

## An Open Letter to Disney

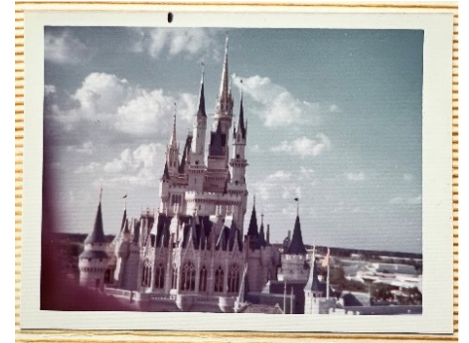
Hello Disney!

Remember me? It's Zaylore Stout.



I grew up about a mile away from Disneyland in the 1980s. And, like every local kid, I used to ride my bike scouring every inch of your perimeter with my friends to see if there was a way for us to “sneak in”. There wasn’t. But I did visit your park with my family at least 3-4 times per year for decades. I was labeled the family’s “tour guide” since I knew the quickest route to get anywhere within the park. I even remember when it used to cost only \$10 for California residents to attend the park! (Aww, the good old days.)

Did you know that you are in my family photo albums? There is a particular photo that comes to mind...tinged red with age. It's of my grandmothers at I at Disneyland, taken on one of the only very few occasions in my lifetime that the three of us were all together. My Grandma Georgia lived in South Carolina and my Grandma Bertha lives in St. Louis. Bertha is the last grandparent I have alive... >> Bertha was my last remaining grandparent, and, rest her soul, she passed by the time I finished this letter to you<<



There were always two spots within Disneyland that were my favorites. I loved Bear Country! What kid wouldn't love the outdoorsy and rustic feel of the place? The capstone for me being the Country Bear Jamboree; I was always mesmerized by the animatronics. It made me feel like I was visiting my family in South Carolina. Then there was the [It's A Small World](#) ride located in Fantasyland. What I loved most about this ride was the message of acceptance, inclusion, and community. Yes, each character had their own ethnic, racial, cultural background that they represented, but they were also loved and uplifted for it. Since I knew that I was different from others around me, it gave me hope that I'd also be accepted, loved, and uplifted for who I was. While growing up in Orange County (the O.C.) there was never a critical mass of Black people, so there was never much of a Black community or Black culture to speak of.



I was born with birth defects to both my hands and my feet, so I knew that I was different than others there too. Finally, as early as elementary school I had crushes on both boys and girls. I knew that was not the norm, so I hid that part of me from others as well.

As a teen, I was a regular (#Videot) at [Videopolis](#) (oh how I loved those churros... before they became a big hit). I don't recall dancing with any boys there as I was way too shy to have asked anyone at that point. Little did I know at the time, however, there was controversy regarding this issue which ultimately resulted in Disney changing their policy in 1985, allowing for same sex “fast dancing” at the park.

I think it was in 1991 that I received a letter addressed to me from Kissimmee, Florida. I didn't know anyone from Kissimmee. I ripped the letter open and discovered it was from Disney. It was an invitation to [interview Malcolm Jamal Warner \(MJW\) for the Mickey Mouse Club!](#) It took me a while for the reality to set in because I just knew this couldn't really be happening... How did Disney get my name? Why me? The Cosby Show was at its 90s era peak and MJW was just the coolest kid on the planet. Well, the invitation was real after all. I got to spend the entire day with MJW near the Disney studios in Burbank. We got to play football, ride horseback, and even grill hamburgers. It was one of the highlights of my teenaged life!



Grad Night at Disney is a long-time Southern California high school graduation milestone. The best part was that you weren't there with just your own graduating class from high school, but with friends who were graduating from all the other area high schools as-well.

Sadly, I never made it to Gay Days at Disneyland or Disney World. As an adult, I was drawn towards spending more time in Los Angeles where it was more diverse and there was more of a critical mass of LGBTQ+ folks to interact and be in community with. However, I know a gazillion "Disney gays" who not only secured their annual passes every year but also attended every Gay Days event both in California and Florida. Someday I'll make it to those, too.

My uncle Paul has worked for [Walt Disney Animation Studios](#) since 1996. More recently, he has taken on caring for my nephew (now 'cousin') who has tested positive for muscular dystrophy. While the disease has not impacted him, but as his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday approaches at the end of this month, the clock is sadly ticking towards it rearing its ugly head in the near future. Thankfully, Disney medical coverage will ensure he has everything he needs to live the longest, most independent life possible, (much like his cousin Matthew.)



