

## **HED: Going back in time**

**Norman city council takes a step backward in LGBTQ+ inclusivity.**

**By Kaslyn Tidmore**



Photo from <https://www.pflagnorman.org/events/norman-pride-2022>

For 12 years, October has been a month of acceptance, history and remembrance in Norman. For 12 years, the town has remembered the 3-hour discussion held at the city council meeting in which hate speech led to the suicide of a Norman youth. And for 12 years, the city has worked to build acceptance and inclusivity for the LGBTQ+ community. However, with a new mayor this year, October was no longer a month dedicated to these things. Instead, it was a month of divisiveness in the community and within the city council itself.

On September 28, 2010, the Norman city council meeting was more packed than ever. Attendees of the meeting spilled out into the halls and standing areas to hear the discussion that would mold the future of Norman and the LGBTQ+ community for years to come.

The hot topic on the agenda: a proclamation announcing October as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Month. When the floor opened for discussion, supporters and opposers took the opportunity to give their argument on why or why not the proclamation should be approved. After over three hours of debate, the council passed the proclamation in a vote of 7 to 1. Still, the ramifications of this discussion lasted far longer than the three hours it took.

A week after the meeting, Zach Harrington, a Norman North graduate, committed suicide. His family said Zach had suffered through bullying after coming out in high school, but the hate speech he heard in the meeting was most likely his final straw.

The discussion and Zach's death were a dark time in Norman history, a time of divisiveness and hate. For 12 years, the proclamation has stood as a symbol of inclusivity and acceptance as well as a reminder of the life lost so long ago.

However, this year, Norman mayor Larry Heikkila did not recognize the proclamation, stating that it goes against his religious beliefs.

When Norman resident Lisa Schmidt saw that the proclamation was not on the agenda after 12 years, she addressed the issue at the city council meeting in November.

"I was surprised to hear that after 12 years, our current council refused to sign or recognize the annual proclamation," said Schmidt in her speech at the meeting.

Her speech highlighted the history of the proclamation, defending the importance and reminder that the proclamation holds for Norman and the Harrington family.

“Proclamations that don’t cost anything, don’t grant anybody any particular rights or protections should be passed without dissent,” she said.

Schmidt’s speech was cut short by the Heikkila, saying she had run out of time. However, Ward 2 representative Brandi Studley, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, followed the speech with silent snaps of approval.

“I am bisexual, and that’s something that I’m prideful about,” Studley said, “and I don’t think that I should have to hide who I am. Nobody should.”

Studley said that the mayor’s refusal to acknowledge the proclamation was harmful to the LGBTQ+ community.

“I feel like it’s a dismissal of that and, just, all of the transgender and LGBTQ people in our community. It’s a dismissal of all of us,” she said.

Studley says the mayor’s actions will be dangerous for the Norman community and drive a wedge within the community.

“In our city, we should all feel comfortable in our space and with who we are,” she said, “and the fact that we can’t recognize all citizens and put our own personal beliefs to the side is just disheartening to our community and it still poses this divisiveness for us.”

Kassidy Holman, outgoing Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the Alpha Omicron Pi sorority, also mentioned the divide that situations such as these create.

“It’s just really unfortunate,” she said. “Like, political divisiveness can hold so much power over a group’s integration into society and how they feel welcomed.”

Kelsey Mignano, an OU graduate and member of the LGBTQ+ community, said that the lack of recognition makes a point to the members of the community, making them feel as if they are “going to slip under the rug.”

“I feel like so many people look to those public figures for approval, for acceptance, and the LGBTQ+ community has already been oppressed for so long,” said Mignano. “So, if those public figures are either not acknowledging it or refusing to talk about it or anything like that, it’s just gonna show people within the community that they need to do the same thing as well.”

Holman mentioned the power and confidence that comes when a political leaders recognize a community.

“Being acknowledged by your community, that you exist and that you face struggles, can be so affirming for people,” said Holman. “It is so important for people to realize that they are seen and that their struggles are acknowledged.”

Every year, October is also recognized as Suicide Prevention month in Norman. This year, the mayor acknowledged the LGBTQ+ community through this proclamation instead of the LGBTQ+ proclamation.

In the Suicide Prevention month proclamation, Heikkila said, “The city of Norman recognizes that discrimination, bullying and stigmatism can create environments of added grief and isolation.”

He also recognized that LGBTQ+ youth are more than four times more likely to commit suicide. However, Studley feels that this recognition was insufficient and that the lack of recognition spoke for itself.

“I don’t know how you claim to be all-inclusive when you do things like that, that are purposefully divisive,” she said.

Despite the mayor’s mention of higher suicide rates among LGBTQ+ youth, Holman says that not acknowledging the proclamation is dangerous for the mental health of this community.

“There are negative mental health implications to being disregarded,” said Holman, “and I think we are kind of moving more toward that by forgetting about it and not talking about it.”

As a member of the community, Mignano knows first-hand how it feels to be ignored by your political leaders.

“I think it makes them feel like they don’t have an option to be who they are,” said Mignano. “Like seeing the people that are leading their community not acknowledging the history, that can be very harmful and can lead younger people who feel like they are within that community to hide it, to pretend they aren’t who they are.”

Mignano says that, like many, she struggled with the lack of recognition before coming out.

“I’m within the community, and it was extremely hard knowing that about myself but feeling like I couldn’t be true to who I was,” she said. “That can really affect someone’s mental health, especially the younger generation.”

Holman mentioned that younger generations are not as used to public displays of opposition to the LGBTQ+ community as older generations. Following the legalization of gay marriage in 2015, many states and towns have seen far more acceptance toward the LGBTQ+ community.

“We are coming in with a generation that’s just not used to a lot of governmental opposition in that way,” said Holman. “Having that might bring it back to a time when it was kind of like the dark ages.”

Mignano also mentioned how not recognizing the proclamation feels like a step in the wrong direction.

“People have worked so hard to bring more acceptance and awareness to the community, and the fact that the proclamation first happened 12 years ago and [the mayor] is choosing not to recognize it, it almost feels like that’s going backward in time, which is horrible,” said Mignano.

Studley recognizes the regression that the refusal to acknowledge the proclamation has created. She says that the chaos and lack of time this year made it almost impossible to get the proclamation back on the agenda. However, they should be more prepared to fight for it next year.

“I definitely think next year, hopefully, there won’t be so much chaos going on, and we can make that more of a point,” she said.

Studley mentioned that with the current threats on transgender rights, the proclamation would be especially important in the coming year to stress the importance of the LGBTQ+ community.

“We let these little things pass by, and these little things, when we start allowing them to pass by, will grow into bigger things,” she said. “So, we’ve got to speak out and speak up to effect change.”

Holman mentioned how important it is for the LGBTQ+ community to see members of the community, such as Studley, in positions of political power.

“It’s empowering to see someone like you in power,” said Holman. “They always say that if you see things in society that you want to be changed, go and fix it yourself. Bring that representation. Represent your community.”

In her speech, Schmidt mentioned the support the proclamation will receive in 2023 and that the council should expect many people in the coming year to fight for inclusivity and remembrance of Zach Harrington.

“Please know that you have only given more power to this proclamation by refusing to acknowledge it,” Schmidt said. “Please know that this will only motivate people to see that it is presented next October, and a whole lot of us will be here to support it.”