



# MAUREEN AND SHAUNA WALSH

---

“OFF THE CUFF, FROM THE HEART”

**M**aureen Walsh and her daughter, Shauna Walsh, share a gift for speaking directly and humbly, from the heart, with twists of humor. Maureen’s most famous example came when she rose on the floor of the State House of Representatives during 2012 debate on a bill to legalize same-sex marriage. Without prepared remarks, Walsh delivered four minutes of homespun wisdom on enduring love, discrimination and a mother’s pride. A Republican from Walla Walla, she would be one of just two GOP House members to vote on February 8th for marriage equality.

Walsh’s 593 words that day made her, in the words of *The New York Times* columnist Timothy Egan, “a hero to many people around the world.” Walsh heard that her speech went viral. “And I said, ‘Oh gosh, I’m sorry.’ I thought that meant that I put a virus in it,” she says.

Waves of calls and emails swamped her office and devices. She heard from irate conservatives; others praised her gumption. And she heard from young people who felt scorned, even by their parents, because of their sexual orientation. One asked to be adopted by her.

Because Maureen made her daughter central to her speech, Shauna was also bombarded by messages—some nasty, others poignant. Shauna, a lesbian, had influenced her mom’s thinking on marriage equality, persuading her that domestic partnerships weren’t enough. They weren’t equal. In her speech, Maureen said domestic partnerships sounded “like a Merry Maids franchise.”

Mother and daughter were soon invited to a swank LGBTQ fundraiser in Los Angeles, where Maureen followed Betty White on stage. Shauna chatted with Chaz Bono and they complimented each other’s mom. Maureen appeared in a TV ad for marriage equality when it landed on the November ballot as Referendum 74, after the bill signed by Governor Chris Gregoire was challenged by opponents.

Facing page: Shauna Walsh, left, at her 2015 wedding ceremony with her mother Maureen. *Shauna Walsh*





Maureen's 2012 speech reinforced a key point: people tend to get their values from their families not school teachers, as Christian conservatives have claimed. *TVW*

But back to that speech, which had 1.5 million views on YouTube within a week.

In a 2022 phone interview from her winter retreat, an RV park in Mexico, Maureen Walsh, a relaxed retiree, said it wasn't a difficult decision for her to support marriage equality, despite the political peril. "I was just raised with wonderful parents, who just didn't discriminate. And, you know, the reality is, if you love someone, you love someone. So, it really was pretty simple for me."

Shauna, speaking from her home in Minnesota, also in January 2022, with the temperature hovering around you-don't-want-to-know, said she had an inkling her mom might make a stand. "She had called me ahead of time and said, 'I'm planning on speaking to a bill that's going on the floor,'" Shauna recalls. "And was it OK if she referenced me? Because I was essentially the closest gay person to her and she needed that personal interest piece to tie in to her speech."

Shauna watched her mom's plea for House Bill 2516 on her computer via a live feed from TVW, Washington state's version of C-Span. "What surprised me was how far it reached. People all over the world were looking at this. And even today, in Minnesota, people talk about it at work sometimes. They're like, 'Oh, my gosh, your mom is the one that made that speech.'"

MAUREEN LUCILLE Katherine Stewart Walsh started by saying she didn't want

to scold anybody. She did not want to be perceived as throwing other Republicans “under the bus.” That was very much a priority. She began:

*I don't wax as eloquently as most of the people on the floor here, but I've allowed my heart and my mind to guide me in decisions that I've made on a lot of different issues that have been before us in the legislature. And I think sometimes that's what we have to do. I too don't want to wag my finger at anybody about which way you should vote on this.*

Nothing she says was written out, Walsh says. “I’ve never rehearsed a speech in my life. I do everything off the cuff and from the heart. And I think that’s kind of one of my strengths—that when I did give a speech it was always from the heart.” Yes, she was from a conservative district and she might pay a severe price. “But on the other hand,” she says, “what kind of integrity do you have as an individual if you allow something like that to sway your conscience?”

At one time, she thought her very Catholic parents back in Ohio might object to her support for same-sex marriage. But her mother, a registered nurse, and her father, who worked in public relations for Procter and Gamble, just smiled. Walsh recalls her mother saying, “Well, honey, that’s alright, it’s the human genome.” Her father mentioned a nice lesbian couple who lived down the street with two cute kids. “And I was almost like, ‘Where are my parents? Who are you people?’ ”

Quite personally, she resumed:

*I was married for 23 years to the love of my life. He died six years ago, and you know, I'm a lonely old widow right now. I'm 51-years-old, looking for a boyfriend. Not having much luck with that.*

Some of her colleagues tittered at her frankness:

*And yet, when I think of my husband, and I think of all the wonderful years we had, and the wonderful fringe benefit of having three beautiful children, I don't miss the sex. You know? And to me that's kind of what this boils down to. I don't miss that. I mean I certainly miss it.*

More titters.

