

## 2022 Plum Creek Literacy Festival: Statement on Kelly's Decision to Withdraw

In 2019, I was asked if I would speak at the 2022 Plum Creek Literacy Festival held at Concordia University in Nebraska. I often book my speaking engagements two to three years out, and since I had heard this was a literacy festival with a long history, I agreed to appear.

Flash forward to this week. I received several DMs raising concern that I had agreed to speak at this conference. It was brought to my attention that the festival was cancelled last year after many authors dropped out over concerns that the university hosting the event was discriminatory against the LGBTQ+ community. You can see some of that context here:

<https://bookandfilmglobe.com/fiction/the-cancellation-of-plum-creek/>.

Until this week, I was unaware of this history.

Learning this, I contacted the festival organizer and asked two questions: 1) Can I do a session that highlights LGBTQ+ YA literature? and 2) Can I have assurances that the books I discuss will be available for sale on site? The organizer responded that I was free to discuss anything at the session, but the books would not be sold. The festival has a long-standing policy that only books written by presenters are sold. I was told this was due to space limitations, and that the festival did not want to sell books that competed with those written by the authors who speak at the festival.

In this same email, I was also told the following: "To be very clear, the university does not discriminate against students based on sexual orientation or identity." I responded with the following: "It is illegal to discriminate. The university, however, took part in a 2019 amicus brief in *Bostock v. Clayton County* to allow employment discrimination at religious institutions because an employee is gay or transgender. This is one of the reasons Concordia Nebraska has landed on the 'worst list' of colleges as compiled by [campuspride.org](https://www.campuspride.org/worstlist/) (<https://www.campuspride.org/worstlist/>). I'd be curious if there are concrete examples of the university reaching out to marginalized groups—in this case, the queer community?"

I did not receive an answer to that question.

I have never backed out of a speaking engagement before, but given the unsatisfactory response to my questions, and given the university's history in working to oppose LGBTQ+ rights, I have informed the festival organizer that I will not be attending. *I recognize it is the university, not the festival organizer, that is dictating these policies.* My decision reflects disagreement with the policies of Concordia University. As such, I can only hope that Concordia University will open a dialogue with members of the LGBTQ+ community so that going forward everyone is valued and welcome in their community.

I believe change will only occur when people speak up, and I can only hope that sharing my decision publicly might help to move the needle a fraction closer to a more just and inclusive world. For my friends in the LGBTQ+ community, I want you to know that I deeply admire your strength and courage in these difficult times.

Sincerely,

Kelly