

# The Fight for Equality in Ypsilanti

LISA MILLS WALTERS

## Author's Note

When I was elected to represent Ward 2 on the Ypsilanti City Council in April of 1995, I had no idea that I would be a part of what many have since called the most important political event in the city of the past fifty years, an event that both unified and divided Ypsilanti and ignited a battle that lasted for eighteen months. My fellow councilmembers throughout this process included Dr. Cheryl Farmer, mayor; Trudy Swanson and Ronnie Peterson, Ward 1 representatives; John Gawlas, Ward 2; and mayor pro tem Terry McDonald and Pam Cuthbert, Ward 3. The story of the Anti-Discrimination Ordinance, including events leading up to it and its aftermath, could easily fill a book. The following are my personal recollections and impressions of that time.

## Genesis of the Ordinance

Its beginnings were inauspicious. On February 10, 1997, an EMU student group, Tri-Pride, ordered raffle tickets from Hansen's Standard Printing in Depot Town. The order was initially accepted but later rejected, when the owners of the printing company said they had realized that the group placing the order identified as LGBT and that the order contained "objectionable moral content." A few days later, Tri-Pride met with the owners, Carol and Loren Hansen, to try to work things out.

When that failed, Tri-Pride's attorney met with Mayor Cheryl Farmer and, on her recommendation, filed a complaint with the recently formed Human Relations Commission (HRC). After a series of meetings and hearings, in March the HRC voted five to four to not recommend that the city council draft an ordinance and to not take further action against the printing company. But we council members knew that something needed to be done.

Meanwhile, a group of residents calling themselves Citizens for Community (C4C), representing much of the LGBT population of Ypsilanti, was seeking support from

other groups and allies. They requested swift city council action to create a non-discrimination ordinance that specifically protected the citizens of the City of Ypsilanti from discrimination on the basis of race, sex, marital status, familial status, age, disability, national origin, source of income, and sexual orientation.

In July 1997, the council passed a resolution authorizing formation of a subcommittee that would draft the specific language of this ordinance. At the time, East Lansing and Ann Arbor had similar ordinances, as did other cities across the country, so the subcommittee had samples to look at to determine the best fit for Ypsilanti. The ordinance that turned out to be the best fit for Ypsilanti was the one in place in Iowa City, Iowa. The subcommittee worked with city attorneys, suggesting specific language, knowing that the ordinance would be challenged immediately.

### **City Council's Involvement**

I don't think any of us on council understood how intense the reaction to this issue would be, especially on the part of the opposition. Suddenly, council meetings were so well-attended that they had to be moved from city hall to increasingly larger venues: the Riverside Arts Center theater, the Ypsilanti High School auditorium, and the Hoyt Conference Center at EMU. Audience participation became lengthy and heated. People whom we had never known to express an opinion about the city suddenly became very vocal, and many who had never attended a council meeting were suddenly familiar to us, even before we placed the actual ordinance on our agenda.

Our first reading took place in November 1997. We listened to audience members for hours, voted, and unanimously approved the ordinance. At the December 16 meeting, because of threats from audience members at a previous meeting, both uniformed and plainclothes police officers were present. We again approved the ordinance on its second and final reading. A challenge was filed immediately by a group calling themselves Citizens Opposing Special Treatment (COST), and the controversy continued to accelerate.

### **Public Reaction and Opposition**

For me personally, dealing with this ordinance was difficult in many ways and simple in many others. It was painful to hear some of the comments from audience members at council meetings. My best friend of forty-eight years is a gay man, so the hatred and vitriol expressed—to hear our friends and, in some cases, family members called “filth” and “sicker than sick”—was painful, the ignorance and lack of compassion truly disheartening. One neighbor who called me to express opposition to the ordinance said she didn't want to identify herself because her best friend's son was gay. My first thought was that someone whose best friend's son was gay should be more understanding of the issue, my second thought was that she didn't need to identify herself, because I had Caller ID.

While there was only one threat of actual physical violence that I'm aware of, council

members routinely received letters and phone calls telling us that we would cause the end of civilization; we were turning Ypsilanti into Sodom and Gomorrah; and we were going to hell. Every time I got a letter from someone opposed to the ordinance, I replied with a document listing frequently asked questions about the ordinance that included answers explaining my position. Friends and colleagues told me I should ignore these people, but I truly, even if mistakenly, believed there might still be a chance to change some minds.