*But it is certainly not the aspect of that relationship—that incredible bond I had with that human being—that I really, really genuinely wish I still had.*



WILLIAM “KELLY” WALSH died at 51 from a heart attack in April 2006. His death made the front page of the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*, where he was de-



“They truly had a partnership marriage,” said Lorie Mastin, a friend of Kelly and Maureen Walsh.  
*Shauna Walsh*

scribed as the area’s “Sausage King,” a multi-faceted character who said “Peace,” when he parted company with someone, and a savvy entrepreneur who owned a building at the city’s busiest downtown corner.

His persona was as bold as his huge handlebar mustache. “He was just a big, gentle bear,” said Maureen’s legislative aide Marge Plumage. “He had no airs about him. What you saw was what you got.”

What Shauna saw: “He was this big brawny huge-shouldered guy who wore coveralls covered in sheet rock dust his whole life. He did not look like the husband of a state senator. [After 12 years in the House, Maureen moved up to the Senate.] He never did. Never would have in his whole life. He felt like your appearance had nothing to do with anything important.”

He grew up in Walla Walla where his parents owned Blue Mountain Memorial Gardens cemetery. He dug graves. That’s how he got his broad shoulders, Shauna says. He owned a concrete business. He had been bullied in school and his undiagnosed dyslexia made learning a challenge. “I think he never forgot where he came from and being bullied himself really opened his eyes to what that looked like and how that made people feel.”

If you knew him well, Shauna says, you could detect him crying quietly, emitting barely audible “pfff” sounds, while watching tragic news stories. “I considered myself to be a pretty emotional person. But yeah, he just felt stories from other people so powerfully.”

While in college, Kelly had begun making sausage as a hobby. “And then he really started turning it into something,” Shauna says. At first, it meant the family getting up at 5 a.m. on Saturdays to load the truck and set up a stand at the Walla Walla farmer’s market. Shauna sold lemonade. Mom ran the cash box and dad worked the grill. One of Shauna’s brothers kept the coolers iced; the other was too young then to help.

The family affair led to “Onion World,” a downtown brick-and-mortar restaurant, named after the state’s official vegetable, the Walla Walla sweet onion. Kelly had helped wrest the title from the powerful potato lobby by bringing his sausage to the Capitol; Maureen did the rest.

Kelly died just as construction was completed on Onion World at First and Main Streets. No one knew the secret behind his “Walla Walla sweet onion sausage.” But Shauna’s brother Patrick discovered his dad’s little red journal on spices and recipes. “We were all very much in the grief-and-love process where we felt it was important. So, we opened the restaurant later that year,” she says. She managed it for a few years.

Wistful, but profoundly grateful about the 23 years she shared with her husband, Maureen Walsh said:

*So, I think to myself, How could I deny the right to have that incredible bond with another individual in life? To me it seems almost cruel.*

ALMOST TWO MINUTES into her talk, she introduced Shauna:

*Many of you have met my daughter. She’s a fabulous girl. She’s wonderful. My boys are great too, but my daughter is just something special. She was the light of her father’s eyes.*

*And she went to school and there was a whole group of kids just picking on another kid. And you know, my daughter stood up for that kid. Even though it wasn’t the popular thing to do, she knew it was the right thing.*

Shauna was in 8th grade, she recalls, when her friend Shaun, who was new to the school, was getting hassled and hazed in the hall. “I just sort of screamed at a bunch of boys right outside the locker room and explained it is not OK to harass him. He can be whoever he wants and this is bullying plain and simple. It’s



Maureen married Kelly when she was 22. Her parents, Bob and Mary Stewart, left, were married 67 years. Kelly’s parents Virginia and William “Paco” Walsh are on the right. *Shauna Walsh*

wrong.” School officials called her parents. “I don’t know all the words I chose,” Shauna says. “But I know they weren’t all school-appropriate. So, my mom I’m sure was aware of that one.” She was more than aware. She was inspired:



Shauna and her friend Shaun Gray before 9th grade homecoming. Shaun announced his engagement in 2022 to his partner Steve. *Shauna Walsh*

*I was never more proud of my kid, knowing that she was speaking against the vocal majority on behalf of the rights of the minority. To me, it is incumbent upon us as legislators in this state to do that. That is why we are here.*

*I shudder to think that if folks who have preceded us in history did not do that, frankly I’m not sure I would be here, as a woman. I’m not sure other people would be here due to their race or their creed.*

Shauna credits her parents for her defense of her friend Shaun, who later came out as gay.

