

**2018 CENTER FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION
VOICES OF THE DIVIDE AWARDS BANQUET**

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: SARAH MCBRIDE

HOSTED BY Center for Political Communication,
University of Delaware.

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Transcript of Event

Date: February 26, 2018 Place: University of Delaware, Newark, DE

DR. HOFFMAN: Please join me in giving a big Blue Hen welcome to Sarah McBride.

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

MS. MCBRIDE: Well, thank you so much and thank you so much Lindsay. I don't think I have ever been praised as accommodating for cancelling on someone before. So --

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

MS. MCBRIDE: -- I really appreciate that. Dean Watson, Nancy, thank you so much for inviting me. And thank you all for coming out this evening. I had the chance to listen to the ten finalists' audio recordings and I was deeply, deeply moved by each one that I heard because at the end of the day the way we move past the sort of political divide that we find ourselves in isn't through stats, isn't through facts, it's through stories. It's through all of us sharing our own lived experiences. And so in that vein I thought I'd tell you a little bit about myself. My name is Sarah McBride. I am the national press secretary of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest LGBTQ civil rights organization. I'm 27 years old. I'm a native of Wilmington, Delaware, a proud graduate of Cab Calloway School of the Arts, Go Cab, a graduate of American University, and I'm a proud transgender woman. It took me 21 years to muster up the courage to say those last two words -- transgender woman. Today they are among my proudest identities, and this evening I can stand before you as the person that I am. But as Lindsay mentioned, for me it hasn't always been that way. I remember as a child lying in my bed at night praying that I would wake up the next day and be myself. I remember lying in bed wondering whether

my parents would still be able to love me, whether I'd still be able to pursue my dreams because at that time in the 90s it seemed so clear to me, as clear as the color of the sky that my dreams and my identity were mutually exclusive. I prayed for the universe to intervene. I wondered if maybe I would just grow out of this with time. I told myself that if I could make it worthwhile for me to stay in the closet by making a difference in the world, by making a little bit more space for other people to live their life more fully, that those things would somehow bring me the wholeness and completeness that I desired. I think it's difficult for folks who aren't transgender to understand, empathize with the experience of having a gender identity that differs from your sex assigned at birth. And I think so often our empathy requires some analogous experience to draw from. And for me it felt like a constant feeling of homesickness, an unwavering ache in the pit of my stomach that would only go away when I could be seen and affirmed as myself. And unlike homesickness with geographic location which dissipates with time and getting used to your new surroundings, for me and for so many other people that homesickness only grew with time and distance. During my sophomore year I was elected president of the student body at American University and at the same time I was really coming to terms with my identity. It was clear to me that the things that I told myself that would make me feel whole, they wouldn't bring me the completeness that I dreamed of. And so on Christmas day in 2011, it's always Christmas, I came out to my parents and with their love and support, as much as they struggled with that news, six months later I came out to the campus community at American University as transgender. I was scared about the campus's reaction. I had always said as student body president that our

college campuses should like what we want our country to look like in ten or 15 years. And even though this was 2012, even though transgender issues and identities hadn't come to the forefront of our national political debates, on that night American University made a statement to this country that while we may not understand what it means to be transgender, while we may still be trying to wrap our minds around these identities, this is how you respond -- with love, with compassion, and with support. And as I looked around American University's campus, as I looked around the country, it was clear to me that as difficult as it was for me to come out it was still relatively easy compared to the experience of most people. I never had to worry about losing my family. I never had to worry about being homeless. I never had to worry about being kicked out of my school simply because I came out. And so for me I wanted to work to make sure that the privileges that I had were no longer a privilege but a right and a guarantee for every person no matter their sexual orientation or gender identity. I came back to Delaware and began working with my family and Equality Delaware to help pass a gender identity nondiscrimination bill. And as I went into the legislature and started talking with these different legislators from different parties and I talked to them about facts, and I talked to them about stats, and I talked to them about the community as a whole, it became clear to me that I wasn't resonating. That I wasn't getting through to these elected officials. And it took me some time to realize that the key to our liberation as a community wasn't in our laws, it was; it was in our own lived experiences. I fully realized the power of vulnerability which was so present in every single one of the audio essays I listened to over this past weekend. Vulnerability can oftentimes be our greatest path towards

justice and equality because vulnerability is something that transcends ideology; it transcends geography; it transcends gender and race and faith. Everyone understands what it feels like to be stigmatized at one moment. Everyone understands what it feels like to hurt. Everyone understands what it feels like to be othered. They understand that they didn't like the way it felt and they understand that no one else should have to face that. And when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, when we allow ourselves to share our hopes and our dreams and our fears like so many of you did in your audio essays, we allow people to see us in our full humanity. We allow people to begin the process of empathy and compassion. And so in Delaware at the legislature we were able to convince enough legislators to pass the Gender Identity and Nondiscrimination Act of 2013 and Delaware actually became the only state in the nation to adopt both marriage equality and gender identity protections, two major pillars of the LGBTQ equality agenda in the same year. And that wasn't because of money, and it wasn't because of political opportunities or votes. It was because at the end of the day these legislators could no longer look us in the eye and deny us the equal protection of the laws they swore to uphold and that was because we were willing to be vulnerable. We were willing to be strong in our flaws, and our, and in our great qualities and our negative qualities. We were able to allow them to see us as full human beings. Now, I come to this work not just as someone who is transgender and at the risk of getting a bit too heavy for a Monday night, I come to this work also as someone who's loved someone who's transgender. I met my future husband Andy fighting for equality and we fell in love. Andy was a transgender male and just three years older than me. He was working on making sure that

