

2017 NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

# Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

## ◆ Jim Obergefell ◆

### Virginia Uribe Award for Creative Leadership in Human Rights



Three years ago Jim Obergefell was a real estate broker from Ohio who lived with his partner of twenty years, John. In 2011, when John was diagnosed with ALS and quickly fell ill, having to be placed in hospice, the couple decided to get married. With the support of friends and family, Jim and John were able to charter a medical jet to Maryland for their marriage with Jim's aunt as the officiant. They shortly realized that in the event of John's death, Jim would not be listed as his spouse due to Ohio's legislation on marriage. Devastated by this reality, they sued the state of

Ohio to be legally recognized as spouses.

After John's death, Jim resumed the fight for recognition not only of his love, but also the recognition of love and partnership across the nation. After two years of battling in court, on June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage is legal and protected under the United States constitution. Jim and John's two decade-long partnership was finally recognized by the federal government. Due to Jim's relentless commitment to his partnership and to equality, same-sex couples throughout the country are now able to celebrate their love and commitment to one another without having to fight for equal rights and protection under the law.

The legacy of *Obergefell v. Hodges* continues to grow with same-sex marriages increasing by 33 percent and the world acknowledging love in all its forms. James Cutlip, chair of the OEA-GLBT Caucus wrote "Jim's work gives hope to individuals in other countries that individuals can, and do, change the world". Jim's work has also had a large impact on LGBTQ students in affirming their right to love themselves and others freely.

Jim's "accidental" activism did not end with the Supreme Court ruling. Since the landmark Supreme Court decision, Jim has written the novel, *Love Wins* with Pulitzer Prize winner Debbie Cenziper. It tells the story of the lovers, lawyers, judges and activists behind *Obergefell v. Hodges*. He has also continued his advocacy for the LGBTQ community on a national and international level, most recently focusing his efforts on the transgender community. "Unfortunately, the most vulnerable part of our community is our transgender siblings. They're the ones now being targeted by opponents of equality because they feel like they've lost the fight against the "LGB" part of the community".

Jim Obergefell is one of many pioneers in the fight for equality within the LGBTQ community. He continues to advocate for change in America and abroad to make the world a safer place for LGBTQ people.