

# EQUAL JUSTICE SOCIETY

## STATEMENT BY EVA JEFFERSON PATERSON President Equal Justice Society

Good morning.

I'm Eva Paterson, President and co-founder of the Equal Justice Society. I'm here today to stand together with my friends and allies as we ask the state Supreme Court to stand for fairness and opportunity in our society.

Last May, this Court ruled that two people in a committed and loving relationship deserve the dignity and support that come with marriage. The Court said that California is a place where everyone has the chance to realize his or her hopes and dreams.

The Justices were right.

But ruling now in favor of Prop. 8 would not only harm the rights of LGBT folks, it would represent a threat to all of us who are not in the so-called majority in this country.

As a racial justice organization, the Equal Justice Society opposes Prop. 8 – not only because it's the right thing to do, but also because EJS strongly believes in working with others to ensure that the rights of all are expanded, rather than diminished, in our society.

We cannot just pigeonhole Prop. 8 as a “gay” issue. By rolling back the fundamental rights of one group, Prop. 8 casts a threat that now looms over the civil rights of all.

That is why the Equal Justice Society has joined the many civil rights groups....

... including the Anti-Defamation League, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, the California State Conference of the NAACP, the Japanese American Citizens League, and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, to name just a few...

... who believe that Prop. 8 is wrong – and a radical change to our state Constitution that cannot be accomplished through a ballot initiative.

If it only takes a bare majority to take away the most fundamental guarantee of equal protection, then we are truly all at risk.

Our constitution is the founding document of a community. And the protector of the disenfranchised.

Our constitution is the statement of principles that protects the ability of all people in that community to live their lives and pursue their dreams.

The same constitution that protects the right of churches and religions to decide when to recognize marriage as a sacrament, and the right of every citizen to express their opinions about the issue -- also protects the right of gay and lesbian people to be treated equally under state law.

This epic battle has personal relevance for me. In 1970, I fell in love with Gary Paterson, who is white, at the height of the Black Power movement.

Our love antagonized both black and white people.

The Supreme Court had struck down laws prohibiting interracial marriage just three years before in the landmark case, *Loving vs. Virginia*.

When we decided to marry, Gary's parents were so appalled that first we eloped to Hawaii and then settled in Oakland.

Gary did not speak to his parents for almost seven years. We had epithets yelled at us in public.

What gay men and lesbians are experiencing now as they seek to marry feels very familiar to me. The state has no right to tell anyone who they can or cannot love or marry.

That is why Prop. 8 is misguided and cruel.

There are good people who continue to hold different beliefs about marriage for gay and lesbian couples. But amending our state Constitution is different. Writing a statement of inequality into the founding document of our state affects everyone's status in our community.

It would say to some Californians that they are second-class citizens.

We have gone down that road before, and we know where it leads.

This case reminds us how important it is for progressives to keep doing coalition politics. Advocates for the rights of LGBT people, women, people of color, immigrants—we all need to stand together when any one group is attacked.

Let's continue to stand together for our brothers and sisters who want to love each other.

For only standing together can we achieve profound and lasting justice.

Prop. 8 needs to end. And end now.

Thank you.

###

**The Equal Justice Society** is a national strategy group heightening consciousness on race in the law and popular discourse. As heirs of the innovative legal and political strategists of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the organization broadly models its programmatic efforts after the late Honorable Constance Baker Motley and the Brown litigation team.