

Equality Illinois Gala Keynote

Sanctuary in a Storm: Holding Power, Expanding Protection

Good evening, Equality Illinois family.

It is an honor to stand here, fully visible in this moment, as the first Black woman of trans experience to lead Equality Illinois in its thirty-five-year history—at a time when a fascist regime is actively working to distort the truth about people like me, criminalize our care, and cast our very existence as a threat.

So, I want to speak plainly at the outset.

I am not the one who is a domestic terrorist.

I am a servant.

I am a community builder.

I am a woman committed to dignity, safety, and democracy.

And I am not alone.

Look around this room.

Here we are.

Not shrinking.

Not hiding.

And telling the truth with our full chest.

Histories are being erased

Bodies are being legislated

And across this country, our rights are under attack.

Just like *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, even the right to marry — guaranteed by *Obergefell* — is now being openly targeted by powerful forces trying to undo federal protections.

And yet, here in Illinois, we are standing.

We are organizing.

We are building.

Tonight is not just a gala.
It is about sanctuary.
And it is about power.

Tonight, I am asking more of us than celebration.

I am asking us to decide how we show up for one another beyond this room.

People say Illinois is a refuge state.
A safe place in a hostile political climate.

But refuge is not a vibe.
It is not a slogan we get to claim without cost.

Refuge is an active responsibility that requires vigilance and investment.
It requires people willing to hold the line when it would be easier to look away.

Because here is the truth.

Illinois is only as strong as the people who are holding Illinois.

A sanctuary is not measured by its laws alone.
A sanctuary is measured by its people.
By how we show up.
By how we respond.
By whether protection on paper becomes safety in practice.

Illinois is not perfect, but we are a beacon.

When other states close their doors, we open ours.
When other leaders attack our communities, we codify protections.

We passed the Equality for Every Family Act, and I want to thank **Iggy V. Ladden** and **Lindsay Doyle** for ensuring Illinois recognizes and protects LGBTQ+ families, including those formed through assisted reproduction and surrogacy, so children are secure and parents are not forced to fight for recognition.

We protected LGBTQ history and inclusive curriculum in our schools. And when federal funding for LGBTQ youth mental health was pulled, Illinois held the line on the 988 Lifeline so our kids still had someone who understands them. Thank you to **Mony Ruiz-Velasco** and **Illinois Pride Connect**.

This happened because leadership chose courage. Illinois Attorney General **Kwame Raoul** has been unequivocal in defending gender-affirming care. Governor **JB Pritzker** has pushed back

against federal overreach. And Mayor **Brandon Johnson** has stood firm in defending Chicago as a Sanctuary City.

Who has made it resoundingly clear, dignity is not conditional.

And yes. **Abolish ICE.**

Hands off our bodies.

Hands off our families.

Hands off our city.

Hands off our state.

Hands off our communities.

This work is strengthened by coalition. Personal PAC. The Sierra Club, ICCIR, Indivisible Chicago, Chicago Federation of Labor.

And a special thanks to our former CEO, Brian C. Johnson, Equality Illinois, and our community owes a debt of gratitude to you for your trailblazing work, upon which my work continues.

We are living through sustained political backlash, intentional confusion, and coordinated harm. Fear is being used as strategy. Chaos is being sold as inevitable. And hard-won LGBTQ rights are under attack. That is the reality Equality Illinois is built to face.

Leadership in times like these is about being steady where it matters most.

Our job is not to chase every headline or react ourselves into exhaustion.

Our job is to make sure nothing essential collapses.

Our outrage is not the problem.

It is proof that we are paying attention.

But outrage without strategy can be turned against us.

So we ground our work in understanding, not to soften our anger, but to aim it.

To make sure people know what is happening, why it matters, and where power is actually being exercised,

so fear does not get to decide our next move.

That means protecting infrastructure before it breaks.

Providers. Families. Frontline organizations. The systems people rely on to survive long enough to fight another day.

We build coalition without erasure.

We maintain discipline under pressure.

Because structured movements endure.

This is how we hold the line.

We will not be gaslit into believing we did not see what we saw.

We saw with our own two eyes what happened in Minneapolis.

Alex Pretti, a nurse and caregiver, murdered while trying to help someone.
Renee Good, a mother, murdered days earlier.

These deaths did not happen in isolation. They ignited grief and protest because people could not unsee what was witnessed. And we need to sit with something uncomfortable.

This violence did not begin this year.
It did not begin with this administration.
And it did not begin with one city or one community.

It is part of a long pattern of harm inflicted on Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities for generations, often without cameras, headlines, or accountability.

We often assume harm continues because people do not understand what is happening.
Sometimes that is true. But often, something else is at work.

Sometimes people understand very clearly and still make a quiet bargain.
The bargain says: *If I stay close enough to power, power will not come for me.*

That bargain can feel especially seductive to people who have spent their lives on the outside. To anyone who has learned to calculate safety. To anyone who knows what it means to be watched, measured, or excluded. Standing near authority can feel like relief. Like finally being inside.

But here is the truth we have to face.
Authoritarian systems do not protect people because they are loyal, respectable, or quiet. They protect hierarchy. And hierarchy always demands someone beneath it.

