



***“Burst down those closet doors once and for all, and stand up and start to fight.” – Harvey Milk***



Oct. 11 is National Coming Out Day (NCOB). This annual day of LGBTQ+ awareness supports all members of the queer community and celebrates those who have “come out of the closet” and are living as their true selves. It also marks the date of the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights on Oct. 11, 1987.

Harvey Milk, an icon of the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement, was very clear on the importance of LGBTQ+ people to come out and share their truth with family members, friends and colleagues. He understood the need for people to live authentically to counter the prejudice, bigotry and discrimination that the LGBTQ+ community faced in his day and that continues to harm people today. In a year that has seen over 300 anti-LGBTQ+ bills offered in legislatures across numerous states, many targeting transgender youth and all appealing to willful ignorance and fear, it is imperative for everyone who can come out to do so.

Coming out takes courage. Those who are fortunate to have a friend or family member come out to them should recognize the act as one of bravery, one that overcomes fears of abandonment, rejection and threats of violence. The decision to come out is highly individualized, and a determination whether or not to come out in certain circumstances, or who to come out to, is one that should be respected. Coming out is also a lifelong process of making decisions about sharing information when in new situations and meeting new people. For far too many, it still involves great risk — the risk of losing family, a job, housing or personal safety. Harvey Milk acknowledged the risk, while maintaining a steadfast call for coming out. He knew that living authentically could cost him his life. “If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door,” he said. He was prophetic. Harvey Milk was assassinated, in part because of his sexual orientation, on Nov. 27, 1978.

Freedom is not free. Coming out, living honestly, is ultimately a demonstration of individual freedom. But it is also a contribution to the cause of freedom for everyone. Harvey Milk knew that if people who are LGBTQ+ came out, it would destroy the prejudices and stereotypes used to justify discrimination. The fight for freedom and liberty here in the U.S. and around the world goes on. Harvey Milk’s work still goes on — it is up to us to continue the fight.

I have a very special relationship to Harvey Milk’s legacy. I am the co-sponsor of the USNS HARVEY MILK (T-AO-206) — the first ship in the history of the U.S. Navy named for an openly gay man. Both Harvey and I had to sacrifice our careers as naval officers due to anti-LGBTQ+ animus and our unwillingness to live in the closet. I know personally the cost, and the joy, of living as who I am. Being able to bring my complete self to my relationships, my work and my country has been worth the cost.

For those of you who are allies — please celebrate, support, empower and affirm all LGBTQ+ people on National Coming Out Day and every day.

Paula M. Neira, J.D., M.S.N., R.N., C.E.N., F.A.A.N.  
Program Director of LGBTQ+ Equity and Education  
Johns Hopkins Medicine Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Health Equity

