

Remarks on SB390, Hate Crimes Legislation

By Georgia Representative, Donald Ponder

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Thank you Mr. Speaker, Ladies and Gentlemen of the House.

I am probably the last person, the most unlikely person that you would expect to be speaking from the well about Hate Crime Legislation. And I am going to talk about it a little differently from a lot of the conversations that have gone on thus far. I want to talk about it a little more personally, about how I came to believe what I believe.

About two weeks ago my family got together for my father's 70th birthday. It was the first time since my oldest daughter was born 19 years ago that only the children and spouses got together, no grandchildren. We stayed up until 2 o'clock in the morning talking about hate crime legislation, this very bill.

Even my family could not come to a resolution about this bill, but we did agree that how you were raised and who we are would likely influence how you would vote on this bill. So I want you to know a little bit about me, and how I came to believe what I believe.

I am a White Republican, who lives in the very Southwest corner of the most ultraconservative part of this state. I grew up there. I have agricultural roots. I grew up hunting and fishing. I had guns when I was a kid. On my 12th birthday I was given that thing that so many southern boys receive, that shotgun from my dad that somehow marked me as a man.

I was raised in a conservative Baptist church. I went to a large, mostly white Southern university. I lived in and was the President of the largest, totally white fraternity on that campus. I had 9 separate Great-Great-Great Grandfathers that fought for the Confederacy. I don't have a single ancestor on all of my family lines that lived north of the Mason-Dixon line going back to the Revolutionary War. And it is not something that I am terribly proud of, but it is just part of my heritage, that not one, but several of those lines actually owned slaves.

So you would guess just by listening to my background that I am going to stand up here and talk against hate crime legislation. But you see, that's the problem when you start stereotyping people by who they are and where they came from, because I totally, totally support this bill.

I come from a privileged background, but hate has no discrimination when it picks its victims. I have a Catholic brother-in-law. My sister could not be married

in their church, and his priest refused to marry them because they were of different faiths.

I have a Jewish brother-in-law. The difference in that religion has caused part of my family to be estranged from each other for over 25 years.

I was the President of the largest fraternity at Auburn University, which won an award while I was there as the best chapter in the country. Out of over 100 members, 6 of those are now openly gay. But the "lasting bond of brotherhood" that we pledged ourselves to during those idealistic days apparently doesn't apply if you should later come out and declare yourself gay.

Some of you know that my family had an exchange student from Kosovo that lived with us for six months, during the entire time of the fighting over there. When we last heard from her, her entire extended family of 26 members had not been heard from. Not one of them. They had all been killed or disappeared because of religious and ethnic differences that we cannot even begin to understand.

My best friend in high school and college roommate's parents were raised in Denmark during the war. His grandfather was killed serving in the Resistance.

For three years, that family survived because people left food on their doorstep during the middle of the night. They couldn't afford to openly give them food because they would then be killed themselves.

And to Representative McKinney, we are probably as different as two people can be in this House based on our backgrounds. But I myself have also known fear, because I am a white man that was mugged and robbed in Chicago in a black neighborhood.

And you are right. It is a terror that never goes away. It doesn't end when the wounds heal or the dollars are replaced in your wallet. It is something that you live with the rest of your life.

But I want to tell you the real reason that I am standing here today. And this is personal, and in my five years in this House I have never abused my time in the well, and I only have 2 days before I leave this body, so I hope that you will just listen to this part for me.

There was one woman in my life that made a huge difference and her name was Mary Ward. She began working for my family before I was born. She was a young black woman whose own grandmother raised my mother. Mary, or May-Mar as I called her, came every morning before I was awake to cook breakfast so it would be on the table. She cooked our lunch. She washed our clothes.

But she was much more than that. She read books to me. When I was playing Little League she would go out and catch ball with me. She was never, ever afraid to discipline me or spank me. She expected the absolute best out of me, perhaps, and I am sure, even more than she did her own children. She would even travel with my family when we would go to our house in Florida during the summer, just as her own grandmother had done.

One day, when I was about 12 or 13 I was leaving for school. As I was walking out the door she turned to kiss me good-bye. And for some reason, I turned my head. She stopped me and she looked into my eyes with a look that absolutely burns in my memory right now and she said, "You didn't kiss me because I am black." At that instant, I knew that she was right.

