

**ADDRESS KEYNOTE: AUSTIN LGBTQ CHAMBER
STEVEN W. PEDIGO
LBJ SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN**

DELIVERED: DECEMBER 7, 2024

THANK YOUS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF CHAMBER'S IMPACT

Good evening and thank you so much. It's a huge honor to address this amazing gathering.

Before we dive in, I want to recognize the exceptional leadership of the Austin LGBTQ Chamber. Thank you to Tina Cannon for her vision and dedication, to her talented staff for their hard work, and to Board Chair Andrew Peters and the Board of Directors for their steadfast commitment to the Chamber's mission. Together, your efforts have been instrumental in the Chamber's success and impact.

I'd like to acknowledge Mayor Kirk Watson for his steadfast support and advocacy for Austin's LGBTQ community. His leadership embodies Austin's values of inclusivity and progress, driving positive change for everyone who calls our city home.

Austin is prospering, and so is the Austin LGBTQ Chamber. Over the past year, you've welcomed 100 new members, growing by more than a third. That's real momentum, and it's happening because of your hard work.

Nationwide, LGBTQ people and businesses contributed an incredible \$1.7 trillion to the U.S. economy last year. That speaks volumes about our community's economic power—a power that is reflected here in Austin, one of the largest and most vibrant LGBTQ populations in the country. That's not just something to celebrate—it's something to build on as we continue to create opportunity and progress for everyone.

Through initiatives like the Pride in Local Music Festival, scholarships for LGBTQ students, and partnerships with the business community, you're not just supporting LGBTQ-owned businesses—you're helping to lay the foundations of a better, more inclusive Austin.

One initiative that deserves special mention is DECA, or the Diversity Ethnic Chamber Alliance, a partnership between the LGBTQ, Black, Hispanic, and young chambers. It's a blueprint for bringing diverse communities together to amplify their economic and social impacts. Its effects are already being felt here in Austin and it is a model for other cities.

On this night of celebration, there is much to be proud of.

TODAY'S POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

But there is a however and I would be remiss to the point of disingenuousness if I didn't acknowledge the elephant in the room. We are facing political headwinds that threaten the decades of gains we've made. Like the extreme weather Texas has been experiencing, it's more than likely that those headwinds will be with us for a while—for the next four years, at the very least.

As we await the inauguration, many of us feel frozen in a limbo of dread, bracing ourselves for what might come next. Nationally, our community could face a rollback of LGBTQ+ rights, including bans on discussing LGBTQ+ issues in schools, denial of gender-affirming healthcare, bathroom bans, and even the potential loss of marriage equality.

And, as big-hearted and generous as the vast majority of Texans may be, our state's political class has never been exactly welcoming to us either. During the last legislative session, some lawmakers filed three dozen bills targeting gay and non-binary people. And we can expect more of the same when the legislature convenes again next month.

I am not here to downplay those worries; I am struggling with them myself.

But when I look back over the decades to my own experiences growing up gay in Texas and then ahead to a world in which the current political leadership is no longer in power, I see many reasons for hope, and I want to share three of them with you tonight, which are that diversity matters, local matters, and that we can never stop fighting.

At my core, I'm a cities person.

I believe that positive, impactful change happens at the local level, especially in partnership with organizations like yours.

Urban economic development, like human rights advocacy, is a long game. It plays out over decades rather than years, so people in my field tend to take a longer view.

MY STORY—THE BEGINNING

My own story begins in Lumberton, a small town in what's called the Southeast Texas Golden Triangle, whose points are the cities of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange, and whose night skies are lit up with the gas flares from the region's many oil refineries. ZZ Top's

Billy Gibbons, one of the triangle's most famous native sons, famously quipped that they call it the Golden Triangle "because it sounds much more romantic than 'petrochemical wasteland.'"

My father, who spent most of his adult life dressed in a red Halliburton coverall working in oil fields across the state, died when I was just starting high school. A lot of my classmates found high-paying wage work doing what he did after we graduated, but my mother insisted that my sister and I go to college. So, in 1997—the same year the Austin LGBTQ Chamber was founded—I started at the University of Texas at Austin.

