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## Guest column: For Pride Month, a call to advocacy

**Luis G. Pedraja** Worcester Telegram & Gazette

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Each June our nation celebrates Pride Month, an acknowledgement of our LGBTQIA+ community that began in the late 1960s after a series of gay liberation protests known as the Stonewall riots. This year the commemoration is particularly poignant as this is the 20-year anniversary of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts.

Yet for all the hard-fought victories for equality and justice for our LGBTQIA+ community, the harsh reality is that there are hundreds of anti-LGBTQIA+ bills in state legislatures across the country and over 70 anti-LGBTQIA+ laws that have been enacted in various states, many of these new laws targeting gender-affirming care. Violence against those who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community is on the rise and in May, the U.S. State Department issued a worldwide security alert due to potential for attacks on LGBTQIA+ people and events.

It pains me greatly to hear about the discrimination, the racist microaggressions and sheer violence that has been, and continues to be inflicted upon the LGBTQIA+ community. I was witness to this discrimination early in my life, long before I came to fully understand what it all meant. Many years later, while in graduate school and when I also served as a pastor of a church — yes, I am an ordained minister and theologian — I listened to the anguish of those who could not be true to their gender identity, gender expression, gender nonconforming or sexuality. While these are the lived experiences of others, they deeply troubled me and had a profound effect on my life.

Today, as the president of an inner-city community college, I am guided by my deep conviction that people should be free to live their authentic lives by recognizing the unique identities and cultures that enrich our collective community through dialogue, workshops and policies.

At Quinsigamond Community College, we are implementing policies such as a lived name policy, which is designed to protect and recognize community members by the name that they self-identify with in their daily life, interactions and communications. It is crucial that we

acknowledge and respect how members of our QCC community wish to be addressed and treated.

No one should ever find themselves in a position where their identity is disregarded or overlooked. Therefore, through this policy, we are dedicated to ensuring that everyone's identity is respected and recognized. This policy demonstrates our commitment to cultivating a climate where all individuals feel welcome and safe to represent themselves unapologetically and authentically in every aspect of campus life.

While last month Massachusetts celebrated the 20th anniversary of legalized same-sex marriage, the first in the nation, paving the way for the legalization of same-sex marriage in all 50 states 11 years later, the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community continue to be challenged.

Discrimination and attacks on the LGBTQIA+ community, along with attempts to erode their hard-earned rights, are becoming more commonplace. Furthermore, in some states, new laws are preventing educators from addressing topics and restricting what students learn. These laws are imposing individual values and beliefs on all, while silencing the dissent of others. Thus, rather than broadening our knowledge, we are limiting it.

People should be free to live authentic lives, to be who they truly are and not be discriminated against. As educators we need to lead the way in encouraging constructive discourse and create inclusive communities where we all belong and are educated freely and without censorship. We must remember that silence can be deadly as history has shown us repeatedly.

I strongly urge you to help raise awareness by not only learning but also advocating for accurate IDs, civil rights, free speech and expression, inclusive health care, public accommodations and schools that are inclusive in all education discussions, sports and activities.

As we celebrate Pride Month, it is vitally important that we continue to raise awareness, challenge discriminatory practices that denigrate any human being, and share in the task of supporting our entire community. We must continue to expose ourselves to multiple perspectives. Knowledge is the antidote to bias and discrimination; ignorance breeds it. We must be examples for our community and work on education that breeds inclusivity not divisiveness.

At QCC we fully support our students and their unique stories and lived experiences. The right to be heard, to learn, to love and to be acknowledged should never be stifled regardless of age,

gender, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation — everyone should have the right to be their authentic self.

*Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College.*