



**Remarks on SB 221**  
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**Senate Judiciary Committee**  
**March 4, 2019**

My name is Sean Young, and I am the Legal Director of the ACLU of Georgia. Thank you, Chairman Stone, for allowing me to speak. I wish to speak out today against SB 221 from both a legal and a personal perspective.

**From a legal perspective**, the Constitution's guarantee of religious freedom and free speech has been a shield that protects our faith from government intrusion. But the Constitution prevents the government from wielding one person's interpretation of Scripture as a sword to harm other people.

In a nation with as many religions and beliefs as there are stars in the sky, the government has a duty to protect religious freedom only to the extent that it does no harm to others, to ensure that all of us can coexist peacefully in a pluralistic society.

The federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which this bill is modelled after, was originally intended as a shield. But in recent years, the statute has been twisted into a sword. The text has been twisted to justify denying healthcare to employees, firing employees doing secular work because they have the "wrong" religious beliefs, avoiding ethics investigations, and denying mental health services to people in same-sex relationships. This must stop, because it betrays the freedoms that our U.S. Constitution guarantees.

**From a personal perspective**, this bill is personally wrenching not only because I am in a committed same-sex relationship. We are engaged to be married in a backyard wedding this year surrounded by our families and friends. We get to experience all the joys (and headaches) of wedding planning that heterosexual couples get to enjoy.

This bill is doubly wrenching because I understand first-hand where some supporters of this bill may be coming from. When I was 13, I became a born-again Christian. I believed that religion was more than church on Sundays, that I was called by Christ to live out his Word in everyday life. I believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible. I led Bible studies and worship services.

But being gay while having these beliefs was torture. I spent years of profound struggle with my relationship with God, with the Biblical text that I knew inside and out, and with depression. I went to ex-gay conversion therapy conferences, I spent countless nights trying to pray the gay away, and I even led an ex-gay group. After years of internal anguish, I eventually embraced who I am.

This bill pains me because many supporters of these laws who once would have considered me their brother in Christ now believe I am not deserving of basic goods and services because their interpretation of Scripture says that I am living in sin. To them, I am a cartoon character with an evil gay agenda who is out to attack their faith.

But they don't know me. I have wrestled with God and Biblical text more than they could possibly know. I have faced profound struggles that many Christians have never had to deal with. My faith has been tested in the fire on levels that many Christians can only talk about. I take a back seat to no one on matters of faith and spiritual struggle.

Passing this bill tells me that I don't count, that my religious journey doesn't count, and that other people's religious beliefs are superior to everything that I have been through. This betrays the America we cherish and her ideals of religious freedom for all of us.

I cannot imagine living a life where I am constantly on guard, worried about whether the next business person I interact with will tell me that he doesn't "serve my kind" because he finds my love disgusting. Whether a bed &

breakfast will let my fiancée and I stay there overnight when they learn that it's "Sean and Dave" who want a room. Whether I'll be kicked off a plane for holding hands with the person I love.

People of faith have every right to preach and debate matters of theology and religious practice, and the ACLU of Georgia will be the first to defend that right. But the government has no right to use someone else's religious views to harm LGBT people or anyone of any faith.

The ACLU of Georgia stands for inclusion, and SB 221 would create a license to discriminate.

I urge you to vote against SB 221.