



Remarks to the March on Springfield for Marriage Equality 10/22/13

By Art Johnston

Art Johnston is co-founder of Equality Illinois, the state's oldest advocacy organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Illinoisans, a longtime Illinois LGBT activist and a Chicago businessman

Welcome to Springfield; Welcome to your State Capitol; and Welcome to History. Please know that by being here today, you will help write a new chapter in Illinois History.

Important firsts have taken place in this proud capital city, as in the rest of our proud Prairie State. The awesome leader who authored the Emancipation Proclamation, that inspiration for all civil rights work, began his career here, within just blocks of where we now stand.

Also, it was in Illinois that the very first gay rights organization, the Society for Human Rights, was founded by Henry Gerber, in Chicago, in 1924.

And Illinois was among the first states to repeal inhumane laws forbidding marriage by people who loved each other, but were of different races.

In 1961, Illinois was the first state in the nation to wipe out the despicable laws forbidding intimate loving contact between people of the same sex, laws that remained on the books in states across America until declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in *Lawrence v Texas* in 2003, only ten years ago.

And here's more. I love this one. Exactly one hundred years ago, the Illinois Legislature, in that building right there, took up the most controversial piece of legislation in decades. The proponents said it was about fairness and equality.

The fierce, self-righteous opponents convinced themselves that this "unnatural proposal" would destroy the very foundations of marriage and family, that its passage would assuredly bring about the decline and fall of American civilization. Well, the legislation passed fairly easily in the Illinois Senate early in the 1913 session, but got stuck for month after month in the Illinois House of Representatives (sound familiar?) And what was this radical proposal that finally passed the House in June, 1913 and was signed by an impatient governor?

This controversial law gave women in Illinois the right to vote, but only in Presidential and local elections.

And thus Illinois became the first state east of the Mississippi to allow women a small piece of equality at the voting booth. And in doing so the Illinois legislature got on the right side of history, where we want them to stay.

In 2013, we are amazed that anyone could have ever deprived women of the right to vote, that anyone could have thought it was moral to prevent loving people of different races from marrying each other.

As I look out at this great gathering for justice and equality, I think about history and I can see the future because I see students from everywhere. I see my friends from the Parker School and Latin School and Adlai Stevenson High

School, students from the Rudy Lozano Leadership Academy as well as from the Gan Shalom preschool at Temple Shalom and hundreds and hundreds of others from all across our state.

I want to close with this. My friends, one day in your future someone will come to you and ask, "Do you remember all that controversy about Marriage Equality way back in 2013?" and you will be able to say something like, "Yes, I do remember, I went to Springfield to help and I remember that it took a long time for some of my elected officials to remember how to be leaders".

And because of what you do here today, and what you can do every day to stand up for Equality for all, you will always know in your heart that you have helped

Illinois to once again get on the right side of history.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.