

'Footloose' in Tennessee

Drag shows and churches can coexist



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A drag show was nearly run out of town in Jackson, Tennessee.

The opponents took a page out of the movie "Footloose" and sought to ban what they considered a corruptive influence in society.

In the film, the enemy was dancing; for the critics in Jackson, it was men performing as female entertainers dressed in elaborate costumes and wigs.

The argument is that drag shows are "indecent," but while a citizen is entitled to hold a view of morality, he or she does not have the right to impose that perspective on other people.

The opposition, which threatened legal action, forced the Oct. 8 Jackson Pride event from the publicly-owned Conger Park to the Carl Perkin's Civic Center.

Make no mistake, this was textbook bullying. A group of citizens, under the banner of the First Amendment and shielded by state lawmakers, sought to silence another, less powerful group.

Fearmongering prevailed

It's worth remembering that there are five freedoms in the U.S. Constitu-

tion's First Amendment: religion, speech, assembly, petitioning the government and the press.

One is not greater than the other and that sometimes creates friction in society where there are competing interests and beliefs.

Some church-going citizens led by state Rep. Chris Todd, R-Madison County, and state Sen. Ed Jackson, R-Jackson, were free to criticize the drag show.

But they were not free to impose their religious beliefs on those with whom they disagree. They were not free to use the power of the state for their aims.

They did so anyway under the unfounded claim that show organizers planned to "recruit children to this lifestyle." And this attitude has made its way into one of the first bills filed for the Tennessee General Assembly's 2023 legislative session -- to prohibit and criminalize drag shows from public property or places where children might watch them.

First, this plays into a current political libel that any LGBTQ person or their ally is a "groomer" seeking to harm a child.

Second, there was no evidence that this was going to happen.

Fear and fearmongering prevailed.

Critics could have stayed home

The Tennessee Constitution Declaration of Rights, Article I, Section 3, makes it clear: "That all men have a natural and



BoroPride supporter Chris Warren, pastor at First Cumberland Presbyterian Church on East Main Street in Murfreesboro, tells the Murfreesboro City Council on Nov. 3 to permit the annual LGBTQ+ festival to continue. SCOTT BRODEN/DNJ

indefeasible right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own conscience; that no man can of right be compelled to attend, erect, or support any place of worship, or to maintain any minister against his consent; that no human authority can, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the rights of conscience; and that no preference shall ever be given, by law, to any religious establishment or mode of worship."

Jackson bent to the will of one religious viewpoint.

While the event still happened, the message was clear that certain public spaces are forbidden.

But even clergy from different Christian denominations in Jackson disagreed with each other on the outcome.

While there is a compelling interest for a city to protect public safety, the drag show posed no proven threat.

Those who opposed it could have merely stayed home. Nobody has to dance. Nobody has to see a drag show.

Creating spaces for belonging

Pride events outside major Tennessee cities have grown over the years, be

it in Jackson, Murfreesboro, Columbia or Franklin.

These events have welcomed families to come and they have created spaces for local businesses, for both Republicans and Democrats, and for citizens who want to learn more about their fellow citizens.

Most important, they have created spaces of belonging for people who are marginalized.

But Murfreesboro's event may not happen next year after City Manager Craig Tindall told the Sept. 17 BoroPride organizers that its drag show had exposed "children to a harmful prurient interest." He vowed not approve another permit.

Several city residents spoke out against the blanket permit denial at a city council meeting on Nov. 7.

LGBTQ citizens exist all over the state and more are becoming vocal because they want to embrace their identities.

They also oppose a rash of state legislation aimed at them and passed over the years on what bathroom they can use, what sports they can play, their healthcare decisions and whether they can adopt a child.

That state Constitution also says: "That government being instituted for the common benefit, the doctrine of nonresistance against arbitrary power and oppression is absurd, slavish, and destructive of the good and happiness of mankind."

Citizens of different beliefs and interests must learn to co-exist in a democratic society and they should resist oppressive efforts to deny them their rights.