healthcare was available to LGBTQ people for all of the various medically necessary needs that we have. Andy was unfortunately diagnosed with cancer just a few, a few months into our relationship. And after going through chemo and radiation and eventually surgery Andy got the news that his cancer had been cured. That he was cancer free. He went on with his work. He continued to advocating [sic] and then about a year later he got the news that every patient fears. His cancer was back. It had spread and for him it was terminal. When Andy found out that he didn't have too much time left he asked me to marry him. And of course the answer was yes. We married on the rooftop of our apartment building back in Washington, D.C. in front of family and friends and then four days after that he passed away. And I share that story because for me my relationship with Andy underscored for me something that has completely changed the way I go about advocacy. Knowing and loving Andy taught me that change cannot come fast enough, that every day matters when it comes to building a world where every person can live their life to the fullest. And, in that experience I've seen something that is really unique to young voices. It's that young people are impatient and we're often told by adults that with age and wisdom we'll be tempered into an approach of incrementalism that will allow for progress to happen slowly. But we should never lose our impatience as young people. We should always demand that change happen and that change happen right now. Dr. King called it the fierce urgency of now. And so one of the powerful things that young voices have in these conversations, whether it's around mental health or race or gender, whether it's around geography or the political divide, is that we demand change immediately. And whether you're 20 or whether you're 30

or whether you're 50 or whether you're 80 all of us must feel that fierce urgency of now. All of us must approach advocacy with the urgency of young people. We're seeing it in so many different places across the country right now because young people have always been at the forefront of social change in this country, whether it was John Lewis and Julian Bond and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee marching across the bridge in Selma; whether it was so many young people of my generation, and I guess I'm a little bit older than the current college students, talking to their parents and their grandparents about the fact that all love is equal; whether it's young people who now after a tragedy in Parkland are leading a national conversation in a way that we've never seen before in the pursuit of combating gun violence in this country. Young voices have always brought change. They've brought change because they've demanded change now and they've brought change because when young people participate in politics we speak from a place of history. And not the history of the past but the history that remains to be written because young people will be the ones that write the history books of tomorrow, we and you will get to decide who was right and who was wrong in this moment and elected officials know that. Business leaders know that. The general public knows that. And so every time we speak we speak with an incredible gravity to our voice, the gravity of history and the gravity of urgency that as once before, so many times before and will once again transform in possibility into possibility into reality. And that is politics. That is advocacy at its best. It's not the art of the possible. It's the art of turning impossibility into possibility. And as young people we haven't been forced to come to terms with the inevitability of slow progress; we've never been told that something is

impossible. And so we're able to imagine things that people far older than us are no longer able to imagine. And that is transformative. That's what we saw in so many of your essays. We saw that ability to, to envision a world where you can be gay, you can be trans, you can be a woman, you can be black, you can be Muslim, you can be a person of any faith and still be seen, still be valued and still be respected as the equal people that we all are. We need more compassion in this country. We need to be able to share our stories more in this country. And we don't just need compassion for those who are the same as us in every single way but one or two. It's easy to feel compassion for a white, young, middle-class, transgender person like myself. There's maybe one difference from you is that I'm transgender. We need to have radical compassion in this country. Compassion not just for the person who's the same as us in every single way but one, but also compassion for the person who is different than us in every single way but one -- our shared humanity. One of the challenges that I think we face as a generation is we have to figure out how to cross the divide that exists in our country. And it's a divide that has been accentuated and emboldened by the fact that we now have individualized sources of media whether it's social media, whether it's news media. We are all able to get our information from sources that conform to our preexisting biases and beliefs but because of that we aren't able to hear each other; we aren't able to talk to each other. President Barack Obama talked about that frequently as President that there was half the country that he couldn't even reach. It's probably true for Donald Trump as well. And so, our challenge as a generation, and I think we're more able to do this as a generation that's grown up in this new era, is to figure out how we can cross

those boundaries, how we can make sure that we hear and truly listen to the stories of every person across every divide because that's that only way we can move forward as a country, it's the only way we can solve the issues that we have before us. I don't have the answers. I don't think many people do. But it's on us to figure it out. And I truly believe when we speak from a place of history, when we speak from a place of authenticity, when we speak from a place of urgency as we are seeing right now with those young voices in Parkland, we can truly make history. And when we are finally able to build that world where every young person, where every young person has the same opportunity as their peers, where no child must be forced to defend their dignity or give up on their dreams, when we achieve that, when that day comes, when our understanding of we the people finally includes all of us -- the young black girl or a young transgender boy or a young Muslim women will grow up and learn about these struggles for justice and equality in their history books and they'll never have to know what this progress felt like to all of us because they will never know anything different. And that will be because of advocates and activists who dreamed of a different world; it'll be because of young people who spoke out and marched and fought for a better tomorrow; it'll be because of our allies of every age who decided to fight back and to help us bend that arc of the moral universe just a little bit more towards justice. So, I want to thank you all. I want to thank you for sharing yourself with us. I want to thank you for speaking out. I want to thank you for sharing your stories, for sharing your hopes and sometimes your fears because I believe that that is the foundation upon which we can make history. So thank you all very much. It's an honor to be with you tonight and I'm excited to help share the awards

with Nancy and for the finalists. So thank you all very much.

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

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