“I never cowed to anyone else’s belief or listened to anybody else tell me who I thought I should or shouldn’t be. My mom was very strong and she was the career woman in our family and I come from a long line of feminists on both sides, maternal and paternal, of the family. I always stuck up for the underdog and I learned that from my dad. He was always sticking up for people that maybe weren’t as fortunate, or faced inequities for broader reasons whether they were born into poverty or based on their race or ethnicity. “Both of my parents believed in judging a person by who they are as a person, their merit.”

Monitoring her mom’s speech from her workplace in Minnesota, Shauna, then 26, was surprised at what came next:

*Someone made the comment that this is not about equality. Well, yes, it is about equality. Why in the world would we not allow those equal rights for those individuals who truly were committed to one another in life? To be able to show that by way of a marriage?*





“To me, my mom has always been this larger-than-life person,” says Shauna. *Shauna Walsh*

Maureen’s words were evidence she listened to her daughter. She had said to Shauna years earlier that she didn’t think there was much difference between marriage and domestic partnerships, or civil unions, other than religious ceremonies. “And I had made my counter arguments,” Shauna says. “We had political debates all the time, and I was never really able to sway her and she was never able to sway me. It was fine and we moved

on and it was good.”

But hearing her mom talk in the Capitol about marriage equality was different. “That was really nice and a personal thing for me when she said, ‘No, domestic partnership isn’t good enough.’ ” Maureen not only voted for marriage equality; she was the second sponsor to sign on to Seattle Representative Jamie Pedersen’s bill. From either party. She then outed Shauna to the world:

*My daughter came out of the closet a couple of years ago. And you know what, I thought I was just going to agonize about that. Nothin’s different. She’s still a fabulous human being, and she’s met a person that she loves very much, and some day, by God, I wanna throw a wedding for that kid. I hope that is exactly what I can do. I hope she will not feel like a second-class citizen involved in something called a “domestic partnership” that frankly sounds like a Merry Maids franchise to me.*

Shauna, who graduated from Walla Walla High School in 2004, eight years earlier, said she had not come out in the sense of a grand unveiling—despite the impact of others doing so.

“It is really interesting how that has evolved too in recent years. Because it used to be this big thing with Ellen DeGeneres. I remember watching her show, her sitcom growing up—before the talk show—and when she came out it, was just all over, this huge thing. It was so important to come out and state who you are and what box you fit into.

“For me, it was never that I felt like I had to sit people down and say, ‘Listen,

here is the thing: I'm a lesbian.' So, I never did that. My very close friends knew that I had interests in that area. It wasn't something that we put in the forefront of importance."

Her mom then wrapped up:

*Thank you, Mr. Speaker, that's all I want to say. Thank you for the civil, wonderful debate today. It's been great.*

"I REALLY KNOW how to poke them in the eye," Maureen says 10 years later with a laugh. "Don't I? 'Oh, you think domestic partners is a big deal—watch this.' Yeah, it was just the right thing to do. I probably cried every night of that session, realizing that that bill was coming up. And the only other person to support that in the [GOP House] caucus was Glenn Anderson (from Fall City in King County) because he had a gay brother.

"Now, let me tell you something else. All those people that voted 'no,' I had several of them come up and put their arm around me, and say, 'You know, I would've voted 'yes' too except I'm afraid I would've been un-elected.'

"And, in some regards, yes, you're there to represent your district. But this isn't talking about water rights. This isn't talking about natural resources. This is talking about an issue of conscience that we all live with. And the only way I can live with myself, is if I'm honest with myself. That was my choice."

Reactions rolled in from all over. Soon, her office assistant Marge Plumage "was just about pulling her hair out." Messages were backing up like I-5 traffic around JBLM. Walsh pulled in extra staff to help. "That's when I understood the power of the internet, let me tell you."

She was pretty sure she'd lose her next election. Her district had voted overwhelmingly against the state's "everything-but-marriage" domestic partnership law when it was on the 2009 statewide ballot.

