

Susan M. – Susie--Shepherd
6615 N.E. 22nd Ave.
Portland, OR 97211-5354
503-481-2935
Susie@snyderattorney.com

February 20, 2025

RE: Support for House Resolution 3

Dear Vice Chair Drazan, Vice Chair Pham and Members of the Committee on Rules:

For the record, my name is Susan Mary Shepherd. I go by "Susie." I am 75 years old, white, and have been involved in the LGBTQ community all my adult life. The event that prompted my activism occurred in the spring of 1975. I was teaching in Florence, and had to retreat to the closet to do that, as being an out gay woman at the time would have been tantamount to losing my job. (See, e.g., *Burton v. Cascade School District Union High School No. 5*, 353 F. Supp. 254 [D. Oregon 1973]). I agreed to an interview for a small mid-Willamette Valley weekly newspaper whose name I have long since forgotten by a U. of O. journalism student, under condition of strict anonymity. He was writing about the plight of professionals having to live a double life due to being gay. (Back then, if you weren't heterosexual, you were gay. Gay was the umbrella term, as the LGBTQ designation was years from being established.) (Note: That author was Randy Shilts, who went on to write *And the Band Played On*, detailing our government's ignoring of the AIDS crisis during its early years.) Being forced back into the closet made me suicidal, and I drove into Eugene weekly all winter and spring term for counseling to help retain a sense of purpose for staying alive. Reading Randy's article about my life – all my comings and goings – under a fictitious name which I both needed desperately to survive and loathed because it was dishonest – it was not my name – forced me to return to Portland at the end of the school year, where I could be honest about myself and work to free others of the chains that confined them to their closets.

My work over several years with the Portland Town Council, predecessor to Basic Rights Oregon, brought me into contact with the drag community. Never had I met a more dedicated group of people, intent on building community through entertainment – and always entertainment with a great purpose: Raising funds for every charity imaginable! Food banks, paying medical bills, scholarships – you name it, and the drag community was raising money for it. When speaking to groups about the need for homosexual acceptance and the

need for basic gay rights legislation, I always told them that if they saw a man running around in a dress and all made up pretty, to let him go—he was surely on some philanthropic mission!) And of course, we had the minority within the minority—Black drag. Being reared in Portland in the 1950's did not give me much exposure to the Black community. We had only one Black family in First Presbyterian Church, where I grew up. I got my Black education as a VISTA Volunteer (now part of AmeriCorps) in the early-mid 1970s, in an extremely segregated town—Chickasha, Oklahoma, where I was given the opportunity to bring the Black and white sections of that town together for the very first time ever, for an All-City Fun Night. It was fun, and people had the opportunity to see that their misgivings about other races were baseless at best.

Now, today, we need to let Oregonians know that their misgivings about Black Drag are baseless at best, and that this is a community whose history we should lift up in true celebration. House Resolution 3 is a perfect way to do just that.

I have had the rich privilege of participating in fundraisers and other community-building events with some of Portland's most prized Black gay citizens: Rose Emperor II Harold—who later became Rose Empress XXXI Cicely—and Rose Empress XXVII Elaine Peacock and her trans sister Princess XI Misty Waters, for example. Their mother, Audria M. Edwards, worked closely with my parents, Bill and Ann Shepherd, in the very early days of building Parents of Gays, which would later become the Portland chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, an international organization that has saved countless thousands of lives of LBGTQ individuals, many having been driven to the brink of suicide by the very divisiveness that tears at our country's fabric today. The pressures of being a sexual minority are tough enough for anyone to try to bear. Multiply that by the factor of racism that has been mushrooming in our country in recent years, and you are placing untenable pressure on an individual. You can be that pressure release valve by voting YES on HR 3.

Another favorite Black Drag friend of mine is the amazing and unstoppable Rose Empress XLIV Poison Waters. In December 2002, Poison honored my mother by giving her this permanent title in the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court: Imperial Grandmother to All Diversities. I have had the rich privilege of being able to call Poison a good friend for many years.

