

Marquell Smith

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Dear Representatives:

Will Davis

Mary Flowers

LaShawn Ford

Eddie Jackson

Chuck Jefferson

Andre Thapedi

May 22, 2013

I'm a Marine Corps veteran and I need your help.

I hear we're only a few votes away from achieving marriage equality in Illinois and if the six of you voted yes on SB 10, I'm certain it would give us the votes we need to win.

Representatives Davis, Flowers, Ford, and Thapedi supported civil unions and I look forward to their support again.

Some representatives have cited traditional religious beliefs as a reason they voted "no" on civil unions, and will likely vote "no" to marriage equality. It breaks my heart that any elected leader would use the good people in African-American churches as justification to limit the rights of others, based on the prejudices of how we were raised.

Like you I'm African-American. I learned that the struggles of our people are a symbol of hope for those being discriminated against. We cannot let an important vehicle of past struggles -African-American churches- become the gatekeepers of the rights to dignity of others. Who are we to deny someone else the right to marry because we don't agree with who they love?

Equality begins when people in positions of power enable everyone to live lives of decency and dignity, free from any prejudice in the law. Black folks did not want anyone's

permission to live freely; we can not rest until this dream is realized for everyone.

Despite our legacy we are now the very people denying others their equal rights. I'm inclined to believe that we can do better but we can't do it without your support.

When I was discharged from the Marine Corps in 2006 under the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, I learned firsthand what separate but equal feels like—and let me tell you it felt awful.

I've combated the feelings of worthlessness from separate but equal by becoming an Illinoisan who is passionate about social justice. Many inspired me on this journey. I'm inspired by Chicago's late Mayor Harold Washington, who as a state senator wrote the state's first Human Rights Act that included protections for members of the LGBTQ community.

We cannot allow the opposition's voices to drown out the voices of those who support marriage equality, nor can we support in silence on the sidelines, quietly hopeful for a victory. We cannot be silent when the youth from our community have to leave their home either voluntarily or involuntarily because someone around them doesn't agree with who they love. Worse, we cannot be silent when members of our community spew hate whether through words or action.

Silence, supportive or not, brings to mind a famous quote by Dr. King when he was lecturing on the "Conscience of the Vietnam War," in it he said "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

I'm not asking anyone to change their beliefs; only to let me realize the dreams of our fore-fathers and fore-mothers to live free. Please stand up and be counted among those fighting for justice and equality. In our silence we inadvertently support intolerance and discrimination by providing a bigger platform for our opposition to spew hate and bigotry. We must seize this moment; we must drown out the voices of opposition with not only our words, but our actions.

We can win. We can win by being public in our support for the LGBTQ community. We can with your vote. We the LGBTQ members of our community are ready to come home, will you let us in? Will you vote yes on SB 10?

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marquell Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M' and 'S'.

Marquell Smith

Sergeant, USMC

2000-2006