

**Elizabeth Birch, Executive Director
Human Rights Campaign
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LOS ANGELES -- I am honored to speak here as a gay American. Tonight, we celebrate the American family. But we know that America's family is not yet whole.

For the color of his skin, James Byrd Jr. was dragged behind a truck in Jasper, Texas, until his body was shattered on a drainage ditch. Because of her faith, 14 year old Kristi Beckel was gunned down as she worshipped in a Texas Baptist church. Because Matthew Shepard was gay, he was driven into the countryside on a freezing Wyoming night, beaten and hung on a fence to die. His gentle voice still asks why, as do the families who have paid for our national lesson with their children's lives.

Tonight, we dedicate ourselves to healing the fractures -- soothing the wounds -- to making our American family truly whole.

It is now well settled that Democrats are capable of strong and disciplined standards of governance for our economy, domestic and foreign affairs. But true leadership also requires a muscled heart for equality. Wise leadership never takes refuge in silence.

I speak here tonight with the parents and political leaders whose action or apathy will determine the fullness of the American family.

To parents -- some of whom have left their gay children at the margins of family life and out of a vision for America, I say this: I want you to know that your gay children are gifted and strong. All are heroic in the way they have conquered barriers to their own self-respect. Many have suffered cruelty or violence. Some serve their communities with leadership and grace. Many are rich in faith, and have a deep love for this nation and democracy. Tens of thousands have served with distinction in the armed forces. Many have lost their lives.

Until this administration, many battled AIDS virtually alone in the face of a stony, silent government. Many have lost their jobs. All were created by God. And you have a right to be proud of each and every one of them.

I am proud to know the good heart of Al Gore. He has led this nation with wisdom and courage. His vision embraces every child and

every family, including my family. I cannot imagine a better leader for our small twins than the next President of the United States, Al Gore.

The other party's vision for America excludes as many as it includes. To be blunt, the Republican platform remains shameful. Healing America's family requires resolve, not simply a refrain. I do not believe that the Republican ticket is comprised of hateful men. But they are not wise men. They practice silent apathy in the face of hatred, and call it leadership. They forego invective but embrace indifference, and call it compassion.

Deep within their hearts, they know this to be true: that not a single gay American seeks special rights or favored treatment. We seek simple equality -- the equal right to work, raise a family, serve our country in every way and be free from the shackles of brutality and hate.

Equality is a special right -- a right so special that for two-and-a-quarter centuries it has motivated men and women to dream and to die and to animate the heart of America itself.

Al Gore and Joe Lieberman have taken strong, courageous, positions on behalf of equality. The Democratic platform they support is a work of art in democracy -- unambiguously supporting inclusion for every American. They have never run for cover of silence. Like most Americans, they understand that:

- As long as a young man can be left on a fence to die, our American family is fractured;
- As long as gay parents live in fear that their children might be taken from them, our family is torn;
- As long as hardworking Americans can be fired in 39 states simply for being gay, our family is not whole;
- As long as gay people are barred from serving openly and with dignity in the armed forces of the United States, our family is not just;
- As long as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth are at risk for suicide;

... until there is a cure for AIDS for men, women and children here and around the world...

... then the American family we celebrate tonight is not yet healed.

It is not enough to love your own child. Leaders must love all children and safeguard the family called America. This is what Al Gore knows. It is what George Bush has yet to learn. We don't have a single child to spare -- and we don't have time for George Bush to learn on the job.

I do not know how our young twins will one day judge my partner Hilary and me as parents, or as people. Our hope and prayer is that we will measure up in the way Dr. Martin Luther King asked people to judge themselves. He said: "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

Let us not follow the silence of George Bush. Let us follow a voice of courage and wisdom, and let us elect Al Gore President of the United States.