

Remarks by Dr. Joe Montella, Chief Medical Officer at the Inaugural Pride Event by the Cooper LGBTQ+ TRG, June 4, 2024

Good afternoon,

I want to thank Mr. O’Dowd for that wonderful introduction, and I want to acknowledge the work of Ardella Coleman, her team, and the entire leadership of the LGBTQ+ TRG for making this event a reality.

It is an honor and a privilege to be asked to deliver this address as we celebrate Gay Pride Month.

I thought about talking about the history of Gay Pride from 1969 to today, but when I rehearsed what I wrote, we would be here till tomorrow morning. So instead, I want this Pride talk to be a little bit different and focus on the connection between Pride and what it means to be a leader—with a little bit of history thrown in.

What exactly do we mean by the word, “Pride”? Not just gay pride, but pride in general.

Pride can be defined as

a feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one's own achievements, the achievements of those with whom one is closely associated, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired.

The history of Gay Pride is a testament to the strength and resilience of the LGBTQ+ community. It all began in the early hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. What started as a police raid turned into a seminal moment of empowerment, when ordinary people like Marsha P. Johnson, a trans woman, and people just like her, did extraordinary things to demand dignity and respect and which sparked the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement.

The first Pride march, held one year later in 1970 on the anniversary of Stonewall, was created to demonstrate the pride the community felt for those who stood up and demanded to have their humanity recognized. This first March marked the beginning of a tradition that has since spread worldwide, symbolizing unity and visibility.

To prepare for this address, I spoke to some of the TRG leaders who organized today’s event and asked them why they were proud to be a TRG leader and why they wanted to do this for our Cooper team. They felt pride that they could give back to the community to which they themselves or their family and friends belonged. They also felt pride in helping those who felt they had no place to go for dignified medical care. They shared stories of being proud to serve as a visible example to those at Cooper who were reluctant to be their authentic selves at work. And they were proud to learn through the various LGBTQ+ events they attended of the power of community and the care, concern, and humanity that was expressed openly every day by the people who volunteered at these events.

To quote Armistead Maupin, one of my favorite gay authors and creator of the Tales of the City series about being gay in the 70's and 80's, "The world changes in direct proportion to the number of people willing to be honest and proud about their lives." I think these statements from our TRG leaders supports what Maupin had to say and reminds us that by being proud of what we can do for people, we contribute to creating a world that is more understanding and accepting.

So, what am I proud of? In the introduction, Mr. O'Dowd mentioned that I wanted people to know that joining Cooper was one of the best decisions of my life and this is why.

I am proud that as a gay man, Cooper has given me the opportunity to stand before you as Chief Medical Officer at an event like this. As I grew older, I never dreamed that holding this position could be a reality for me.

I am proud that Cooper has made me feel that I belong and can serve as a role model to others so that they might feel that it is okay to be visible and be who are you so you can realize your full potential. I never had that kind of role models so I hope I can provide an example for others.

And I am extremely proud on a daily basis that I get to work with Cooper team members in all departments who can do things I could never dream of accomplishing--I am constantly in in awe of the talents that each of you possess to help our patients, our community and our colleagues.

I would like to return to the conversations I had with those leaders of the TRG regarding how they felt about being a leader of the group. One person commented to me that they really did not consider themselves a leader, since they were just being themselves and expressing the values by which they live every day. And they commented that since they didn't occupy a leadership position at the highest levels of Cooper, they didn't feel that they could affect sweeping change. I would reply to them with another question: Did Marsha P. Johnson and the others who stood up at Stonewall and felt like they had no place in society consider themselves leaders? Or did anyone else at the time? And yet, 55 years later, we acknowledge that they were. It is only through the lens of time that we can fully understand the effect that one person or a small group can have on the world. To that person who didn't think they were a leader I say, "Yes, you ARE a leader."

To me, leadership is not conferred by title or by educational degree. Every one of us can be a leader by virtue of doing what is right, by demonstrating care, concern, and compassion, and recognizing each other's humanity.

I encourage each of you to take this opportunity to reflect on your own experiences and the ways in which you can be a leader and contribute to creating a more inclusive and accepting world. Whether it is through advocacy, education, or simply being there for someone who needs support, whether an arm around the shoulder or a kind word, every action makes a difference.

So, Chris Winn, Justin Schweitzer, Heath Davis, Terese Vekteris, Kim Vaughn, Ryan Kirker, Jes Smith, Jeffrey Jin, Tonya Simpkins, Laroyce Miles, and Kaden Dick, you are all leaders, and we are all proud to know you as such. Not only for your work with the TRG, but also because of the pride you show in your community, and your commitment to making sure that our patients and team members know that you care.

In closing, I would like to leave you with a quote about leadership by Drew Dudley, who is the author of [This Is Day One](#) and an accomplished leadership coach. He says,

We've made leadership about changing the world, and there is no world; there's only six billion understandings of it. And if you change one person's understanding of it, one person's understanding of what they're capable of, one person's understanding of how much people care about them, one person's understanding of how powerful an agent for change they can be in this world, you've changed the whole thing.

To me, this quote beautifully encapsulates the power each of us holds in fostering acceptance and understanding, one person at a time. I ask you to be that leader, and to help Cooper achieve our Vision of being the best place to be a patient, the best place to work, and the best place to learn and practice medicine.

Thank you, and Happy Pride!