Certainly, my parents were ahead of their time in co-founding PFLAG back in the mid-1970s. Daddy was an attorney, and even mother noted that he could be "rather stuffy" on occasion. As they got increasingly involved in the LBGTQ community, however, it was not unusual to hear daddy muse, as they were preparing to attend an event or just returning from one, "I feel sorry for anyone

who doesn't have gay friends. They just don't realize how much of life they are missing!" Daddy was most apt to make those comments regarding a drag event.

The fact that we have an opportunity to support the history of Black Drag is nothing short of spectacular – and deeply needed at this juncture in our country's history. I would like to say that I am appalled at the strength of opposition to this Resolution, but as a lifelong Oregonian, and veteran of countless anti-gay ballot measures, and being mindful that we were one of the last states to finally abolish sundown laws, I am, sadly, not that surprised. Oregon is home to a great number of hate groups. A no vote on HR 3 would only bolster their evil agendas. Your YES vote will affirm that there is a place at the table for ALL Oregonians, and that we honor the pioneering spirit of all Oregonians, particularly minorities.

It was only in recent years, long after both of my parents had gone to their Great Reward, that my trans brother, Isaac, told me about the death threats mom and dad got in the 1970's when they were starting PFLAG. I always worried that that would happen, but they never spoke of it to me. Isaac was in high school during those years, and told me that mom and dad forbade him from answering the phone for a couple of years, because they did not want him hearing the hateful messages people were calling to leave. (This was before answering machines were commonplace, and my folks did not have one.) Imagine telling a teenager – especially a girl (which he was, back then) – not to answer the phone! But mom and dad wanted to protect us all. YOU can do your part to protect all Oregonians with a YES vote on HR 3.

I certainly got an earful of hate every time I went on a Sunday morning radio talk show, simply trying to explain that gay folks are just like everyone else. But fear of anything different seems to spawn hatred. Why? As daddy used to say, "Any time any two people always agree on everything, one of those people isn't necessary." We NEED diversity – on all levels. This is how we learn. We teach each other. We learn from each other. Fear stifles that life education that fills our spirits and sparks our imaginations. The old saying is that, "when fear knocks on the door and faith answers, there's no one there." Let's get rid of the fear now. I have faith in you – our Oregon legislators – to do the right thing and vote YES on HR 3.

You, as Oregon legislators – and I am proud to note that my own representative, Tawna Sanchez, is a sponsor of this Resolution – have an opportunity to protect ALL Oregonians from the fear of something different – a Black person in Drag – who is, most likely, raising funds for charity, and the history of how that individual got to this exciting, creative point in life. How many charities has Poison Waters benefitted by her brilliant performances and witty comments?

Many thousands, I daresay. Frequently when I see her hosting an event, she has to jet off to head up another charity in the same evening. How many Oregonians and others have benefitted by hundreds of thousands of dollars that she alone has raised? Literally, only God knows. Your Yes vote on HR 3 will help assure that these fundraisers can continue without fear – that Black Drag shows will continue to raise countless tens of thousands of dollars for people in need, all the while building up the spirits and affirming the humanity of the very performers themselves, because you have honored their colorful history.

Being Black is how you are born – if you are born Black. Doing Drag is how you get to express yourself – if you are blessed enough to come out in an environment that will support your creativity and help you celebrate that aspect of yourself. For nearly half a century, Black Oregonians have been saving lives, building community and raising funds for a panoply of charities. It is high time to honor that history.

You as our elected officials have taken an oath to support the citizens of our great state. A Yes vote on HR 3 will truly and genuinely support all Oregonians. A No vote on HR 3 will have a damning effect on the spirit of many of our most creative citizens. It will send a message of disenfranchisement to any Black Drag queen, whether they have been performing for years, or are just beginning to discover their delight in drag participation. You can choose to lift up these amazing, creative individuals with a Yes vote on HR 3, and help keep Oregon a state where fear has no place.

Our State song contains the lyrics, “Hail to thee, Land of Heroes; My Oregon.” Our Black Drag performers have been heroes to the beneficiaries of all the charity productions they put together for the last half century . YOU can be heroes to our Black Drag community by affirming their history – their very humanity--by voting YES on HR 3. I beseech you to do so.

Respectfully Submitted,



Susan M. – Susie--Shepherd