



MEDIA RELEASE

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Unfortunately, the remnants of Hurricane Irma forced us to cancel the deliberative forums set for tonight, September 12th. However, they have been rescheduled for Thursday, September 28th from 6:00 – 8:00 p.m. at the University of Montevallo on Main (UMOM) building, 737 Main Street. As previously planned, the City of Montevallo and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life will host a series of consecutive, public, deliberative forums designed to answer the question: *How do we ensure that everyone, regardless of their individual sexual orientation or gender identity, actually feels and is safe, supported and affirmed in Montevallo?*

Currently, State and Federal laws protect the rights of certain individuals with regard to free and unfettered access to housing, employment and public accommodations. These laws, however, do not protect the rights of individuals based on sexual orientation or gender identity. In recent months, members of Montevallo's LGBTQ community, along with many of their family members and friends, approached elected officials within our city's government asking for equal protection under the law – at least as far as is within the city's power to provide.

At a recent *Naming & Framing*, deliberative forum in Montevallo, members of our LGBTQ community shared their personal stories and experiences and explained how a lack of legal protection affects them personally. One participant noted that as a lesbian she has been confronted by others as being "evil." Others expressed their feelings of vulnerability and "real fears," among other things, of being assaulted, bullied, not being hired or being fired from a job, being cheated by contractors, denied services, generally discriminated

against and being denied housing because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Transgender individuals in particular expressed frustration with the public's misunderstanding with "what it means to be transgender." They all expressed a desire to live in a community where they feel (and are) safe and valued. They all stressed that the fears they have are real and that is a horrible feeling to hear what some "people say in public about gay people."

On the other hand, while other participants in the forum seemed to agree that "no one should be discriminated against," many expressed their deeply felt concerns about this issue. Some expressed their concerns based upon their religious convictions, urging "respect for all people, including those with religious beliefs." Others expressed concern that because they may not support an ordinance or some other formal actions on the part of the city they may be "perceived as a bigot." Others noted the fear that opening up all public accommodations (including restrooms) to transgender individuals could increase fears or potentially create real safety issues, especially for women and children. Others cautioned that taking some formal action to address a concern that many do not feel is an issue in our community could have "unintended consequences," such as creating more fear and disharmony.

As a community which, in general, believes we already have a reputation for being welcoming, accepting and loving toward all individuals, how do we ensure that everyone, regardless of their individual sexual orientation or gender identity, actually feels and is "safe, supported and affirmed?" In an effort to answer that question, our discussions at the *Naming & Framing* forum raised three potential solutions, including: 1) Establish laws that ensure fairness and justice; 2) Focus on Citizen Relationships, not New Laws; or 3) Mobilize, Organize & Educate.

The deliberations scheduled for September 28th at UMOM are designed to further refine and define these possible plans of action, and perhaps even lead us in a direction we had not considered before. The important part is that we are determined to address these very real and important concerns as a community. To that end, we hope to hear a lot of voices that evening with some very good ideas.