Back at home, she went to a county GOP meeting. "They were not happy," she recalls, "and by God, I need to be representing their interests.

"I looked at them, and said, 'How dare you? You can't tell me how to feel. You can't tell me what my conscience dictates to me.' So, I defended myself. But I really got beat up at that meeting.

"And I came home, and on my answering machine—see how far we've come?—the little light was blinking. And so I went, 'Oh God, here we go.' I hit the machine and I heard, [imitating a man's gruff voice], 'Hey, this is Jim Smith'—or whatever his name was— 'I'm 92 years old and I don't like gay people. But girl, you got cojones to stand up and talk about what you believe in. And for that, I respect

you. And you’ve got my vote.’ ”

MOM JUST LOST her job. That was Shauna’s reaction. “I had concerns about that because my mom was a single parent then, her income supporting my brothers who were still living at home at the time. So, I had a little bit of guilt that she had done this for me as a show of support and she was really going to pay the price for it with her career.”

Then Shauna, a Democrat, saw that her mom was being lionized on “The Young Turks,” a YouTube channel popular with progressives. When she saw other liberal platforms hailing clips from the “speech-of-the-year,” she thought, “Oh, this is serious here.”

Strangers found her email address and Facebook profile.

“That was really wild. And some of the emails were lovely and some weren’t so lovely. But a lot of people, even if they weren’t on board necessarily with marriage equality, they would still say something like clearly you mean a lot to your mom. So that was at least nice. They were acknowledging the parental love portion of the whole speech.”

She also received deeply emotional emails, including from people who said they hadn’t spoken to their gay child in years, but her mom changed their thinking.

“Or there was a young person, like a 19-year-old guy who had struggled with suicidal thoughts and he was from this very evangelical household and he felt like my mom—because of her political affiliation—speaking out just made him have hope for the future. Where he had felt there was none before. And I thought that was really powerful.”

BUT SHAUNA wasn’t expecting a detour to Hollywood.

Soon, she and her mom were invited to the GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Awards in



At the GLAAD Media Awards in Los Angeles, Shauna told Chaz Bono she loved his mom. He replied, “Your mom is pretty cool herself.”  
*Shauna Walsh*



Los Angeles. Maureen was asked to speak. Honorees and guests included Ellen DeGeneres, Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Benecio del Toro.

“And it was hilarious, because I was a nobody,” Maureen says, “and they told me, ‘Go to the Green Room before you go on stage.’ So that evening I was all dressed up in my basic black dress, and I went to the Green Room, and there were police officers surrounding it.”

She said “excuse me” and tried to go in. They said, “Sorry, ma’am.”

She persisted: “No, I’m supposed to go here because I’m up on stage after Betty White and the gals from *Hot in Cleveland*.”

The officers wouldn’t budge. They grabbed her a chair to sit in backstage. When Betty White came off and said “hello,” Maureen told her how much she liked White and her work. Then the lawmaker stepped up to do her part and drew a deep breath.

“And I’m staring out at this room with thousands of people; I presume predominantly gay people. And I said, ‘You’re probably wondering who this overweight, middle-aged woman is, standing up here on the stage, following the likes of Betty White. My name is Maureen. Maureen Walsh. And I’m a legislator from Washington state—a Republican legislator—and I gave a speech on marriage equality.’

“And everybody in that room stood up on their feet and applauded me. I was in absolute shock.”

Shauna was sitting at a beautifully decorated round dinner table in the ball room, dazzled by “star-struck-y” feelings.

“It was amazing. It was surreal. There was a silent auction and people were pulling out their checkbooks and donating to certain causes. There was a man at our table who ended up bidding \$30,000 on a trip to Thailand and just pulled out a checkbook and wrote a check for that. I’m like, ‘good lord, that’s what I make in a year.’ And seated to my left was Chaz Bono.”

Bono was receiving an award from GLAAD for a documentary he had done about his transition. Former Congresswoman Mary Bono, his stepmoth-



After her speech was praised by liberals, Maureen Walsh drew a Republican challenger in 2012. Walsh won re-election with 58 percent. *Shauna Walsh*

er, was on stage with him when out strode a surprise guest.

“Take one guess,” Maureen says.

The woman who needs only one name. She was the reason for the strict security around the Green Room.

“We’re in this group,” Maureen continues, “and I’m telling you, you talk about rising to their—they were jumping on the tables. Everybody was so thrilled to see Cher. She had an Afro that was as big as a beachball on her head. And she’s rockin’ some leather outfit, or something. It was just a hoot.”

