



**EQUALITY  
ILLINOIS**

## **PRESS RELEASE**

Founded in 1991, Equality Illinois is the state's oldest, largest and most effective organization advocating for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Illinoisans.

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**January 27, 2014**

### **EQUALITY ILLINOIS CONFERS FREEDOM AWARD ON U.S. SEN. MARK KIRK** *Recognition to Come at 2014 Equality Illinois Gala*

CHICAGO – U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk will be presented with the Equality Illinois Freedom Award at the 2014 Equality Illinois Gala.

In making the announcement today, Bernard Cherkasov, CEO of Equality Illinois, the state's oldest and largest advocacy organization devoted to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Illinoisans, said the Freedom Award is being given to the Illinois Republican for his leadership on and support for issues that involve equal and fair treatment for all Americans.

"From his military service to his work in Congress, Sen. Kirk exemplifies the true meaning of being a public servant. He approaches LGBT issues not by the political labels that some people attach to them but by whether they are the right thing to do for Illinois and the United States," Cherkasov said.

In addition to Sen. Kirk, it was previously announced that the Chicago Urban League and renowned Chicago filmmaker Lana Wachowski will also be recipients of the Equality Illinois Freedom Award, and Illinois-based State Farm will receive the Business Leadership Award. Sen. Kirk, Wachowski, Urban League representatives and State Farm executives will be present at the 2014 Equality Illinois Gala on Saturday, Feb. 8 in the Hilton Chicago, chaired by Colonel (IL) Jennifer N. Pritzker, IL ARNG (Retired). Some 1,400 guests are expected at what is annually the Midwest's largest LGBT formal event.

Sen. Kirk, a native of Champaign, Illinois, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2000 and served there until he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2010. He retired last year from the Navy Reserve with the rank of commander. The senator suffered a stroke in January 2012 and made a dramatic return to the Senate a year later by climbing the Capitol steps. As the battle for the freedom to marry in Illinois was heating up last spring, Sen. Kirk released a powerful statement in support of the bill.

"When I climbed the Capitol steps in January, I promised myself that I would return to the Senate with an open mind and greater respect for others," Sen. Kirk said. "Same-sex couples should have the right to civil marriage. Our time on this Earth is limited, I know

that better than most. Life comes down to who you love and who loves you back; government has no place in the middle."

Sen. Kirk has also been a stalwart supporter of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), even being a Republican co-sponsor of the measure. The latest version of the bill protects not only gay, lesbian and bisexual people from workplace discrimination, but also transgender people. He delivered his first speech on the Senate floor since the stroke to urge his colleagues to support the civil rights bill.

"I think it's particularly appropriate for an Illinois Republican to speak on behalf of this measure in the true tradition of Everett McKinley Dirksen and Abraham Lincoln, men who gave us the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution," the senator said.

Most recently, Sen. Kirk withdrew permission for a homophobic group to use a Senate meeting room, with his office stating, "Sen. Kirk doesn't affiliate with groups that discriminate."

"To recognize Sen. Kirk's contributions to the cause of justice for LGBT Americans, we are proud to honor him with the Equality Illinois Freedom Award," Cherkasov said.

The Equality Illinois Freedom Award is given annually to individuals who demonstrate remarkable vision, courage, and leadership in the effort to achieve full equality for LGBT individuals in Illinois. Past Freedom Award winners include Illinois Senate President John Cullerton, state Rep. Greg Harris, the late state Comptroller Dawn Clark Netsch, the late state Rep. Mark Beaubien Jr., and state Sen. Heather Steans.

More information on the Equality Illinois 2014 Gala is available on our website [www.eqil.org](http://www.eqil.org).

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