



ellen krug
writer, lawyer, human

Road Trip 4 Hope Report No. 4 February 7, 2018

Please excuse the length of this report; there is simply so much to share!

Yesterday—Day 8 of my speaking and listening road trip, #elliesroadtrip4hope—proved to be the most incredible day yet. And it happened at the most improbable place, Ole Miss Law School in Oxford, Mississippi.

Improbable because before yesterday, I stereotyped what people from Mississippi would be like, mainly that they would be intolerant of me, a transgender woman who doesn't "pass" entirely for female due to my still-masculine voice.

My experience at Ole Miss broke that stereotype. In fact, of the many law schools across America at which I've spoken, Ole Miss may be the school that's been most welcoming. Yes, you read that correctly.

The day started with me doing a radio interview on Mississippi Public Broadcasting with hosts Richard Gershon and Liz Gill, who host a weekly law-related show, "In Legal Terms." Richard, a former dean of the Law School who now teaches tax law, was exactly as I pictured a Southern older gentleman—tall, fit, salt and pepper wavy hair, very handsome, and quite charming. (Because the show is broadcast from a room in the Law School library but produced from the MPB studios in another city, I didn't get to personally meet Liz, but she certainly did a great job of moderating the show.)

I think the intent was that I'd speak about various legal issues involving LGBTQ people but for the most part, the entire hour consisted of taking calls and me explaining basic concepts, such as what does the "Q" in "LGBTQ" mean? (Answer, "queer" or "questioning"—to give recognition to those who are exploring their sexual or gender identities.)

The show attracted a lot of callers (as Liz put it, "Our call-in board has lit up"), many of whom were gay men (a big surprise for me). One caller expressed disdain over my use of "queer" because he felt it demeaning to him; he was followed by another gay man calling in to say he felt "queer" was quite appropriate because it captured his uniqueness.

A caller, "Ron from Tupelo," did fit a stereotype—he opined that notwithstanding my self-identity as female, I was still a man because, "You're basically saying that God made a mistake. No, God made you a man and that's what you are." He added that I

should accept that certain people would object to me on religious grounds and felt that if they owned a business, they had the right to refuse service to LGBTQ people because we've "chosen" to be who we are.

I was ready for Ron's point of view and while it hurt, it didn't trip me up. What I didn't expect at all was how other listeners would react to Ron's intolerant words.

Thus, "Dean" called to say it wasn't about God making mistakes. Instead, "God presents challenges," like children born with cleft palates or heart conditions—which we all accept need to be fixed. He then said that one's sexuality or gender identity was no different and that people should be able to "fix" themselves to live as who they are.

That was followed by "Nick" who shared about growing up with a birth mom and a step-mother and the discrimination his family faced. He shared that "things in Mississippi are changing very slowly" and had hope that eventually people would accept that everyone should be allowed to love who they want to love.

The way Nick explained his story so touched my heart that tears welled in my eyes. That tearing-up continued with the next caller, "Gary," who related that he was a sixty-four-year-old "compassionate conservative" with seven grandchildren. He complimented me for being open-minded and for not "thrusting" my opinions on others. He admired that I was willing to listen to others and appreciated my "gentler approach" to interacting with humans.

I have to say that Gary's words really melted my heart—because he "got" exactly who I am and what I am trying to do in the world by connecting all humans through compassion. That someone from Mississippi would "see" me for who I am (and then take the time to call in to say it) really blindsided me. I just didn't expect the degree of reciprocal compassion and humanity. Wow.

If you want to really get a sense of Mississippi, you can listen to the podcast of my interview/caller reactions here. (For readers of this on the PDF, Google "MPB online legal terms legal protections for lgbtq".) The show is 49 minutes long; to get to the heart of it when "Ron from Tupelo" calls and then how other listeners react, scroll to minute 28:30.

After the radio show, I met with OUTLaw (an LGBTQ law student group) members and allies and several faculty members for a luncheon meet and greet (about fifteen people, all the room could hold; I was told that they capped attendance and turned away many students who wanted to attend).

I looked around the room and saw many young women of color and the faces of folks who seemed genuinely happy that I was visiting Ole Miss. I spoke of my "roots" which included learning from Dr. King and Robert F. Kennedy that we have an obligation to work to make the world a better place. I then shared about how it was in the Mississippi Delta in 1966 that RFK first understood that people in America were starving due to poverty and how he then became a champion of all marginalized humans.

I also shared how the callers to the radio show that I'd just finished had so sparked my heart—how it gave me hope and made me feel as if I was totally wrong about the people of Mississippi.

In response, one of the faculty members shared an incredible story of how several years after 1964 when Robert Kennedy ordered federal troops to Ole Miss to protect the rights of black students (while serving as Attorney General under President Kennedy), RFK was invited to Ole Miss for the commemoration of a new building. As the story went, Bobby Kennedy received an incredible welcome from Ole Miss students (the same student body that had rioted against integration not so many years before). In fact, RFK later took his wife Ethel to Mississippi to show her the people of Mississippi weren't as Northerners believed. The professor went on to theorize that just like RFK, I was finding that the stereotypes of Mississippians were wrong.

The fact that someone would mention my name in the same sentence as my hero, Bobby Kennedy, was a bit overwhelming.

We also heard from another senior faculty member, Professor Mary Ann Connell, who so eloquently spoke of growing up as a liberal woman in a very conservative state. She related a story of meeting Barack Obama when he was a student at Harvard Law School, which years later led her to wear an "Obama for President" button to a meeting of very Republican women. Once more, my heart soared as I thought of the courage Professor Connell was modeling for law students who need to be shown the way.

From the students, I got great questions about how they could be better allies for transgender and gay/lesbian people. In turn, I spoke of my experience in Birmingham the day before where I heard the word, "fatigue," to describe how advocates for equity and justice were tiring from fighting a system that seeks to ignore (and oppress) people who are "other." I urged the students to remember their grit and resiliency and to not tire of the long fight ahead. "Take care of yourselves," I said. "So that you won't get fatigued, so that you won't tire of what's needed in our country."

Following the meet and greet, I gave a "Trans 101" presentation to a larger group of students and faculty. Again, more great questions and wonderful words of support for me and my work.

I drove away from Ole Miss elated at learning that I had been so wrong about the people of Mississippi. The enlightenment gave me *hope*—real, tangible, pulsing-through-my-veins *hope*—that just maybe, we can get past the divisions and legitimized grouping and labeling that's happening in America today. I would never have expected to learn this lesson in Mississippi. (My thanks to Bri and Cody, two OUTLaw board members, for making my day so successful!)

It was proof that getting in a car and showing up to *listen* makes all the difference. It's too bad that most of our elected officials can't do similar things.

Today I'm in Nashville where I'll speak at Vanderbilt Law School; afterward, I'll travel to Indianapolis where I will speak at McKinney Law School tomorrow, the last stop of what's become a wonderful learning experience for me.

Hope. How incredibly powerful. I am determined to speak of it and share it.

ellie

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