

Rebekah Sager

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Just as the 2017 LGBT Heritage Month kicks off June 1, Los Angeles City Controller Ron Galperin joined Mayor Eric Garcetti, City Attorney Mike Feuer, Councilmembers Mitch O’Farrell and Mike Bonin and other members of the City Council at City Hall to honor four trailblazers in the LGBTQ community.

Honorees proceeded into the John Ferraro Council Chamber accompanied by the voices of the Celebration Theater, who accompanied them in a soulful rendition of “This Land is Your Land.”

This 7th annual Heritage Month honored the work of actress Alexandra Billings, known for her role in “Transparent,” Michael Kearns, recognized as Hollywood’s first openly gay actor in the 1970s and a longtime advocate of awareness for those with HIV/AIDS, actress Sara Ramirez, known for her role on “Grey’s Anatomy,” and 80-year-old Alexei Romanoff, a Ukrainian-born immigrant, heralded for his historic civil rights work.

This year’s theme is “The Art of Resistance.”

“Everyone should be free to live their truth, love who they choose, and find acceptance in the place they call home,” Mayor Eric Garcetti said to those gathered.

“LGBTQ Heritage Month is a time to reflect on the long march to justice and tolerance, and to honor those who have devoted themselves to building a world that is free from hatred and safe for all — no matter their sexual orientation or gender identity. Los Angeles takes pride in the activism and accomplishments of our LGBTQ community, and we will always stand with every Angeleno who is fighting for equality, respect, and dignity for all people.”

Councilman Mike Bonin talked about the LGBTQ community's need for celebrating its heritage and passing along the rich history to its young people.

"We don't have a kind of Passover, where we can get together every year and share our stories of what our community has done and how our community has struggled, and survived. So, our younger generations don't have the benefit of that built in heritage, so young people today don't know that our brightest times in LGBTQ history proceeded the darkest times – WWII. There are young people today who don't know the horrors and ravages of the AIDS epidemic or how the lesbian community banded together to save their sick and dying brothers," Bonin said.

Singer, actress and activist, Sara Ramirez, acknowledged the many in the LGBTQ community those who've inspired her and help to keep her steadfast in her fight for equality.

"With our current political climate it's hard to maintain hope these days. But, sharing space in a way that celebrates my community and all its intersections gives me hope. I'm proud to be a Mexican, Irish American-immigrant, queer and bi-sexual woman. The LGBTQ+ community has never been about just one person, and one experience and identity. Our struggles are shared and our resilience unrelenting," Ramirez said.

Michael Kearns' speech was about inclusion, encouraging those in the LGBTQ community to make sure to "shine their lights" into neighborhoods they've never gone into, taking paths rarely traversed, and daring "to ruin a pair of shoes."

"This honor serves as my marching papers," Kearns said.

Actress Alexandra Billings made the suggestion that the crowd assembled "gather their strength and reach across the aisle and talk to each other."

"This room is easy. What's happening here is a room filled with great love and great joy? It's a safe place, but now we have to go out of the safe place and go to the unsafe place. That's the real meaning of revolution. When we can gather together and talk to the people who don't agree with us. Who do want us dead? Who do want us marginalized? Who don't believe in equal rights. Who believe we should be rounded up like cattle and taken to an island and forget about us. Those are the people who're ill informed and spiritually bankrupt. We have to help them the best way we can, with education with compassion, kindness, and a revolutionary spirit that bore the LGBTQ community from the beginning of time... this is who we are. It's in our cells. You would not have art were not for the queer community," Billings said.

LAPD Assistant Chief Beatrice M. Girmala, Director, Office of Special Operations and Department LGBTQ Outreach Program Coordinator talked about bringing a safety initiative to Los Angeles similar to one recently launched in Seattle.

The "Safe Space Program," will ask participating businesses, located in Hollywood and East Los Angeles to place decals on their windows and doors, as a way of announcing themselves as a place open to LGBTQ community members in need – aimed at creating a safer community.