For a wide-eyed 18-year-old from the Golden Triangle, it was a brave new world, full of possibilities. UT's student body was eight times larger than Lumberton's whole population, and Austin, which had already embarked on its steep trajectory of growth and was sprouting skyscrapers, was the biggest city I'd ever seen.

My sophomore year, *Fortune* magazine rated Austin America's best city for doing business.

Inc. ranked Austin among the top five U.S. metros by startup rates, and *Industry* named it one of its top ten "world-class manufacturing areas."

South by Southwest was gaining steam, cementing Austin's brand at the intersection of design and tech.

And for all that, the city's "weird" hippy vibe was still much more than a slogan. On any given night, you could walk into the Continental Club, the Broken Spoke, the Elephant Room, or any of Austin's other legendary venues and hear the likes of James McMurtry, Jerry Jeff Walker, Alejandro Escovedo, and Gary P. Nunn. Robert Earl Keen, Sheryl Crow, and Travis Tritt headlined the 22nd season of Austin City Limits.

Austin was a wide-open place, filled with new experiences. For a gay small-town teenager like me, it was a revelation. For the first time in my life, I felt like I could be myself.

Austin ignited my passion for cities and my professional interest in the mysteries of regional urban economic growth. After graduating from UT, I went to graduate school at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where I studied with the urban theorist Richard Florida, a black T-shirt-wearing economic geographer who had just published a best-selling book.

LESSON 1: DIVERSITY MATTERS

Carnegie Mellon was where I gained my first big insight into what makes cities successful. Cities that welcome diversity—LGBTQ communities, minorities, immigrants, artists, and people with different cognitive styles—thrive.

Richard's *The Rise of the Creative Class* vividly described what I had seen and experienced in Austin and what was just beginning to unfold in Pittsburgh: the surge of new growth driven by technology and knowledge industries. Those industries flourish in cities that know how to attract and retain talented people.

At the heart of the ability to attract talent is an inclusive, welcoming community. Urban diversity provides fertile ground for creativity and innovation, the lifeblood of the knowledge economy.

This idea became a blueprint for economic and urban development. As the *Washington Monthly* put it in the headline it ran over an excerpt from Richard's book, "Cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race."

The point wasn't that gay people or guitar players dominate tech fields—it was that techies want to live in vibrant, open-minded, fun places. Urban diversity sends a clear signal to entrepreneurs and innovators that this city is tolerant, exciting, and a great place to live, work, play, find friends and romantic partners, and build businesses.

My work with Richard would shape my career. After I received my degree, we collaborated for more than two decades on research and consulting projects that helped communities across the globe—from Jerusalem and Buenos Aires to Denver, Miami, Newark, and Duluth—build economies that were more creative and inclusive.

Our first principle was simple yet transformative: *the soul of a successful city stems from its people*. The essence of urban economic development, we told our clients, is about fostering diversity, building communities where everyone belongs, and creating places where people can truly be themselves.

Over and over again, our work showed me the incredible power of inclusion, the arts, and grassroots development as drivers of urban economic growth.

Hello, San Francisco, Berlin, London, Tel Aviv, Boston, DC, and New York. And welcome to Austin. You, your friends, our advocates, and our community are why Austin is what it is—a

vibrant, creative, innovative hub, and, dare I say it, a superstar city.

LESSON 2: LOCAL MATTERS

In 2014, I moved to the New York City area to join the faculty at NYU's Schack Institute, where I founded and ran NYU's Urban Lab in Midtown Manhattan. There, I trained graduate and undergraduate students in economic development and placemaking while creating and directing an executive education program for real estate professionals.

Studying and teaching in New York—and working alongside some of the most innovative developers in the world—brought home a second core truth and lesson: that *cities are where the action is*. At the local level, you can move fast and engage multiple sectors to solve problems.

The transformation of New York City over the past two decades illustrates the power of this kind of local collaboration. Take the remarkable rebirth of downtown Manhattan. After the devastation of 9/11, developers, community-based organizations, and local leaders came together to reimagine and rebuild. Before 9/11, the Wall Street area was famously deserted at night. Today, it's a vibrant 24/7 community, with cutting-edge placemaking and art installations, and innovative approaches to community and affordable housing.

