. In 2007, I graduated with honors from the University of Washington with a Masters' Degree, and spent several years in a successful career working in local government.

In 2010, I realized that my love for Montana is greater than my fear, so I decided to come home. My fear of being "out" – of being who I am - may have kept me away from Montana for several years, but I returned because I know this is where I belong. I didn't choose to be queer, but I am choosing to live in the one place that feels like home.

Before I moved back last fall, Missoula passed its anti-discrimination ordinance. I am tremendously grateful for, and inspired by the efforts of everyone who helped bring a sense of safety and respect to the LGBTQ community in Missoula. The ordinance was a very big part of why, when I decided to move home to Montana, I chose Missoula instead of my own hometown of Helena.

Because of the anti-discrimination ordinance, Missoula is a place in Montana where I can be myself, a little bit safer, a little bit freer. When I started my new job in December, I felt safe coming out to my boss and co-workers. I didn't have to be afraid that I might lose my new job because I am queer, and I didn't have to hide who I am. And because the issue of LGBTQ equality has been discussed through such an open community process in Missoula, I have been able to have meaningful and informed conversations with my new co-workers, friends and neighbors about what it means to be "out" in Montana, and what it means for everyone to be treated with simple, basic respect. Please don't take this sense of respect away from me. I'm not asking for special treatment; I'm asking for basic human rights.

During the five years I spent in Seattle, I talked endlessly about Montana – the natural beauty, the quality of life, and the amazing people. I talked about how Montanans are GOOD are to one another. How Montanans RESPECT and VALUE one another. Please, don't prove me wrong – please join me in opposing HB 516.

Sincerely,  
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