

**On the Occasion  
Of conferring the degree  
Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*  
upon  
Kimahli Powell**

Madam Chancellor, today I have the honour of introducing Mr. Kimahli Powell. A champion of human rights and social justice.

It is shocking to realize that 72 countries currently criminalize sexual orientation and gender identity. There is much work to be done to change attitudes, beliefs and laws around the world.

But there are times when more direct action needs to be taken, and that is where *Rainbow Railroad* comes in. As Executive Director of *Rainbow Railroad*, Kimahli Powell has been involved in rescuing LGBTQI people from life-threatening discrimination in their home countries.

Chechnya has been a recent locus of a ‘gay pogrom.’ In 2017, in a complex and dangerous operation, *Rainbow Railroad* extricated 70 gay men out of Chechnya and brought them safely to Canada for a new life. Mr. Powell went to Chechnya himself (a high-risk visit) to meet the men in Russian safe houses, and work with local networks.

What is a rainbow? A magical arc of light where white light is refracted into all the component parts. Wavelengths are a spectrum; they gradually turn from one colour to another. Individuals too are on a continuum; we must value all the colours.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his poem *The Two Founts*, described a rainbow as a “gracious thing, made up of tears and light.”

What is a railroad? The image clearly brings to mind the underground railroad which brought slaves to freedom but this railroad is not only above ground, but in the sky – imagine!

The work of the *Rainbow Railroad* is ongoing. Human Rights Watch notes that there was no effective investigation to the 2017 anti-gay purge in Chechnya and this impunity has sanctioned a new wave of torture and humiliation.

But we are not only talking about issues in Chechnya. *Rainbow Railroad* has worked in many countries; wherever people are at risk. Jamaica, Uganda, Indonesia, Pakistan, Syria....and on. And on.

Imagine you are living in a place with no hope but you can imagine a world that is better than the one you live in. This is usually the realm of fantasy or science fiction. Or is it a way to imagine an idealized self or an idealized world?

Kimahli Powell has made dreams for the oppressed LGBTQI a reality. Maybe it's his background as a theatre director. Directors bring imagination to life; take words on a page and make them three dimensional. Actors, directors, human souls, need compassion; need empathy.

Augusto Boal in his revolutionary *Theatre of the Oppressed* noted that "Empathy is that most powerful weapon" which can break oppression.

But rainbows are ephemeral. There is a storm and then the rainbow. Then rainbows go away. Yet our eyes still seek them out.

And trains don't always run on time...there are cancellations; there are delays. But if you miss a train there is always another one coming. That is the message for the powers who brutalize and dehumanize their victims.

Peter Gabriel said about another horrendous political system which abused minorities in South Africa: "you can blow out a candle, but you can't blow out a fire."

That is the spectre of Kimahli Powell and the *Rainbow Railroad*. The train whistle is in the air, and in the ear of the oppressor. Another train will be coming. A rainbow railroad powered by tears and light.

Madam Chancellor, I have the honour to present Mr. Kimahli Powell for the degree Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

12 November 2019