Or consider New York's emergence as a technology hub. Not traditionally known as a center for tech, the city set a bold goal to position itself as a leader in the field. Public/private investments in livability and placemaking like the High Line have drawn attention from all over the world. Take the High Line, the linear park built on the abandoned elevated train tracks that run from Manhattan's old meatpacking district to its west side rail yards, which sparked an explosion of starchitect-designed residential and office buildings. Or Cornell Tech—a partnership between Cornell University and Tel Aviv's Technion-Israel Institute of Technology—which gave New York the equivalent of a Stanford, an MIT, or a UT Austin to anchor its high-tech and bio-tech ecosystem. Today, New York is the second-largest center for venture capital and startup activity in the world.

These stories of locally-driven change and reinvention show what cities can achieve.

LESSON 3: WE HAVE TO FIGHT FOR OUR CITIES

In 2019, I became a born-again Texan when I returned to UT and Austin to launch the Urban Lab at the LBJ School of Public Affairs.

My husband Brian and I were two data points in a massive trend. Since 2010, Texas has been adding 1,095 new residents every day, clocking a growth rate that is double the national average. When I was a student at UT, Texas's population was just over 20 million; today, it has surpassed 30 million. Metro Austin's growth has been even more spectacular, nearly doubling to 2.2 million.

It was that growth rate that drew me back to Texas—and it underscores my third point for you tonight: *that we can never stop fighting, as we must be the change agents in our cities.*

With its 26 metropolitan regions, three of the ten largest cities in America, and eight of its fastest-growing, Texas is one of the world's greatest natural experiments in urban development. As such, it's also the perfect place to learn from its best and its worst practices.

And Texas has plenty of examples of both. While its low-tax, low-regulation environment has attracted huge companies and entrepreneurs, the state has also followed some troubling paths when it comes to livability, sustainability, education, health, and human services.

Like Silicon Valley and Seattle—regions that have contributed many new residents to Austin—our Texas cities, and Austin in particular, face what I call a “California problem.” Increasingly, our communities are plagued by housing unaffordability, traffic congestion, and economic segregation.

My work at the Urban Lab and with my partner Laura Huffman at our consulting company Civic Sol has shown me that with sufficient will and determination, all those challenges can be confronted and resolved. It happens when organizations like the LGBTQ Chamber weigh in on critical issues like affordability and economic segregation. It happens when city leaders and stakeholders look beyond their own borders for other places' best practices and adapt them. It happens when we experiment—scaling what works and moving on from what doesn't.

Cities are still places of hope for me, especially Texas cities. Though our current generation of state leaders may be looking to stifle local innovation in deference to the rural old guard

that is threatened by the rise of multicultural urban centers, and to turn back the clock on so many social issues, that's not how Texas got to where it is.

The state's changing demographics give me even more hope. For every new white resident over the last decade, Texas welcomed three Black, three Asian, three multiracial residents, and eleven Hispanic residents. More than 95 percent of new Texans are people of color. Beyond our great barbecue, what brings all those people here are the same things that drew me back: economic opportunity, affordability, and diversity—not just of races and ethnicities, but of ways of life.

And though you wouldn't know it from the romanticized view of Texas as a state of ranchers and oil wildcatters, 90 percent of us live in cities or metro areas. Many of us—gay and straight, cis and trans, white, Black, and brown—are proudly different. Weird, even.

Step by step, piece by piece, we can build a better future, provided we are willing to work for it. LGBTQ Texans are already doing more than our share to create communities that are open, tolerant, supportive, and economically dynamic.

For all the uncertainties we face, here's one thing you can take to the bank: without us, Texas would be less innovative and creative.

CLOSING

A few last thoughts in closing.

Texas's demography, economy, growth, and natural resources make us a place to watch. For better and for worse, our state is America in microcosm.

A few years back, I wrote in *The New York Times* that "Texas is the future of America." I understand that the very idea that Texas could be a herald of the national future is terrifying for many liberals and moderates, and for good reason. But it doesn't have to be a curse. It can be a blessing.

The question is whether we can overcome the challenges created by our past and our current backlash and make our cities economic, creative, and social standard-bearers.

If we embrace this moment—investing in our people, fostering innovation, and leading with inclusiveness—Texas can be the model for a better, brighter, and more equitable future for everyone.

That is what the LGBTQ chamber does every day, and we can see the results around us.

It gives me hope, and I hope it gives you hope too.

Thank you and good night.

##