That is why proximity has never been safety.
Whiteness, money, respectability, citizenship, gender conformity, even being “the acceptable kind” of queer person have all been sold as shields. They are not shields. They are temporary cover. And history shows us, again and again, that the cover always runs out.

This is not new. When fear rises, societies become obsessed with rank. With who is in and who is out. Who is deserving and who is disposable. Authoritarianism does not require everyone to be cruel. It only requires enough people to decide that what is happening is not happening to them.

That is the lie we are being asked to abandon.
Because a system built on scapegoating will always need a next target.
And when dissent is treated as threat and accountability as interference, we are no longer debating policy. We are deciding whether democracy itself still has meaning.

And this is where we have to tell the truth about ourselves.
We are very good at naming the threats outside our doors.
But the call is also coming from inside the house.

Our infighting.
Our unchecked biases.
Our willingness to turn on one another when fear rises.

So let me say this plainly.
No pissing in the tent.
Not now.

Not while people's lives are on the line.
Not while the house is under attack.

Discipline is knowing the difference between accountability and destruction.
As Stacy Davis Gates reminds us, we can no longer afford to move at the speed of trust. That does not mean trust does not matter. It means the stakes are too high to wait until we feel perfectly aligned before we act.

We are trying to make it out of this alive.
And it will take every one of us to do so.

Someone once told me, "You're a unifier."
And here is what I have learned that means.

Unifiers do not erase difference.
They refuse disconnection.
They stay in the room when it would be easier to walk away.

Thank you Art Johnston, for speaking those words over me, all those years ago. Thank you.

That is the work I am committed to.
And that is the work this moment requires of all of us.

I am a publicly visible trans woman, and I know that visibility carries risk.

And still, I will keep fighting.
I will not shrink back.
I will not cave to fear.

Recently, I was at dinner with friends. The host has a trans child. A young person who wants to live quietly. Not erased, but not made into a spectacle.

I turned to them and said, "I will be visible for you."

So you can play your instrument.
So you can be a teenager.
So your worries can be ordinary, and survival does not become your full-time job.

Like her, I began my gender-affirming journey before I was nineteen.

I am not a mistake.
I live with no regrets.
I am whole.
I am alive.

And I will be visible for those who choose not to be.
And for those who cannot be.

There is something I want to share before we go any further.

It is a simple story from when I was seventeen, but it shaped how I understand responsibility and what it means to belong to a place.

I was heading to the kitchen for a snack. On the floor, right in my path, was a small piece of paper towel. I noticed it. I looked right at it. And without thinking, I stepped over it and kept walking.

My father saw me and said, “So you’re not going to pick that up?”

I shrugged and said, “But I didn’t do it.”

He looked at me and said, “So what. You live here. And in this house, if you see a mess, you clean it up.”

He explained that when something spills, breaks, or makes a mess, the real question is simple.

Do you pretend not to see it?

Do you decide it is not your responsibility?

Or do you step in and help clean it up?

That lesson stayed with me long after I left home. Because leadership is not revealed in moments of comfort. Leadership is revealed in moments of mess.

There are messes in this world that were made long before we arrived.

Whether we personally created them or not does not excuse us from helping to repair, restore, or rebuild.

Why? Because we live here.

Because this is our shared home.

And because belonging carries responsibility.

Tonight, this gala, this moment, this movement—it is our paper towel test.

What do we reach for?

What do we fix?

What do we ignore?

What do we quietly decide is not our business?

Because that is the true measure of a community.

Not the speeches.

Not the spotlights.

But the responsibilities we either pick up—or quietly walk past.

And still, we hold joy.

Not as distraction.
Not as denial.

Joy is resistance.
Joy is fuel.
Hopelessness is a tactic used to dismantle movements.

We refuse to surrender our joy, even while we do hard things.
We hold each other.
We love each other.
And, please, don't leave these words at this podium.

This is your fight, just as it is mine.
Raise your voices.
Protect one another.
Stay connected.

The forces working against LGBTQ people right now are not disorganized.
They are disciplined.
They are coordinated.
They are well resourced.

Equality Illinois exists so organizations across this state can keep doing life-saving work. From Bronzeville to Bloomington. From Chicago to Cairo.

We hold policy ground so frontline organizations are not left exposed.
We refuse to comply in the hunting of care providers.
We stand firmly with those protecting young trans futures.

And yes, the state has no business in our bedrooms or in the lives of consenting adults.
Government belongs where it always should have been.
Protecting the safety, dignity, and economic power of trans and queer people, especially Black and brown trans people who have been pushed to the margins.

That is real governance.

Decisions about care belong between young people, their families, and their medical providers.
Not politicians.
Not fear campaigns.
Not the state.

This is how movements survive.
This is how sanctuaries are held.

It is not enough to be the safe state.
We must be the model state.

So that when a young queer kid dreams of safety, of possibility, of pride, they dream of Illinois.

We are not just a sanctuary.
We are a launchpad.

And remember - Proximity will not save us.
Courage will.

Perhaps we were called to this moment, for such a time as this.

Thank you.
It is my deepest honor to lead this work with you.