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Attendees cheer and smile as drag queen Miami Rose performs during Jackson Pride Fest in the Carl Perkins Civic Center on Oct. 8. CHRIS DAY/JACKSON SUN



Protesters to Jackson Pride Fest gather outside the Carl Perkins Civic Center. CHRIS DAY/JACKSON SUN

How Bono rallied evangelicals in fight against HIV/AIDS

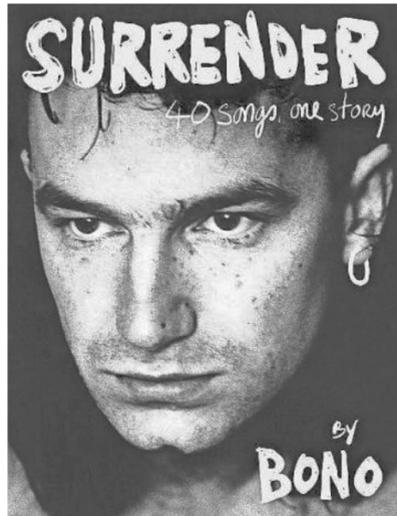


Your Turn
Jenny Eaton Dyer
Guest columnist

Twenty years ago, Bono came to Nashville. It was the end of his brief but effective Heart of America Tour, culminating on World AIDS Day, to rally largely white, evangelical voters to a little-known, albeit heavily stigmatized, issue: AIDS in Africa. He needed their support if his organization was going to move a president who had never traveled to Africa to address a pandemic a continent away. Spoiler alert: it worked.

But the question I ponder, as Bono came back to town Nov. 9 on his book tour for the recently released "SURRENDER: 40 Songs, One Story," is if a similar meeting on critical global health and development issues with the new evangelical guard in Nashville would be as influential today.

On the heels of the 1990s, the "Religious Right" had condemned HIV/AIDS, which was seen predominantly in the gay and drug-addicted communities, as a punishment from God. Yet by the turn of the century, the disease had ravaged countries in Africa, southeast Asia and the Caribbean. Children were becoming orphans by the thousands overnight,



"Surrender: 40 Songs, One Story," by Bono. KNOPF

and the disease was hollowing out a generation worldwide.

Most local evangelical leaders weren't willing to champion these issues at the time. They needed nationally recognized leadership from within their own tribe (and preferably associated with the Republican Party) to give them cover if they were to make a stand.

Stars aligned. Franklin Graham held

a "Prescription for Hope" missionary conference in Washington, D.C., to discuss what people working for the Samaritan's Purse organization were witnessing throughout Africa. U.S. Sen. Dr. Bill Frist of Tennessee placed photos from his work as a medical missionary in Sudan on the Oval Office desk. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, White House Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten and White House Director of Speechwriting Michael Gerson pressed the George W. Bush administration to do something under the banner of "compassionate conservatism" as a moral imperative.

And Bono's celebrity – with his band, U2, at the apex of its fame – brought the emergency issue into the limelight with the glitz and glam needed to draw the attention of fans across America, many of whom were evangelical.

Faith leaders and people in the pews alike supported the Republican agenda to lead the most ambitious policy and funding to tackle a single disease ever with the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

You may be surprised to learn that when you couple the statistics from PEPFAR with the multilateral partnership of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, more than 50 million lives have been saved, and the number of people dying from HIV/AIDS has been cut in half.

However, if we do not provide sustained support for the resources necessary to fight these diseases globally, we can predict that HIV/AIDS will show an increase in infections and deaths, returning to levels of the early 2000s.

U.S. Sen. Bill Hagerty sits on the Appropriations Committee with the power to continue the leadership of former Sens. Frist and Bob Corker by fully supporting funding for PEPFAR and replenishment of the Global Fund.

Bono lit the match 20 years ago, igniting the interest of people of faith and political leaders, and the U.S. has led the world in saving the lives of millions. Let's unite our voices and continue to carry the torch to end the pandemic of HIV/AIDS by 2030.

This World AIDS Day, on Thursday, Dec. 1, Sen. Hagerty needs to hear your voice. There are 50 million more lives counting on us.

Dr. Jenny Eaton Dyer is the founder of the 2030 Collaborative. She formerly served as the national faith outreach director for Bono's *The ONE Campaign* as well as the executive director of Dr. Bill Frist's *Hope Through Healing Hands*. She co-edited *The aWAKE Project: Uniting Against the Africa AIDS Crisis* (2002), *The Mother & Child Project: Raising Our Voices for Health and Hope* (2015) and *The End of Hunger: Renewed Hope for Feeding the World* (2019).