



*"Life beyond stigmatizing theology
and ideology is possible. We are
here to help."*
www.Thrive.LGBT 

August 7, 2019

Randy Thomas
Executive Director, Thrive LGBT, Inc.
1211 Clubside Dr.
Longwood, FL 32779

Mayor Jerry L. Demings
201 S. Rosalind Avenue, 5th Floor
Orlando, Florida 32801

Dear Mayor Demings,

I am writing about the critical need for a Conversion Therapy (CT) ban in Orange County. Conversion therapy is the discredited practice of trying to change someone's gender identity and sexual orientation. Instead of celebrating and affirming LGBTQ+ youth for who they intrinsically are, CT sends a cruel message that these precious souls are broken and need to be fixed. It is in the best interest of Orange County residents and the surrounding areas that Orange County ban conversion therapy to protect the most vulnerable among us, LGBTQ+ youth.

Authority figures from parents to church leaders to therapists pressure Orange County LGBTQ+ youth into this abusive practice disguised as professional counseling. CT has been widely denounced and discredited by every major mental health organization, 18 states (and counting), and local municipalities as well. It is still legal in far too many places in our state, including Orange County. Because Conversion Therapy is founded in systemic bigotry and toxic shame against LGBTQ+ people, it is damaging to our community, destructive to our families, and deadly to LGBTQ+ youth.

I should know. I speak with 23 years of experience in the conversion therapy/ex-gay movement as a former leader, proponent, and survivor. I moved here in 2002 to join the staff of Exodus International, the most substantial pastoral approach to conversion therapy in the world until we closed it in 2013. At the time of its closing, I was the Executive Vice President. It is important to note that this pastoral conversion therapy organization, with 251 member agencies across North America at the time, chose Orange County Florida as the safe haven for its headquarters. Orange County must now become a safe haven for LGBTQ+ Youth, not those who would harm them via conversion therapy in any of its forms.

I lost a lifelong friend named Michael in 2013 to suicide because he couldn't find congruence with his faith and who he was as a gay man. Another young man who went through conversion therapy, Ryan, overdosed on drugs because he felt like God wasn't "changing" him. He was willing to do anything to numb the pain. These two stories ripped my blinders off, and after helping to shut down Exodus later in 2013, I came out of the church closet in 2015. I will never stop grieving the damage conversion therapy has done in and around my life. That is why I will work tirelessly now that I know better to do better. The list of LGBTQ+ young people driven to desperate means must stop. Orange County must act to ban conversion therapy within its borders.

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Also consider, according to The Trevor Project's National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental health, 42% of LGBTQ+ Youth who experienced conversion therapy attempted suicide. Tragically that already high number spikes even higher with 57% of transgender and non-binary youth who have undergone conversion therapy report a suicide attempt in the last year. Our young people face unfair and inordinate pressure to be who someone wants them to be instead of who they truly are. This needs to end and banning conversion therapy is an important step in the right direction

Mayor Demings, right now there are thousands of young people in Orange County, or being brought to Orange County from surrounding areas, being told they will be converted from gay to straight or forced to live with a gender identity that is not theirs. We need your courageous leadership to give LGBTQ+ youth a chance to grow into the healthy, loving, and beautiful souls they were born to be. We should be about celebrating their core sense of identity and relational being. We should be about creating affirming resources and protect them from the dangerous, discredited, and deadly practice of conversion therapy.

Please support and help facilitate the effort to ban conversion therapy in Orange County.
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Randy Thomas". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Randy Thomas

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