In 2019, my partner Ore, his best friend Eddie and I decided we'd attend [World Pride in New York City](#). None of us had ever attended either NYC or World Pride before. Attending this pride was exceptionally important and significant because it marked the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the historic Stonewall Riots, and because I was in the last weeks of finalizing my LGBTQ+ history book, [Our Gay History in Fifty States](#). Well, Eddie happens to work for Disney so we were all invited to march along with Disney in the world pride parade. What a joy it was to meet so many amazing people from spanning the entire Disney footprint! Some identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community while others were allies. Regardless, we were all there to share happiness, love, and joy. ( A sentiment of celebratory inclusion I had come to see as synonymous with the Disney brand.) We were even treated to a performance by some amazing Broadway performers (including Wilson Cruz who is a huge supporter of my book). I will forever remember Wilson's statement to us regarding why our June celebration is called "Pride."



My dear friend, Mary (through her miracle work) was able to secure a speaking opportunity for [Trans Can Work](#) at the [Out & Equal](#) summit in Seattle 2018, an event for which Disney was a major sponsor. Mary, being the amazing friend that she is, and knowing that It's always been a dream of mine to speak at this important and impactful summit, brought us two Mickey Mouse Pride Ears as both inspiration and consolation. We love them and break them out on special/Disney occasions. They were a hit during COVID-19 drag queen bingo!



Once I completed writing my LGBTQ+ history book I had to reach out to Disney legal to get approval to use the Disney image and name within the book. Max, within your corporate legal department, was amazing to work with and we were able to secure the necessary approval resulting in the Disney name/brand being included in my book.

In both 2020 and 2021 I presented at the [Lavender Law](#) conference on the topic if LGBTQ+ curriculums in schools and the near extinction of so called "no promo homo" laws. The first session was titled Extreme or [Essential: Understanding the Shifting Legal Landscape of LGBTQ-specific Community Inclusion in U.S. School Curricula](#) and the second was [Advocacy with a Drawl, Y'all: A Case Study in Southern "No Promo Homo" Laws](#). Both panels included amazing attorneys and advocates from across the country who were advocates for all youth, not just queer youth. A big shout out to Attorney [Shannon Mintor](#), of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, and [Dr. Caitlin Ryan](#), of



the Family Acceptance Project, for their invaluable insight and decades long work toward making this world a safer place for queer youth in school, places of worship, and within their own families.

This batch of laws came out as a response to the HIV/AIDS crisis that started in the early 1980s. Somehow elected officials at the time believed that if educators didn't talk about LGBTQ+ issues at school then somehow (miraculously) kids wouldn't realize they were LGBTQ+. But these laws neglected to take into account the computers and internet which were already making the world a smaller place and allowing us to build our communities and chosen families in a new virtual space. The cat was already out of the bag and none of the states who passed such laws showed a decrease in the number of LGBTQ+ folk living within their communities.

Enter Florida in February 2022, vying to reconstitute these old tropes of LGBTQ+ indoctrination in Disney's backyard. The [Florida House passed](#) the "Parental Rights in Education law" or so called "Don't Say Gay" bill.

Disney was silent.

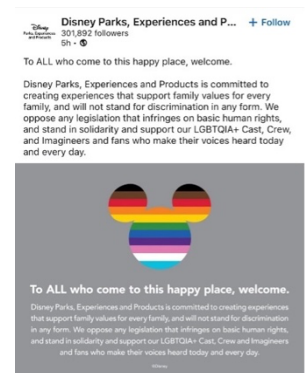
Then in March 2022 the [Florida Senate passes](#) the "Don't Say Gay" bill. Still, Disney remains silent. As the largest employer in the state (and very likely the largest employer of LGBTQ+ folk in the state as-well) we hoped that you'd stand up for us, our families, and our communities. How can Disney World be the happiest place on earth when merely referencing the existence of an LGBTQ+ family or family member in the education space could result in an educator losing their job, being sued, and/or arrested for violating this (unconstitutional) law.