From there, Maureen and Shauna went to Washington, D.C., for a wonky event called the Commitment Summit. It focused on history, policy and the push in states for marriage equality. It was Shauna’s first time in the nation’s capital and she relished touring the landmarks she had only seen in movies. Everyone went home with a proclamation by President Obama making June LGBT Pride Month. “I still have it in my house,” she says. “It’s framed up in our bedroom.”

The whirlwind next dropped them into a segment of Lawrence O’Donnell’s show on MSNBC. Shauna appeared from Minneapolis. A town car whisked her to a local TV station where they did her hair and makeup. It was that kind of a year.

AND THAT WEDDING Maureen wanted to throw for her kid? “She got to throw me four actually. Because I’m just that extra,” Shauna says with a laugh.

After Washington, Maine, Maryland and Minnesota all voted in favor of marriage equality in 2012, other states followed. On Shauna’s birthday in January 2015, Florida approved marriage equality. She had recently proposed to her partner Amy. Her mom asked what she wanted to do about a wedding ceremony.

Shauna wasn’t sure. Her family was in Washington. Her mom’s family was in Ohio. She also had a group of people in Minnesota who meant a lot to her. She didn’t want people to have to travel long distances to the wedding, and she didn’t want to exclude anybody.

“It’s really hard to plan a wedding like that without inviting 5 million people and having it at a banquet hall that everyone can teleport to. So, impossible. We toyed around with the idea of doing a vacation destination wedding. My mom was excited about that idea because we were in the middle of winter and session had just started, I think, for her in Washington.”

She and Amy thought about getting married in Florida. They’d celebrate with a Disney Cruise because Amy’s son Tanner Calverley was eight years old then. “We wanted to do something that would be fun for him, also fun for us. So we took a cruise to the Bahamas from Florida.”



Maureen got her wish in 2015. Not only did Shauna and her partner Amy have a wedding ceremony in the Bahamas, above. They also celebrated with friends and family in Ohio, Minnesota and Washington. *Shauna Walsh*

Shauna and Amy were legally wed in a Florida court before departing.

“The ceremony, just for show, was on the beach in the Bahamas which was great,” Shauna says. “There were only eight of us total including Amy and Tanner. It was a very private, intimate wedding. My brothers were there and my mom was there. Amy’s dad and one of Amy’s sisters came and was our photographer as well.”

They later had a big party in Ohio with her mom’s family. And then they threw a bigger party in Minnesota. And they followed up with a summer bash in Washington. “We kind of had this wedding tour for six months to a year after our wedding actually happened. It was a really fun way to do it. And it kind of pieced it out so it wasn’t this huge, stressful situation. I feel like we did our wedding perfectly.”

THERE WAS A STRIKING prescience to Walsh’s speech. As advocates pushed for marriage equality in 2012, they had adopted a new strategy. Sophisticated research pointed out better ways to sway voters who weren’t adamantly opposed to same-sex marriage, but also weren’t sure why the LGBTQ community wanted it.



For years, advocates had argued about issues such as hospital visitation rights and military service that didn't quite resonate with many Americans.

By 2012 they had learned to shift the focus from the head to the heart; to center the debate on love and white-picket-fence commitments, and how gay couples wanted the same as folks like Maureen and Kelly Walsh. Without coaching, Maureen had instinctively highlighted that touchstone months before it would appear in TV ads and other pillars of the 2012 election campaign.

“It does really boil down to relationships and love,” she says, looking back at a tipping point in history. “And I think that's how things turned around.”

BY 2021, Maureen was ready to leave the Legislature. She'd been an aide for 12 years to her mentor Dave Mastin, who switched from Democrat to Republican during his tenure representing Walla Walla and the state's 16th District. She had spent another 16 years trekking to Olympia for her constituents. “And frankly, I had a new person in my life. I was 11 years without anybody in my life,” she says.

She joked that it was time to move on before she had people pushing her out. She left when her term ended in January 2021.

She got way “out-out” of partisan politics. She and her partner Jim bought a travel trailer. They spend winters in Mexico. “And then, when it gets hotter than hell, we head up north and travel around. So, I'm not getting ensconced in politics anywhere other than the politics of RV parks.”

Beat.

“And let me tell you, there's enough politics in travel-trailing.”

Deep in Mexico, Maureen Walsh remains off the cuff, from the heart.

**Bob Young**