I denied it. I made some lame excuse about it. But I was forced at that age to confront a small dark part of myself. I don't even know where it came from. This lady, who was devoting her whole life to me and my brother and sister, who loved me unconditionally, who had changed my diapers and fed me, and who was truly my second mother, that somehow she wasn't worthy of a good-bye kiss simply because of the color of her skin.

Hate is all around us. It takes shape and form in ways that are somehow so small that we don't even recognize them to begin with, until they somehow become acceptable to us. It is up to us, as parents and leaders in our communities, to take a stand and to say loudly and clearly that this is just not acceptable.

I have lived with the shame and memory of my betrayal of Mary Ward's love for me. I pledged to myself then and I repledged to myself the day I buried her that never, ever again would I look in the mirror and know that I had kept silent, and let hate or prejudice or indifference negatively impact a person's life. Even if I didn't know them.

Likewise, my wife and I promised to each other on the day that our oldest daughter was born that we would raise our children to be tolerant. That we would raise them to accept diversity and to celebrate it. In our home, someone's difference would never be a reason for injustice.

When we take a stand, it can slowly make a difference. When I was a child, my father's plants had a lot of whites and a lot of blacks working in them. We had separate water fountains. We had separate tables that we ate at.

Now my daughter is completing her first year at Agnes Scott College. She informed me last week that she and her roommate, who happens to be black, they were thrown together just randomly last year as first year students, had decided that they were going to room together again next year.

I asked her the reasons that they had decided to live together again. She said, "Well, we just get along so well together." She mentioned a couple of other reasons, but do you know what was absent? Color. She just didn't think about it.

You can make progress when you take a stand. Our exchange student, who grew up in a country where your differences absolutely defined everything about you, now lives in Dallas where a whole community of different races has embraced her and is teaching her how to accept people who are different from her and who love her.

To those that would say that this bill is creating a special class of citizen, I would say....Who would choose to be a class of citizen or who would choose to be gay and risk the alienation of your own family and friends and coworkers?

Who would choose to be Jewish, so that they could endure the kind of hatred over the years that led to the Holocaust and the near extinction of the Jewish people on an entire continent?

Who would choose to be black simply so that their places of worship could be burned down or so that they could spend all their days at the back of the line? We are who we are because God alone chose to make us that way. The burdens that we bear and the problems that we are trying to correct with this legislation are the result of man's inhumanity to man. That is hardly trying to create a special class of people.

To those that would say that we already have laws to take care of these crimes, I would say watch the repeats of yesterday's debate on the Lawmakers. We made passionate pleas on behalf of animal rights.

We talked with revulsion about cats being wired together with barbed wire. Surely, surely, Matthew Sheppard's being beaten and hung up on a barbed wire fence and left to die is no less revolting. Surely our fellow man deserves no less than our pets.

Hate crimes are different. When I was a teenager, on more than one water tank, I painted "SR's of '72". Surely no one in here is going to tell me that the words that are painted on walls that say "Kill the Jews" or a swastika or "Fags must Die" or "Move the Niggers" are somehow the same as "SR's of '72". Even today, those very words make us feel uncomfortable and they should.

Surely we are not going to equate a barroom brawl or a crime of passion with a group that decides, with purpose, to get in a car and go beat up blacks or gays or Jews without even knowing who they are.

Hate crimes are about sending a message. The cross that was burned in a black person's yard not so many years ago was a message to black people.

The gay person that is bashed walking down the sidewalk in midtown is a message to gay people.

And the Jews that have endured thousands of years of persecution were all being sent messages over and over again.

I would say to you that now is our turn to send a message. I am not a lawyer, I don't know how difficult it would be to prosecute this or even care. I don't really care that anyone is ever prosecuted under this bill.

But I do care that we take this moment in time, in history, to say that we are going to send a message.

The pope is now sending a message of reconciliation to Jews and people throughout this world. Some of those crimes occurred 2,000 years ago.

My wife and I have sent a message to our children that we are all God's children and that hate is unacceptable in our home.

I believe that we must send a message to people that are filled with hate in this world, that Georgia has no room for hatred within its borders. It is a message that we can send to the people of this state, but it is also a message that you have to send to yourself.

I ask you to look within yourself and do what you think is right. I ask you to vote YES on this bill and NO to hate.