On a muggy May night in 2013 in Greenwich Village, New York, 32-year-old Mark Carson left a tavern after a typical night playing pool with friends. After an unidentified suspect directed a series of offensive slurs at him, Carson was shot in the face at point-blank range and died on the scene. ***(NEXT)*** This tragic story reported by **New York Daily News** in May of 2013 may sound like one of the many racially based hate crimes that have occurred in our country recently. Though Carson identified as an African American, the offensive slurs directed at him by his murderer were not associated with the color of his skin, but rather with his sexuality.***(NEXT)*** As people associated with a inclusivity-minded university such as UW-La Crosse, it is not only desirable but also necessary that we are aware of this prevalent issue and are able to take action so that no human being feels uncomfortable or unsafe due to their identity. Hate incidents against the LGTBQ community have an underestimated presence in our society and are considered acceptable and “normal” by many people. However, the elimination of this detriment to our society can be achieved through persistent education, understanding, and time. ***(NEXT)***

 Let’s first explore the depth of hate and bias incidents against the LGTBQ community. **The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs** reported in a 2013 article that 2,016 incidents of violence against members of the LGTBQ community took place in 2012 alone. That’s about six incidents of reported violence nationwide every day. This does not include violent incidents that went unreported because the victim was afraid or ashamed, nor does it include words or actions of hate and bias that left scars not on the bodies but on the minds of the victims. It seems that legislation protecting these individuals is also severely lacking. **American progress.org**, a website centered around bringing difficult topics to the attention of the people, reported that as of October 2013 only 15 states and Washington D.C. had laws addressing hate or bias crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity. These issues may seem like a national issue, and the anecdote at the beginning of this oration may seem like a tragic but far-removed event from La Crosse, Wisconsin. But would you believe me if I told you that to-date in the 2014-2015 school year, 57 hate or bias incidents have taken place right here on the La Crosse campus? This information is according to the **Campus Climate website** updated automatically every five minutes here at UWL. Of these 57 incidents, 36 were based on sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Clearly, this is a relevant issue not only to the nation but to our own community. ***(NEXT)*** Now, let’s put these statistics in perspective. How many of you in this room have a friend or family member who identifies with the LGTBQ community? Imagine for a moment that this person faced daily discrimination and bias just by being themselves. It’s well-known that depression, self-harm, and even suicide may ensue from harassment. With such destructive effects, it is deeply saddening that situations such as these are still occurring.

 You may be asking yourselves why these incidences are so common yet relatively unspoken. **The National Crime Prevention Council** reported in 2001 that hate crimes occur for various reasons. The attacker may be uneducated and have misconceptions about the target. The attacker may also feel the need to look down on others to compensate for their own self-esteem, or the attacker may even have been the target of hate or bias in the past and see it acceptable to do the same to others. Specific to the topics of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression hate and bias are also cultural values people are raised with or are exposed to, such as a religion or political affiliation that opposes same sex relationships. Because debates concerning the legal rights, insurance coverage, and other equality issues of these individuals are mainstream topics in our society, it may be that we are consequently numb as a whole to the blatant opposition and bias that people of these identities receive on a regular basis. Hearing an African American individual being referred to as the “N-word” would be considered outdated and vulgar. Making hateful remarks about a person’s religion would be considered disrespectful and closed-minded and is in fact a constitutional violation of our right to freely practice religion. Why, then, is it acceptable, socially and sometimes lawfully, to attack a person based on their gender identity or sexual orientation? It’s not. ***(NEXT)***

 If this very pertinent societal issue motivates you to take action as much as it does me, there are many ways that you can take action. Most obviously, communicate this issue to your legislators so they may introduce and pass legislation punishing discrimination against the LGBTQ community. Next, educate yourselves. Right here on our campus, we have many opportunities to educate others and ourselves about the LGTBQ community and equality. Enroll in a diversity-related course next semester through the department of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, join one of the many campus diversity organizations such as Broadening Horizons or Rainbow Unity, participate in diversity education programs through the residence halls or campus, or partake in a peaceful demonstration at the clock tower. Use these opportunities to become a better-educated individual and to reduce acts of hate and bias on our campus and in the United States. When taking into account these social equality issues, remember that individuals who belong to the LGTBQ community are our fellow students, friends, and family members. Know that if you see an act of hate or bias, doing nothing to support the victim or victims is equivalent to agreeing with the aggression. Hate is not a UWL value, nor is it a human value.

 Fortunately, the negative headlines and societal prejudices are not the only dimension to the LGTBQ movement. On the cover of the June 2014 edition of TIME Magazine stands transgender Orange is the New Black star Laverne Cox. Recognized by the magazine as one of today’s 21 top influential transgender individuals, Laverne Cox is the first transgender person to be nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award in the acting category and a proud advocate of the transgender rights movement. She serves as an inspiration to many facing prejudice and difficulty, but more so as a symbol of momentum in the direction of freedom and equality for the LGTBQ community.

 You all have seen that acts of hate and bias against the LGTBQ community are sadly a prevalent part of our society, and there is a series of diverse reasons behind these acts. Most importantly, however, the solution rests in our hands through education, social involvement, and action on the momentum of change that exists in our society. Be a supporter. Be an activist. Be an ally. Be strong in the belief of an individual’s right to express themselves in their own way. When this happens, we as a united society stride one step closer to truly being a country providing liberty and justice for all. Thank you. ***(NEXT)***