So, while the fight was a difficult experience, knowing what to do was a simple decision. It was obvious to all of us on council that we needed this ordinance. Sometimes as an elected official, your personal beliefs conflict with your constituents' wishes, and you must work to find a balance. In this case, that wasn't a problem. Many of the residents in my ward supported the ordinance and let me know. I kept a record of phone calls and letters I received, and they ran about ten to one in support of the ordinance. This is especially impressive when you consider that we generally heard from our constituents only when they had a complaint. This was perhaps the only issue for which I received messages of support. I remember the exact words of one woman who called me and said, "I've never called a councilperson before and I don't have time to talk, but I had to tell you you're doing the right thing." Even though we knew we were doing the right thing, it was gratifying to get that positive reinforcement.

One of the complaints from those opposed to the ordinance was that council should listen to the advice of the Human Relations Commission. But that commission was made up of people who were appointed, not elected, and their vote was five to four, which basically meant that one person, who was not chosen by voters, was deciding for everyone in the city. Council was made up of seven individuals, all of whom were chosen by their constituents and all of whom agreed that passing this ordinance was the right thing to do.

Resistance to the ordinance came from both inside and outside the city. As Catholics, mayor pro tem Terry McDonald and I were particularly targeted by the *Credo*, a deeply conservative Ann Arbor-based newspaper. I received many phone calls and had long discussions with one of their writers who always referred to me in her articles as "Catholic Councilmember Walters" and to Terry as "Catholic Mayor Pro Tem McDonald." Presumably, their implication was that as Catholics, we should be more conservative; I believed that as Catholics we should be more compassionate.

Some of the opponents to the ordinance didn't want to acknowledge their personal bias, so they claimed to be opposed for financial reasons. They predicted that everyone and his brother would be filing suit and the city would go broke defending itself. Later, when a news story was done on the first anniversary of the adoption of the ordinance, and it was pointed out that not a single suit had been filed, some of these same opponents claimed that they knew all along that no suits would be filed, proving the ordinance was unnecessary, and that *this* was why they opposed it.

## Epilogue

In 2001, members of the 1998 city council were given Courage in Leadership awards by the LGBT and Friends Alumni Chapter of EMU. The award certificates were presented to us by Judy Shepard, the mother of Matthew Shepard, the young man from Wyoming who was brutally beaten and left to die because of his sexual orientation. As the mother of three sons, I understood that Mrs. Shepard had worked infinitely harder and suffered infinitely more than any of us on council, and I was truly humbled to meet her and receive this recognition.

This experience affected councilmembers differently. Pam Cuthbert was subsequently outed as a lesbian, lost her bid for re-election, and later moved away because of the rejection of her lifelong neighbors. Trudy Swanson was re-elected to council but was asked to leave her church. I chose not to run for re-election due to family commitments. Ronnie Peterson continued in his political career and became a state representative.

While this experience was frequently painful and difficult, it was a crucial milestone for our city, and I'm very proud to have been a part of it.

## Addendum

On May 5, 1998, the first attempt to repeal the ordinance was rejected by Ypsilanti voters by a large margin, indicating that city council had, indeed, represented their constituents. In 2002, this same group tried to amend the city charter to preclude it from containing any mention of sexual orientation regarding discrimination, stating specifically that their intent was to “prohibit protection for gay, lesbian, or bisexual people.” This attempt also failed.

## A Note on Sources

In addition to my personal recollections, the information in this article was supplemented by an oral presentation at the Downtown Branch of the Ypsilanti District Library, in May of 2017, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the ordinance.

## About the Author

Lisa Mills Walters moved to Ypsilanti in 1979 to attend graduate school at EMU. In 1980, she married Eric Walters; they raised three sons and lived in Ypsi for thirty-seven years. During that time, Lisa was elected to city council; was a founder and long-time president of the NPNA; served on the boards of the Ypsi Heritage Foundation, the Riverside Arts Center, the Ypsi Community Choir, and the Historical Society Archives; was a member of the City's Recreation Commission and Community Promotions Commission; and served as manager of the Friends of the Library Bookshop. She was employed by EMU from 1987 to 2015, first teaching in the English Department and then as the Graduate School's thesis/dissertation reader. Lisa and Eric retired to Palm

Springs, California, but maintain a summer home on Ypsilanti's Ford Lake.