

It is an honor to be here on the NH Women's Day of Action and Unity, on a day when women from all over the country are marching in Washington to make sure that our stories are heard. Stories, as you can imagine, are very important to me. It is through stories that we ask questions, seek truth, and change minds. So today, I am here to tell you three of my own personal stories.

The first takes place in 1983, when I was a freshman at Princeton. I was homesick and looking for something to be a part of. My only experience with rowing was seeing the crew shells on Lake Carnegie and thinking it looked pretty, but I went to the coach and asked if they needed help. The women's team, I learned, already had a manager, but the men's heavyweight team did not. The coach invited me to their practice. I learned later that was because he never expected me to show up. But I did, and became the

only female member of the men's heavyweight crew team at Princeton, and the first woman to ever set foot in a men's boat. To learn the sport, our coach put me in as a coxswain during practices with the rower least likely to dump me overboard when I screwed up – the same rower I eventually married. Since then, Princeton has had female managers and female coxswains. When I joined the team, I wasn't doing it to change history. I was doing it to change MY story. Which, coincidentally, is exactly how institutional change happens.

The second story I'm going to tell you happened in 2009, when my eldest son, Kyle, was applying to colleges. He handed me a draft of his application essay for feedback. In the essay, he came out. I read it over and looked at him and said, "So do you want to talk about the content, or the grammar?" He said "Both!" I gave Kyle a hug. I told him

that I didn't love him any less because he was gay, and that I couldn't love him any more if he wasn't. At the time that this happened, I was writing a book called SING YOU HOME, about gay rights in the United States. Suddenly I wasn't just an author – I was a mom on a mission. I was proud to live in a state that was supportive of gay couples. Then, in 2012, the House Judicial Committee attempted to repeal NH's marriage equality bill. I joined a bipartisan group called Standing Up For NH Families, to do whatever it took to prevent the repeal. I spoke in New Hampshire and in Washington DC with Senator Shaheen. And when the effort to repeal failed, I celebrated. And I celebrated even harder when, two years later, the love of Kyle's life got down on one knee on a paddleboard and proposed to him. Kevin had grown up in New Jersey, and at the time of their engagement, they could not have gotten married in his

home state had they wanted to. But they chose New Hampshire – because of its steadfast support of gay marriage, and because they feel welcome here. By the time they got married at Mount Washington this past October, marriage equality was the law of the land. As my husband and I walked Kyle down the aisle at the height of fall colors, I remembered how the pillars of the White House had been washed in a rainbow of lights the night after the Supreme Court decision. I cried that night. I loved knowing that my state was one of those that paved the way for a generation of children who will never know a time that two men or two women could not marry.

The last story involves writing my most recent novel, *Small Great Things*. Twenty years ago, I had tried to write a book about racism, and I had failed miserably.

Obviously, I'm white. What could I possibly tell people of

color about their lives that they don't already know? I questioned if I even had the right to write a story about racism. Then I read a news story about an African American nurse in Michigan named Tonya Battle, who had delivered a baby and in the aftermath, the baby's father said he didn't want her or anyone like her to touch that baby. He pushed up his sleeve to reveal a swastika tattoo; he was a White Nationalist. The hospital put a post it note in the baby's file, saying no African American personnel could touch the infant. The nurse sued and settled out of court. But I wondered – what if. What if she'd been alone with the baby and had to choose between following orders or saving a baby's life ? What if she wound up on trial, defended by a white public defender who – like me – like my friends – would never call herself a racist? Suddenly I realized I could and would finish THIS novel. I wasn't

writing it to tell people of color what their lives are like – that’s never going to be my story to tell. I was writing to people who look like me, with light skin, who can easily point to a white supremacist and say “That’s a racist” but can’t point to themselves and say the same.

I couldn’t ask my readers to consider their own racism, though, unless I’d considered it myself. I went to a racial justice workshop and left in tears every night. I met with women of color, who told me their stories: the girl who carried around a Vassar water bottle on the train, so that as white people walked by they would know she was safe. The mom who was frantic the day after the shooting of another unarmed Black man by the police. She was carrying her infant son and kept asking me, “How do I keep him safe when he grows up? How do I teach him to not be Black?” For fifty years of my life I had not thought about

racism because I don't have to. But for the first time, I understood that this, in and of itself, is a privilege. I learned, writing this book, that even if we don't talk about racism, that doesn't mean we with light skin are not part of the problem. I learned that it's more important to talk about it knowing we are going to make mistakes – and learn from them – than to not talk about it at all. And I learned that the role of the ally is to USE that privilege we have and do good with it.

This is why I am here today. Because everybody has a story, and the way to move the needle forward progressively is to make sure that they are all heard. If you are any combination of white, male, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, socio-economically secure - you always have a podium. SOMEONE always listens to what you have to say. Sometimes the best thing you can do with that

privilege is say, “HELLO? ARE YOU ALL LISTENING?” and then pass the microphone to someone who has been historically marginalized. Amplify their voice, so others can hear their story.

We in NH are not in the habit of going in reverse. We have the backs of those who are less fortunate – who may be struggling for health care, for clean air and clean water, for racial equality, for a fair wage, for justice. We are in this together. And we know that change does not come from the top down, but from the bottom up. From the first woman to step into a traditionally male position. From those men who pledged their love to one another long before my son did, and waited for the law to catch up to them. From nurses like Tonya Battle, who were not willing to let hate keep her from doing her job.

Malcolm X said, “When we change I to WE, even ILLNESS becomes WELLNESS.”

We call today a DAY OF ACTION. But it is more than that. It is just the beginning. Don’t go home and sink into complacency. Change does not come from a single march. It comes from vigilance, passion, and accountability. It comes from doing the hard and necessary work of standing up for those who are being pushed down. It comes from speaking the truth until you find someone who will listen. It comes from those of us who refuse to be silenced.

I believe that Love is Love. That Black Lives Matter. That no human is illegal. That Climate Change is real. That women’s rights are human rights. That kindness is stronger than hate.

I believe there is only one direction for this country to go, and it is FORWARD.

I believe that WE are a force to be reckoned with.

I believe ALL our stories deserve to be told.

And I KNOW that when we raise our voices in solidarity to tell them, we will be heard.

Thank you.