

Speaking Truth and Justice *Statement from Michael Klimzak*

My story is about a different type of prejudice. Mine is about being gay.

When I was in my 20s, I never thought much about social injustice. I was trained (more or less subconsciously) to expect not to have the same rights as everyone else.

- My family was working class and we struggled.
- My chosen field was the arts and artists need to expect hardships, from low wages, no insurance, no vacations, and working a “day job” to pay the bills.
- And I was gay.

Being gay in the 90s was different than being gay today. And luckily it was better than being gay in previous decades. But being gay meant judgment, possible dejection from your family, the possibility of contracting AIDS... I was used to the verbal harassment that I had been having since grade school, way before I had even known that I was gay. But verbal harassment was better than physical harassment which luckily I never experienced. But you had to be careful...careful not to be too gay, to apologize for your gayness, to make sure that you wouldn't make people uncomfortable.

In my 30s, I had become more comfortable in my own skin and with the idea of being gay. Then again, in the 2000s, it was easier being gay, possibly due to tv shows whose main characters were gay. It made society easier to accept us. There was still abuse and you still had to be on your guard, but in most urban settings you were fine. During this time I realized some things that I had not known were possible: I fell in love. I didn't think it could happen because it was ingrained in me from my childhood (not from my family but from society at large) that gay people couldn't have the type of love that “normal” people have. For one thing, you couldn't get married, you couldn't have the rights given to other married couples, you couldn't have kids. Well, you could do these things, but with consequences. You could have a civil union ceremony which was like a wedding but not. You could have a domestic partnership which was like being married but not. You definitely would not have the same rights as married couples like joint filing of taxes. Sounds silly, but I definitely remember feeling punished, having to split our expenses, paying extra to file two separate returns, but I wanted to be gay so that's the price you had to pay.

And if you wanted you could have children. Where there is a will, there is a way. But again it comes with a cost, both monetary and emotional. As I said earlier, I never thought about social injustices or I was willing to accept the injustices because that is what I was taught. But as I was now trying to have a family, I really started to see how I didn't have the same rights as others. We were so lucky to be able to work with an adoption agency that was loving and supportive. We were so lucky to be chosen as parents. Yes, we two gay men, were chosen by a woman named Melvina to parent her daughter because she could not. She chose us because she thought that we were a loving couple that could provide a loving home for her daughter. But

even with that, when it came down to the legal side of things, we couldn't. Well, we could, but again with consequences. In 2009 in the state of Virginia, Phil had to be the legal parent on the adoption certificate. I had to be known as a roommate that lived with him and his daughter Mia. In essence, I would be raising her too, she would call me Dad, but she would not have my name and I would not have any legal parental rights over her. But in 2009 this is what we had to do to create our family and this is what we did. The adoption agency told us that since we lived in liberal New York state that after a year, I would be able to petition to adopt Mia as well. We would have to do a second adoption. It wouldn't cost as much as the first adoption, but that is the price you have to pay for being gay, or at least the price you have to pay in 2009 when being gay and adopting from the state of Virginia.

After a year and a half of being the guy that lived with Phil and his daughter, I finally became a legal parent of Mia. And even though I always was and always will be Mia's parent, it hurt. And it was scary to think I would not be able to speak for her in case of an emergency or that she might be taken away from me if someone questioned my relationship with her. Even though it has been over 10 years since that has happened, we still travel with Mia's birth certificate that proves we are her parents. Because still in the 2020s, even though things are better than there were twenty years ago, they are still not perfect. We have been approached in the Gurnee Target parking lot, a store that we practically live in, as possible kidnappers because we didn't look like a normal family. It may seem silly, but it is annoying having to cross out the word MOTHER on school applications and replace with FATHER. Last week at Six Flags I heard a teenage boy call me a gay slur in front of my daughter, but I ignore it like I did when I was a kid. I mean what's the point of having a fight with a teenage boy in line at Six Flags, but still, why do I feel that I have to accept the harassment. Why? Because socially that is what I have learned to expect as a gay man.