As pressure from Disney's silence grew. I asked my friends at Disney what was going on and everyone was just as confused as the rest of us onlookers. Then there was the public declaration that Disney would pause making any/all political contributions. Hmm... there was only one party pushing for this law and not even every member of that party voted in support of it ( I see you [Sen. Jeff Brandes](#), R-St. Petersburg, and Sen. [Jennifer Bradley](#), R-Fleming Island two Republican senators who voted against the bill). Why penalize those who are for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ peoples and their families in the classroom? After mounting pressure Disney CEO Bob Chapek wrote in a memo to staff "Speaking to you, reading your messages, and meeting with you have helped me better understand how painful our silence was. It is clear that this is not just an issue about a bill in Florida, but instead yet another challenge to basic human rights. You needed me to be a stronger ally in the fight for equal rights and I let you down. I am sorry." The lackluster response from senior leadership inspired employees to stage a "Disney Do Better" full-day walkout across Disney properties on March 22, 2022.



Earlier this year, The Walt Disney Company proudly announced they had received a 100 score for the 16th year in a row on the [Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Corporate Equality Index](#), the nation's foremost benchmarking survey and report measuring corporate policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ workplace equality. Disney's efforts to that point had satisfied all of the CEI's criteria earning the designation as one of the *Best Places to Work for LGBTQ+ Equality*. But from the perspective of Disney employees in April of 2022, they weren't feeling the love.

I/we don't expect allies to be perfect, but I/we do expect allies to not remain quiet when our youth, families, and communities are under attack. The tide has changed, and we appreciate Disney's most recent statement: "Our goal as a company is for this law to be repealed by the legislature or struck down in the courts, and we remain committed to supporting the national and state organizations working to achieve that .... We are dedicated to standing up for the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ members of the Disney family, as well as the LGBTQ+ community in Florida and across the country."



Your full-throated support to have the “Don’t Say Gay” bill repealed, hopefully by its effective date of July 1, 2022, has resulted in a significant and retaliatory backlash against you by the Florida legislature and Governor revoking the Walk Disney World special district status (one of 1,844 special districts within the state). I know it hurts but being an ally sometimes requires one to put themselves in harm’s way. Just like the abolitionists of the 1800s, male suffragists in the early 1900s, the Freedom Riders of the 1960s, and the cisgender heterosexual supporters of marriage equality in the 2000s the support and actions of our allies have made all the difference. Being the ally that you have shown yourself to be, here are some action items to consider adding to your ever-growing list:

### **Corporate Advocacy**

Lead the charge to repeal Florida’s Don’t Say Gay bill. In March 2016, North Carolina’s “bathroom bill” was signed into law prohibiting transgender and gender nonbinary people from using restrooms that correspond with their gender identity. The subsequent boycott was slated to devastate the North Carolina economy with an estimated cost to the state of more than \$3.76 billion in lost business over a dozen years, according to an [Associated Press analysis](#). However, that never came to pass because the boycott included not only individuals but over 400 companies including heavy hitters like PayPal, NBA, NCAA, Deutsche Bank, Lionsgate, Bruce Springsteen, Demi Lovado, and Wells Fargo.

*Be THE COMPANY spearheading and coordinating the charge along with both national and local LGBTQ+ organizations.*

### **Legislative Activism**

Did you know that [Kelley Baker](#), then Vice-President of Diversity at [General Mills](#), was the first company representative to testify in front of the U.S. House congressional committee (subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor & Pensions) in 2007 support of the passage of the Equality Act? I’m sure many folks within General Mills at the time were wondering why the company should get into this fight. General Mills is a wholesome all-American brand that was in virtually every home and loved by all, especially children. But it is for that exact reason that their involvement was so impactful. Children live in families and those families might have members that are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Equality for some within the household means nothing when there is not equality for all within the household. Disney is a brand that touches every household member, whether through music, shows, movies, cruises, or theme parks.

*Be vocal and present when discussions regarding equality are happening locally or nationally.*

### **Amicus Support**



Significant cases like [Obergefell v. Hodges](#) and [Bostock v Clayton County](#) change the lives of the LGBTQ+ community from coast to coast. The first allowed for marriage equality and the second outlawed employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Many [amicus briefs](#) were filed in [support of equality](#) in both cases. Supporting the development of these briefs were hundreds upon hundreds of companies. Disney has been one of those companies, so you have already been involved in this fight, much like your colleagues at American Airlines, Best Buy, CVS Health, Apple, Coca-Cola, and Wyndham Hotels. But waiting for a case to get to the state or federal supreme court can sometimes be too late. *Employ your advocacy from the very start of the conflict so there can be as minimal impact on the LGBTQ+ youth in question as possible.* (You can change the trajectory of Florida’s [Equality Profile](#) you have to just want it bad enough.)

