

**GAY SOUTH FLORIDA**    MAY 16, 2016 1:10 PM

# Lehtinen family urges other parents to love, support transgender children

## HIGHLIGHTS

U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and husband Dexter introduced a campaign to support transgender family members

Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, now 30, came out as transgender during college and now works for LGBT group GLAAD

The transgender public service campaign was produced by SAVE, South Florida's leading LGBT-rights group



Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, husband urge parents to support transgender children 01:18





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Two of South Florida's most hard-boiled politicians — Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the fierce anti-Castro congresswoman who chaired the House Foreign Affairs committee, and her husband Dexter Lehtinen, once the region's acting U.S. attorney who prosecuted the likes of Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega and murderous religious sect leader Yaweh Ben Yaweh — dissolved into tears Monday as they spoke of their love for transgender son Rodrigo.

"I have to think of Vietnam," said Dexter Lehtinen, a wounded war veteran, as he regained his composure at a heavily attended Miami Dade College news conference. "I did not have that trouble in ranger school or in combat."

Rodrigo, the young man whose personal safety they once feared for, comforted his parents, gently teasing, "They always say, how did your dad react? He's a tough military veteran."

Laughter then eased the Lehtinens' discomfort.

"Family is Everything" - English



On behalf of LGBT-rights group SAVE, Ileana and Dexter introduced a bilingual (English- and Spanish-language) public service campaign in support of Rodrigo, who came out as transgender about seven years ago while a student at Brown University.

“Family is everything,” Ros-Lehtinen says in the same-titled English-language video. “Our son is transgender. We loved him as Amanda, and now as Rodrigo. ... At first, we had a lot of questions, but as parents we love and support our children.”

Adds Dexter Lehtinen: “We’re really proud of our son, Rodrigo,” now age 30 and membership manager for GLAAD, the national LGBT anti-defamation group.

SAVE’s companion, “La familia es todo,” offers the same message in Spanish.

"La familia es todo" - Español :30



Several of Miami-Dade’s most powerful education and political and leaders attended the news conference, including Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padron and Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez.

“The message is nondiscrimination,” Gimenez said. “Families come in all shapes and sizes. ... We’re all families and we’re all people. We’re just people and we shouldn’t be discriminating against each other. I’m very happy and proud of the stance of Miami-Dade County has taken over the years, leading this fight against discrimination.”

Miami-Dade County in 1977 became ground zero for the burgeoning gay-rights movement when 70 percent of voters led by singer Anita Bryant repealed one of the nation’s earliest human-rights ordinances banning discrimination based on “affectional or sexual preference.”

It took 21 years for the county to reinstate a similar law and two years ago, Miami-Dade commissioners amended the ordinance to include gender identity and expression.

Some religious conservatives opposed the 2014 amendment, warning that sexual predators would pose as transgender and attack strangers in public restrooms and other places.

“I haven’t heard of one single complaint,” Gimenez said Monday. “All those things that were supposed to happen, I haven’t heard about one incident involving transgender people going into the wrong bathroom or doing something.”

The debate has become one of the hottest in the nation, with states including Mississippi and North Carolina passing antigay laws or banning trans people from using restrooms that don’t match the genders they were assigned at birth.

Before the news conference, the Lehtinens spoke with the Miami Herald. Ros-Lehtinen said she had a message for other parents who learn their children are transgender:

“Everything is going to be OK. If you have a family member who’s coming out as gay, lesbian, transgender, everything is going to be alright,” the Miami Republican said. “Our public service announcement is all about is saying ‘family is everything.’”

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## Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen thanks his family for supporting him as a transgender child

Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen thanks his mother and father, U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and her husband, Dexter Lehtinen, for their support, as they launch the "Family is Everything" campaign with LGBT-rights group SAVE on Monday, May 16, 2016, at Miami Dade College.

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Rodrigo shared with his parents stories about other trans kids who were “shunned by their families,” Ros-Lehtinen said.

“If your family accepts you, so many things fall into line,” she said. “Not that your life is going to be perfect, of course, but it’s less likely that you will get into drugs, have chronic unemployment. We want people to feel more comfortable. And like every new part of our society, change is hard. And it’s hard for people to get adjusted.”

Ros-Lehtinen said that learning she had a transgender son “wasn’t easy.”

“But the toughest part was Rigo’s part — telling us. Rigo wrote it in a letter and left for his friend’s house because he didn’t know what would happen,” the congresswoman said. “I’m not going to sugar-coat it, it was rough for us. We understand people who are gay or lesbian, but when somebody says I identify as a man more than the gender which I was born, it’s still a shock.”

Added Dexter Lehtinen: “You want to see your kids happy.”

“That’s the main thing. Your first consideration is that they may not be aware of the tough time they face in society and the workplace, having, perhaps, a more idealistic view that in this country we accept freedom. And we do, better than most everywhere. But we’re still working on some of those views. But the thing to realize is they haven’t really changed fundamentally. Character and work ethic and humanity doesn’t change based on sexual orientation.”

Ros-Lehtinen also lauded local LGBT activists. “We’re just so thankful that SAVE is doing this,” she said. “It’s a welcoming message.”

SAVE volunteers recently participated in a national study whether door-to-door canvassing can shift anti-LGBT voters’ opinions on transgender rights. Nearly 2,000 voters were chosen to participate in an online survey that included questions about transgender people. When the same people were surveyed several more times, researchers found that 10 percent of voters softened their views on transgender rights after they spoke with SAVE volunteers.

“For every 100 voters we talked to, we gained 10 more votes,” said Justin Klecha, SAVE’s director of campaigns.

The SAVE interviews, called “deep canvassing,” began in January 2015, a month after the Miami-Dade Commission passed the gender-identity amendment.

About 150 volunteers participated, including longtime SAVE supporters and people who identified as either LGBT themselves or as straight allies.

“The study found that all of our canvassers are effective across the board,” Klecha said. “That’s similar with voters. We’re able reduce prejudice with conservative voters and liberal voters, young and old voters and Democrats and Republicans. Part of it was in Kendall, part of it was in the Miami Gardens area. We spoke to white voters, African-American voters, Hispanic voters. We spoke to them in Spanish and English. The researchers did not find anything statistically significant in any of the subsets.”

Volunteer Pamela Sweeney, a former SAVE board member, said voter conversations were meant to “bring people to a place where they’re vulnerable.”

“A way to talk to voters to get them to think about when *they* were judged. And likening that to what a trans person experiences,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to conflate the experience of an immigrant in the workplace with a person who is trans, but it’s a great

place to start a conversation. You know you're on the right track when you get that voter talking about the place they go to, when they felt that way, or when their loved ones felt that way.”

Sweeney said the interviewers achieved success if they could encourage voters to share their personal stories.

“That’s the crux of it,” she said. “You could be passed over for a job. OK. To you, your family, your sense of self-worth, your dignity —how was that affected or eroded by your experience. The whole conversation can take 20 minutes, but you can’t stand at the door for 20 just telling *your* own story. Your story is the tool to get them to talk about *themselves*.”

SAVE Executive Director Tony Lima said continued conversations will foster political and societal changes beneficial for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. “By actively changing the hearts and minds of voters in this way, it also brings us closer to the tipping point of public opinion that will prompt lawmakers to make Florida the first in the south to pass statewide nondiscrimination protections for the LGBTQ community.”

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