TDOR 2013: Bridge to the Future
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We lost 27 building the Brooklyn Bridge, 28 building the San Francisco Bay Bridge.

Eleven were lost building the Golden Gate Bridge, and five building the Mackinac, Michigan Bridge.

Four were lost in 2004 building the Skyway in North Toledo, followed by another in 2007.

In 2009, four more were lost building Louisiana’s Huey P. Long Bridge.

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Building bridges is dangerous work, there’s no two ways about it. And that is exactly what transgender people and our loved ones – our significant others, friends, family, and allies – are doing: we are building a bridge to the future.

A future in which people are not defined by their genitals, by others’ beliefs, or by arbitrary rules of what is considered “masculine” and “feminine.” We are building a world in which there are more options than two -- always more options than two -- and where people are free to bloom into the most beautiful and unique flowers they can possibly be.

This is not an easy or safe task. This is the 15th year our community has gathered to memorialize those we have lost along the way. This counting and remembering and honoring has not always happened; there is, for example, no official count of those who lost their lives building the transcontinental railroad, perhaps because many of them were also stigmatized as less than fully human, less than fully worthy of the rights others took for granted – they were Chinese. Historians’ best guess is that about 130 of them died.

We are counting. This week in towns as small as Lincroft, New Jersey (population 6,255) and as non-progressive as Hattiesburg, Mississippi (where NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer died in 1966 when the Ku Klux Klan firebombed his family’s home) we have gathered to count, remember, and honor those we have lost.

What is critical for us to remember as we engage in this memorial is that these are lives that were not lost in vain. Future historians will have to prove me right, but I believe there has never been a time in history in which a despised and misunderstood group has made such phenomenal progress concerning rights and public attitudes. In the last year alone:
• Two out of every three U.S. Senators voted to protect the employment rights of transgender people.

• Four states – California, Colorado, Oregon and Vermont – and the District of Columbia outlawed transgender exclusions in any healthcare insurance policy sold in their jurisdiction.

• The Violence Against Women Act was amended by the “do-nothing Congress” to protect the right of every transgender person to access services funded under this federal system addressing domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and dating violence.

• The U.S. Departments of Justice and Education ruled that transgender students are protected from discrimination under Title IX. California went further, passing a law guaranteeing transgender school children can use the bathrooms and sex-segregated programs that match their identity.

• The Social Security Administration made it FAR easier to change the gender marker on a Social Security account, requiring only a doctor’s letter testifying to someone having undergone gender transition treatment.

• 84% of Fortune 500 companies have publicly stated they will not discriminate against transgender employees. That’s 84% compared to 2002’s 5%.

• 42% of Fortune 500 companies offer at least one health care insurance plan that covers sex affirmation surgeries.

• 6-year-old Coloradoan Coy Mathis won the right to use the girls’ bathroom.

That was in the last 12 months alone. Among the rights and advances we won in 2012 are these:

• Health insurance plans were forbidden from discriminating against people based on their gender identity.

• The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled that Title VII forbidding sex discrimination in employment protects transgender people as well.

• The U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department ruled that transgender people and our families cannot be discriminated against when applying for federally-insured mortgages or federally-assisted housing.
This work is by no means finished. Like those who built the transcontinental railroad, we can no longer see where the beginning was, and many of those who laid those first miles are no longer with us. Also like those transcontinental railroad workers, we cannot see how close we are to the end. We can only continue to lay down track everywhere we can, counting on those who may come after us to continue the work until we reach our goal.

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There are some ways in which this bridge- and railroad- building analogy breaks down.

Most importantly, we don’t get to leave the work when we go home at night. When Lisa Lambert went home on December 30, 1994, she did not leave the danger behind. She was shot to death by people who broke into her home to kill Brandon Teena. Also killed that night was Philip DeVine, whose only tie to the transgender community was that he was a guest in the house where Brandon was.

We also have very limited options for quitting the job of building this bridge to a freer world. We do not get vacations from being transgender or being a SOFFA. Even when we go completely stealth, keeping our link to transgender people a deep, dark secret, we remain affected by the fact this bridge to a new world is not yet complete. We hear the comments on the news and in social media. Most recently, we have been subject to hearing over and over again that our children are a danger to their peers, using bathrooms to harass others when the real fact of the matter is that bathrooms are often the sites where WE experience harassment and violence.

In Milwaukee this year we saw another casualty of this inability to leave the job behind, even for a moment. We lost one of our most beloved members, D’Elle Lowe, when she attempted to get off the construction crew for a much-needed breather. Instead of finding the oasis of care she craved, she found a hospital staff who could not see beyond her transgender history and give her the respite she begged for. Faced with the unrelenting nature of this work, and deeply, deeply tired, she gave up. She joined our suicide statistics.

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So knowing that we are all on the construction crew building a bridge or a railroad to a new and better world and that getting time off to regroup is hard if not impossible, what can be done? I will tell you what can and must be done. We must keep doing what we have been doing.

- We must keep getting up in the morning. This, by itself, is a victory, a step forward. By itself it lays down another foot or two so the ones beside and behind us can keep pushing forward.
• We must love and support our co-workers. Write something positive on a transperson or SOFFA’s Facebook page every day. Hug your colleagues. Smile. Acknowledge that we are all in this together, that the work is hard, but that we are making phenomenal progress.

• We must learn to listen and witness. Too often, we tell people what we think they should know or what we think they should do. This is not always the most helpful. Sometimes what we most need is a break in which we put down and assess all that we must carry. Sometimes there is no greater gift than to listen to someone say how hard it is, how tired they are, how their hope and faith sometimes fail them. In these moments, listening with care, looking in the person’s eyes, and simply saying, “I hear you” is the most helpful thing we can do.

• We must continue to love the people in our lives. We are in this together. No matter how resistant your family members or friends or coworkers may be, they, too, are part of this project to build us into a new world. The work of dismantling what we knew and reaching for what we can only vaguely imagine is hard; we need to be kind to ourselves and one another.

• Mostly, we need to keep on keeping on. We have made unbelievably fast progress. Yes, we have lost many along the way, and each of these deaths deserves to be acknowledged and grieved. But we are building a world where these deaths will soon be a thing of the past. We – each one of us – are making a tremendous difference. We will get to this new world, and lead everyone else there, as well.

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