

Alaska, It Is Time To Do Right by Senator Georgianna Lincoln

In May 2001, spurred by the February paintball attacks against Alaska Natives, Governor Knowles created the Governor's Commission on Tolerance. This summer and fall I traveled not only my vast Senatorial district, but throughout the state as a member of the Commission. Listening to the heart-rending stories of Alaskans of varied backgrounds, it became clear that the scope of intolerance and discrimination within our state is not limited to any one highly publicized and shocking incident. Rather it is a pervasive and deeply damaging problem we can no longer deny, downplay or ignore.

The majority of Alaskans are good neighbors with good hearts. In the wake of the September 11th attacks on New York and Arlington, VA., I read with great pride how Alaskans contributed to the relief effort. Urban and Rural Alaskans alike offered their prayers, donated food, emptied their pockets, and some even made the long journey to volunteer their labor. Overwhelmingly, Alaskans can be counted on to do the right thing.

Alaskans are also hard working and busy with our own lives. While sympathetic to the plight of others, we are not always as informed or involved as we should be. Many believe that time is on the side of goodness. Someone else, somewhere must be fighting to overcome intolerance, discrimination and hatred. However, I recall Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call to action:

*"I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. . .human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. . . **We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.**"*

Alaskans have seen actions of ill-willed people long before February 2001 and September 11th. From 1993 to early 2001, 81 bias/hate-motivated incidents were reported *in Anchorage alone*. In 1999 the FBI received 7,876 bias/hate-motivated incident reports nationwide. After the devastating offenses of February and September, hate crimes continue throughout our state and our country.

It is time for discrimination and hatred to end, and it is time for Alaskans to join together in declaring, "Not in our town and Not in our State!" It is time for Alaskans, individually and collectively, to take action:

- Speak up when we encounter discrimination and support others who do.
- Participate in community forums/groups that promote dialogue and understanding among different peoples. These forums/groups must be encouraged to welcome *everyone* to the table.

- Lobby elected leaders on legislation intended to foster tolerance and deter discrimination and hatred. Bills currently under consideration include an Alaska History Education Bill (House Bill 171) and bias/hate crime legislation (Senate Bill 163 and Senate Bill 200).

In sum, be aware and stay involved. There is still a great deal of work to be done.

To date, no legislation has passed both the House and Senate that *increases* the penalty for hate crimes. Bills introduced by the Governor (SB 200) and myself (SB 163) would do so, but to get them passed we must have bi-partisan support. These two bills do not discriminate, they protect *all* victims of bias/hate-motivated crimes.

The Governor's Commission on Tolerance will release a report in late November highlighting our findings and recommendations. I encourage all Alaskans to read this report which will be available on-line at www.gov.state.ak.us/tolerance. As citizens of this great state and country, founded on the principles of equality and justice, these findings should be appalling to each of us. However, the recommendations set forth by the Commission should provide a clear path to follow in order to overcome intolerance, discrimination and hatred. Do not shelve this report in a dusty corner, and do not allow your elected leaders to dispose of it similarly. It is inherent in our duties as leaders and as Alaskans to defend all of our citizens and strive to transcend intolerance, discrimination and hatred. It is time to do right.

Democratic Senator Georgianna Lincoln resides in Rampart, Alaska. First elected to the Alaska House of Representatives in 1990, Senator Lincoln has served in the State Senate since 1992.