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**OPINION**

# Op-ed: What seeds are we planting when we attack DEI?

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**By Will Thomas**

*This is a guest opinion column*

A few years ago, I risked my friendship with several people in D.C. by forcing them to watch the Iron Bowl with me. As a lifelong Alabama fan, you can imagine that watching this game with me is probably not an experience for the faint of heart, especially for those who don't live and breathe college football like we Alabamians do. I had also just begun my three-year term on the Executive Committee of Alabama's National Alumni Association, and I had more zeal for the Tide than ever; not only had I just begun my term as the first LGBTQ representative on the EC, we (the LGBTQ alumni chapter) had just

endowed not one, but two scholarships to support students at The Capstone. We, and the institution, were moving forward together, something many people had told me, quite smugly, would never be possible.

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At one point in the game, a friend turned to me and asked, earnestly, "How can you be so invested in a place that's so unwelcoming to you (as a LGBTQ person)? And so...

***backwards.***"

My answer was simple: home will always be home. A fact I have questioned, certainly as someone who no longer spends most of my time there but the truth of which I am reminded every time I sit on the pier my grandfather built on Shoal Creek and watch the water glisten, dammed up by Wilson Dam that my great-grandfather helped build, or any and every time I hear Alabama and her people as the butt of some bad joke from someone from a state whose food and football are way worse than ours (all of them). Home will always be home, the air, soil, water, and people that nourished me into who I am today, and there is no law or politician that can ever change that.

But those laws and politicians can make people *feel* otherwise. And this is what they are doing in the Alabama Senate with SB-129 and its already-passed companion bill in the House, banning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts and funding in institutions of higher education throughout the State. It is fair to be critical of DEI programs at these institutions, and I have had my fair share of direct criticisms regarding DEI programs at The Capstone. It is undeniable, however, that ensuring our students are exposed to a variety of viewpoints and perspectives will prepare them to be better, more productive citizens, no matter where they may live. Diversity and inclusion are not the reality of some distant future, but a constant with which we humans have always been asked to grapple. Equity of opportunity is what all people living and coming to this country seek and deserve. These are tough, perennial questions that deserve constant exploration, and we should not run from them, but towards them.

In three places in the Gospels, Jesus tells the Parable of the Mustard Seed. In it, Jesus tells a story of a planter who plants a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree so large that all the birds of the field find a home in its branches and rest in its shade. Jesus tells us this story

to describe the Kingdom of Heaven—a place that while starting small, is meant to be a nourishing home to all who find themselves there.

When we started the Alabama LGBTQ Alumni Association in 2018, the criticism we got from most other geographic chapter leaders was that they wanted and worked to welcome everyone (Southern hospitality is one of our values, after all). They were afraid having a separate chapter would divide us more than it would unite us. Of course, these differences can be a source of division, but we can also use our differences to draw each other closer together for what we do have in common. It was not an unfounded fear, and we could have easily run away from that tension.

But instead, we learned that there were simply many parts to one body. Our chapter's existence has brought new people into the fold that otherwise would have not known or felt they were welcomed. It has spurred individuals to join and serve in leadership roles in their geographic Alumni chapters. It has provided scholarships and emergency assistance to young people in a time of dire need so they could continue their education. My time on EC has fostered friendships I would have never had otherwise with people who could not be more different than me. We planted a seed in hope that all the birds of the field could find a home there, but I fear that tiny seed's growth will instead be mowed down by these bills, causing the birds to fly elsewhere.

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That, of course, is the question we must all answer for ourselves in life—what seeds are we planting? Will they, like the mustard seed in the parable, be like the Kingdom of Heaven and grow so large that all can find a home there? Or instead, will we erect a bright sign at the edges of fallow land telling the birds they are unwelcome?

As for me, I will keep planting those seeds in hope that they grow, at home, where I and so many others deserve to know they belong.

*Will Thomas is a consultant currently living in Washington, DC from Madison, AL. He was the Founding President of the Alabama LGBTQ Alumni Association, and is finishing his term as the first LGBTQ representative on the Executive Committee of the Alabama National Alumni Association in April. More information about the Alabama LGBTQ Alumni Association can be found at [rollpride.org](http://rollpride.org).*

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