



COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
MASSACHUSETTS SENATE
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133-1053

Senator Stan Rosenberg, President Pro Tem
Hampshire and Franklin District
Room 320
617.722.1532
Fax: 617.722.1062
413.582.0113

District Office
1 Prince St.
Northampton, MA01060
413.584.1649
Fax:

Stan.Rosenberg@state.ma.us

At the State House, in the House of Representatives chamber, hangs a mural entitled “Milestones on the Road to Freedom in Massachusetts.”

This painting, by Albert Herter, depicts five scenes from our state’s history. For me, the most poignant of these is the image of Judge Samuel Sewall, his head bowed in shame as he seeks forgiveness for his role in the Salem Witch Trials and the execution of 19 innocent people in 1692.

The caption beneath this panel of Herter’s mural reads: “Dawn of Tolerance in Massachusetts.”

We have indeed come a long way since those days, when fear and superstition held sway over our system of justice. But over the centuries many people, far too many, have suffered as our society struggled to fulfill its noblest, yet apparently most vexing, promise – the promise of equality. Our history is replete with examples of how certain groups of people have been defined by the majority and then vilified and subjugated because of their differences. From the execution of “witches” in Salem, to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, from the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of Native Americans, to the stinging discrimination felt at one time or another

by all minorities – blacks, Jews, women, gay men and lesbians, Hispanics, the poor, the list goes on – our efforts to achieve equality have all too often collapsed before the notion that it is somehow permissible to deny justice and equality to those perceived as “the other.”

The good news is that America is, and will continue to be, a work in progress, much like the individuals we encounter everyday. The best news is that the forces for equality eventually, *eventually*, prevail.

Five years ago, Massachusetts stood alone as the birthplace of marriage equality in America. Today, five states have joined us in providing full marriage equality, while nine others allow some form of legally recognized same-sex union. Such victories have not come easily, or swiftly, or without sacrifice. But they have come, and more will follow if people of fair and open minds persevere. The forces for equality eventually prevail.

I am proud to have been a member of the Legislature that helped start this national movement, not just because it marks the beginning of the eventual end to another form of injustice, but because it marks what I consider to be another milestone on our road to freedom – the eventual end to identity politics. As a foster child who grew up as a ward of the state, as a gay man, as a Jew, I understand what it’s like to be cast as “the other.” I rarely discuss these facets of my character because I don’t practice identity politics. I practice policy politics. And I firmly believe that we will never fulfill our potential as a just society until we embrace the principle of equality for all and adhere to it as fundamental, immutable policy.

Eventually we will. Our past, I believe, is prologue.

When the debate over marriage equality began on Beacon Hill, only about a quarter of the state's 200 legislators favored extending marriage rights to all adults. Given such a daunting task, the forces for equality might have been forgiven had they chosen to stay silent, to continue to live in the shadows. Instead, scores of non-traditional families, the courageous "others," shared their lives and their stories and reminded us that any law that violated a person's civil rights, that crushed a person's dignity, that tarnished a person's self respect, would be unworthy of the world's oldest democratic institution. They reminded us, quite simply, that we're not so different after all.

In the end, marriage equality won the support of 75 percent of lawmakers, a stunning and remarkable turnaround. The forces for equality eventually prevail.

As we celebrate this Fourth of July and all the freedoms we enjoy, we should pay special tribute to the people whose names are lost to history who helped make our Commonwealth a community, a work in progress, a welcoming place for all good people of good will. We once hanged "witches" in this state. From that injustice, at least according to Mr. Herter, we learned tolerance. Because of what began here five years ago, eventually, *eventually*, the time will come to add a new panel to his mural, maybe one entitled "Dawn of Equality in America."