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Road Trip 4 Hope Report No. 1

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I'm writing this from a hotel in Tallahassee on what will be a day of rest for me—the first in many days. Indeed, since late Tuesday afternoon, I've driven more than 1400 miles across a good swath of the Midwest and South—across our America.

"Our" America. Land of the free, home of the brave; so cliché. And place of inequity and inequality—for a good number of folks, at least.

I undertook this trip to see more of this country I call "mine." I specifically wanted to travel to the South (a place I've never visited in depth) to better understand what it's like to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer in states where my "tribe" lacks state-wide legal rights. I also wanted to better understand the racial divides that have become so much clearer since the presidential campaign of 2016.

And so, I drove. Past snow-capped corn stubble in Minnesota and Iowa; through coal and railroad country of southern Illinois; into Kentucky past a humungous Confederate flag and roadside signs with the word, "Jesus"; down the spine of Alabama where at 8:30 p.m. outside Birmingham, I found a 200' white cross bathed in massive light; and into Florida with its palm trees and RVs.

Along the way, I watched, listened, and learned. Multiple road signs told me that Jesus loves everyone; while waiting at an Alabama Whataburger takeout window, I watched one cook, and then a second, walk past the window to get a glimpse of the woman who sounds like a man (I waved and smiled); and outside Dothan, Alabama, the FM station reminded listeners of an upcoming "MJ [Michael Jackson] Revue" at the local high school.

I'm loving all of it. It's an education that one can receive only by putting miles on tires.

Yesterday afternoon brought an interview on WTXL, the local ABC affiliate, where I spoke about my road trip with its goal of letting people who live the margins know that they matter. (Click [here](#) to see the interview.)

Last night, I met with a handful of people at the downtown library, courtesy of PFLAG of Tallahassee and TransParent USA. I shared about how humans are wired to group and label other humans but also how we all have empathetic hearts. I spoke of the Four

Commonalities (see other blog posts for explanation) and how human familiarity is a pathway past all the “crap” that we seem to be experiencing as a country.

When I opened to questions and comments, I heard that Tallahassee, like the Twin Cities, is a “bubble” of LGBTQ acceptance owing to two state universities and many transplants from liberal settings. I also heard about the “white wall” that divides the city and state along color lines. Several people spoke of how restaurants here historically have put white servers out front and persons of color in the back (cooks, dishwashers). Another person, a twenty-something African American man, talked about seeing multiple military persons enter a sub shop and the sitting area divide into white service members on one side and black service members on the other side.

I hadn’t expected a meeting full of LGBTQ folks and their allies to turn into a very frank discussion about race. The honesty was refreshing—if we don’t acknowledge racism, how can we ever end it?

The rest of the trip includes another PFLAG event tomorrow afternoon (a meet and greet at a local church); then on Monday morning at 7:30 CST, I’ll do a live radio show on Ellie 2.0 on AM950, followed by a meeting with the Birmingham Bar Association diversity and inclusion committee. Later next week, I’ll be speaking at several law schools—Ole Miss (Tuesday), Vanderbilt (Wed.) and McKinney in Indianapolis (Thurs.).

I will certainly learn more as I go. Look here for future reports. Thank you!

I am so incredibly lucky.

#elliesroadtrip4hope #humansconnect

ellie