### **Orlando – LGBT Crisis Community Center**

Mickey Mouse’s Florida home is in Orlando. That is the city where your empire resides. Orlando is also home to one of the [largest LGBTQ+ populations](#) in the U.S. [The Center Orlando](#) is one of the few places within the city where any member of the LGBTQ+ community can walk in and feel safe, and seen for who they are.

*Is there a reason why this center isn't named after, and sponsored by, Mickey Mouse (much like the Ronald McDonald house)?*

These types of centers are the lifeblood of our community. It's where we go to build community, secure affirming health care, find shelter, and seek refuge when under attack. Your support of your local center would make all the difference in the lives of your local community who now feel unwelcome in a place they have always called home.

### **Make GayDayS® a Disney Sanctioned Event**

Reports show that the first [GayDayS®](#) (#RedShirtDay) event took place in 1991 where roughly 3,000 members of the LGBTQ+ community went to Disney World in Florida donning red shirts while visiting the world's most popular theme parks. Now GayDayS® attracts over 180,000+ celebrants from across the nation and around the globe! It's my understanding that GayDayS® is not formally a Disney sanctioned event.

### **Double Up on Supplier Diversity Efforts**

A nationwide boycott of the State of Florida due to the passage and implementation of the "Don't Say Gay Bill" could have a devastating impact on the state's economy, especially small businesses. We love that you have a robust and thriving [supplier diversity program](#). Now would be the time to lean into that. [Black](#), [Women](#), and [LGBTQ](#) - owned businesses were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and a boycott could be a death knell for many who survived. These are communities with already lower employment levels than their counterparts...



*Disney, as the largest employer in the state, could commit to double up on all their supplier diversity spend with minority, women, veteran, disability, and LGBTQ+ owned businesses over the course of this equality battle.*

This added commitment could be the much-needed lifeline needed for these small businesses to survive.

### **Ensure Youth Have Access to LGBTQ+ History**



The resurgence of book banning is so disheartening. Especially when I've kids across the country who are demanding that a more diverse history be taught in their schools. There are 4,269 public schools within the state of Florida. It would make a significant impact for young people across your flagship state (and the nation) to have access to LGBTQ+ history in their libraries, even if educators can't reference us in the classrooms. Disney has already reviewed and vetted Our Gay History in Fifty States. In addition, the State of Illinois has approved our text as a resource for the history curriculum within their state.

In closing, Disney is in the business of deeply connecting with children and making them believe in magic. How can they believe in magic when their mere existence is being challenged? Below are some Disney quotes used to inspire kids. We hope these same words will inspire you.

**"Everything that made that giant tree is already contained inside this tiny little seed. All it needs is some time, a little bit of sunshine and rain, and voilà! Now, y-you might not feel like you can do much now, but that's just because, well, you're not a tree yet. You just have to give yourself some time. You're still a seed." – Flick**

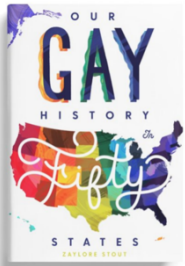
**"Ohana means family, family means nobody gets left behind. Or forgotten." - Stitch**

**"The things that make me different are the things that make me." – Piglet**

**"Your identity is your most valuable possession. Protect it." – Elastigirl**

**"Always let your conscience be your guide." -- The Blue Fairy**

**"Sometimes the right path is not the easiest one." -- Grandmother Willow (Pocahontas)**



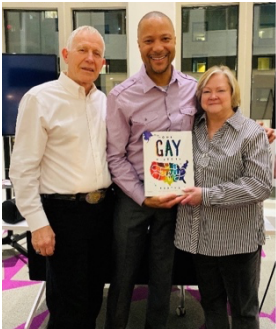
## Zaylore Stout

He/Him/His

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**Z – Do you have a paragraph on the Sheppard's and your relationship with them?**

“I feel it necessary to show the great nation that we live in that there doesn't need to be this kind of violence and hatred in our world. And that loving one another doesn't mean that we have to compromise our beliefs; it simply means that we choose to be compassionate and respectful of others.” - Judy Shepard