



Meadville needs non-discrimination law to ensure the American way

By Bruce Harlan

July 13, 2014

On April 27, Meadville lost one of its most passionate and ardent advocates for civil and human rights with the passing of Mary Alice (Molly) Knox. Locally, Molly was best known for her association and leadership with the Unity Institute for Human Development in the 1970s. Unity was an organization dedicated to serving low-income children and youth.

After this work, Molly left Meadville for Pittsburgh and began working at Pittsburgh Action Against Rape. Molly led this organization as its executive director for 16 years. PAAR was one of the leading rape crisis centers in Pennsylvania at that time and continues to be a pioneering force in the movement to end sexual violence.

Our association with Molly began in the 1970s when she worked with other local professionals to develop and implement the program we know today as Women's Services. As with her work at Unity and PAAR, Women's Services is dedicated to helping children and adults impacted and traumatized by violence and abuse. Now in its 37th year, Women's Services continues to respond and advocate for some of the most vulnerable members of our community.

Molly's legacy was apparent at a recent memorial held at a local church. In attendance were men and women of diverse backgrounds who came to honor her devotion, remember her compassion and pay tribute to her advocacy. It was the kind of memorial most of us would like to envision for ourselves; one filled with stories of selfless love and sacrifice toward others.

I got to thinking about Molly recently when approximately 100 folks showed up at Meadville City Council's meeting last month. The possibility of researching an ordinance to prevent discrimination toward members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community was before City Council for consideration. Folks opposed to the ordinance were in attendance and very vocal. Many of these folks were opposed for religious beliefs.

While I respect people of faith and their deeply held religious views, I couldn't help but wonder why someone (or some business) would want to discriminate against anyone, regardless of their personal feelings and beliefs about someone's sexual orientation. I wondered what Molly would have thought about this issue, too.

And then I remembered what Molly said about working with victims of sexual violence. She said,

“I got radicalized by living next to people as they struggled for autonomy.” What a powerful statement, and that’s when it hit me that Women’s Services needed to get out in front of this issue.

We have always believed that individuals have the right and responsibility to be self-determining and to make choices that are appropriate to her/his life. Isn’t that the very definition of liberty? Wasn’t our nation founded on a philosophy of personal freedom and autonomy? Conservative author and director of publications at the CATO Institute, David Lampo, put it best when he said, “To insert one’s personal religious beliefs into our laws is to abandon the highest political value of this country which is individual liberty.” The subjective nature of biblical interpretation should never be the standard by which we, as a civil society, define public policy.

However, there is another, equally important, reason to pass this ordinance.

Without it, we are supporting inequalities among our neighbors. We are saying that some among us are empowered to the disadvantage of others. We’ve seen all of this before with other disenfranchised groups. When minorities are viewed as subordinate to the majority, they have a lower social status in society which allows the majority to exert control and decision-making power over them. This inequality leads to discrepancies in access to health care, limited opportunities for employment, political participation and education.

We know, for example, that subordinating women to men make women and girls vulnerable to physical, emotional and sexual violence by men. Likewise, denying housing and employment opportunities to one segment of our community strictly on the basis of who they choose to love makes them equally vulnerable to acts of violence and abuse. Reducing violence in our communities requires that we address inequalities and discrimination wherever they exist, regardless of our own deeply-held values.

Lastly, some will argue that an anti-discrimination ordinance may be too costly. I say, when has the cost of liberty and freedom ever been cheap? An anti-discrimination ordinance that includes sexual orientation protects our individual liberties, reinforces our American form of government (one that is not ruled by or subject to religious authority) and sends a strong statement to others that Meadville is a tolerant, respectful and patriotic community.

Individual liberty and autonomy have always been important enough to fight for and all of us should become “radicalized” whenever these rights are threatened. If you would like to see a more inclusive, anti-discrimination ordinance in the City of Meadville, please let your support be known to City Council.

Bruce Harlan is executive director of Meadville-based Women’s Services Inc. Since 1977, Women’s Services has been providing services and programs to the adults and children of Crawford County who are in crisis due to domestic violence, sexual assault or homelessness. For more information on the services they provide, visit womensservicesinc.org.