

Letter to the Editor: We stay, we fight for a better Tennessee

- Anna Masson and Elizabeth Owen

It is a very jarring experience to hear elected officials talk about "Tennessee values" that demean families like ours, as if we are not Tennesseans, as if we do not have values - as if we do not have value. We have both lived in this state for much of our lives and have long struggled with this cognitive dissonance.

Growing up queer in the South can be surreal. We know that this state, this region is not just one thing. We only have to look at our communities, our friends and family members. We see folks of many races, belonging to many faiths or none, with many kinds of family structures. Yet some politicians get on TV and talk about Tennessee as if we all have a rigid set of identities - often white, Protestant, straight and able-bodied. To reconcile this kind of conflict while knowing that it is those same politicians who set the national reputation for our state is exhausting and demoralizing.

This exhaustion turns to existential terror when we see violence against our communities and communities like ours. When we see shots fired in a church for daring to affirm its LGBTQ members. When we see protest and vandalism against a mosque under construction. When we see police murder unarmed civilians and the protesters demanding change demeaned and threatened with violence. When we see UT students physically assaulted on campus, just for being open about who they are and who they love. This, after over a year of vandalism against the Pride Center and the consistent undermining of attempts to ensure that this campus is "welcoming to all and hostile to none."

We choose to live and work in a state that continues to fight for its "right" to not recognize our marriage, to refuse our trans brothers and sisters the right to use the restroom they feel comfortable in, that calls itself "oppressed" when expected to acknowledge that not everyone

lives the way they do or has the same experiences that they do. It can be heart-breaking to stay in this place that has been our home for so long.

As union members, we sometimes find ourselves asked to guide the organization to choose a campaign to work on. Strict “workplace” issues like wages, performance evaluations, benefits and working conditions have long been a major part of the union’s work. Also from the beginning, we have fought to make sure that folks with marginalized identities are protected at work. Sometimes that means helping a coworker file a complaint about a hostile work environment or speaking to HR or a supervisor. Sometimes that means a campaign to extend domestic partner benefits to unmarried and same-sex couples.

The fight for queer rights is a labor fight because we still live in a state where we can be legally fired for being open about who we are and who we love. Because whether I can claim my wife on my taxes and take sick leave when she is ill affects our family's bottom line. Because trans folks deserve gender-affirming health care that is compassionate and paid for by their insurance.

So why do we stay here, when everyday we must fight against the systems of oppression all around us? Why do we stay in a place where we continue to see assaults on our trans brothers and sisters, watch our friends with disabilities fight for access and the lives of our Black friends be put in jeopardy simply walking down the street? Why not move to a more progressive area where it would be easier? Because we love our home; we want to raise our children here. So we stay. We fight. We could use our many privileges to move our family somewhere we didn't have to bear witness to these atrocities; but here's the thing: no one's free until everyone's free. We want to see a Tennessee where everyone is able to live their lives free of oppression. We want this not only for our own family, but for your family as well.

If you work on campus, please join your union. Come to the October 28-29 Labor & Change Teach-in in the UTK Panhellenic Building to talk about building the movement we need to make change across our state. Stand together on campus whether it's against facilities outsourcing or against more attacks on diversity and our queer community.

Vote - including for local candidates like House District 13 candidate Gloria Johnson who will stand tall for all of us. Early voting runs October 19 - November 3. You can early vote in the Howard Baker Center October 31 - November 3, 8am-8pm, and avoid the long lines on November 8 Election Day

Anna Masson and Elizabeth Owen have worked on campus for ten and six years, respectively, and are members of United Campus Workers. They have been married for a year. Learn more about UCW at www.ucw-cwa.org

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