

INTERSECTIONALITY

My Experience Lighting Up BYU's Y in Rainbow Colors

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In March of 2021, the iconic white Y on the Mountain above Provo, Utah was first lit with rainbow-colored flashlights in support of LGBTQ+ students and faculty.

When I was a child, I was a rule follower. In first grade, our desks were arranged in groups of five, and we were instructed not to move them. One boy (a troublemaker) moved his desk about six inches out and back, away from the rest of us. I was appalled. I was even more appalled when he convinced a couple other students to scoot their desks with his. I was extremely self-righteous when every other child at my table moved their desks to match his, and I stayed defiantly in place. Then I was HORRIFIED when the teacher walked by and tapped my desk gently, saying, "Abby, move your desk back with everyone else's", assuming that I had moved away from them, not them away from me! (This genuinely lives on in my memory as one of the most traumatic events of my childhood. I've always wanted to go back to that teacher and tell her the real story of what went down that day!)

Fast forward about 34 years and oh, how I have changed. I don't break rules that I deem important, like robbery or treason or murder, but I do find great meaning in my life by standing up against systems that I believe need to be changed via rule breaking, minor civil disobedience, and even the occasional love

motivated shenanigans.




In March of 2021, BYU students and faculty, led by a brave BYU senior named Bradley Talbot, hiked to the large white Y on the mountain above Provo and lit it up for an hour with rainbow-colored lights as a show of support for all LGBTQ+ students and members of the community at large. As a BYU graduate myself, an ally to the queer community, and an avid hiker...I was THRILLED to see the rainbow display and thought, "Oh my gosh, I wish I could've helped with that!!"




Group lights BYU's 'Y' on mountain with rainbow-colored lights

'This wasn't a protest. It was mostly just to say we're here, we belong,' said Provo's Joshua Warden

By Tad Walch, March 4, 2021 11:46 p.m. MST





A group hiked Y Mountain in Provo, Utah, with handheld LED lamps to light it in rainbow colors for one hour in support of LGBTQ students on Thursday, March 4, 2021.

BYU tweeted out the infamous words, "BYU did not authorize the lighting of the Y tonight", and while many Cougar fans groaned over the missed opportunity to express solidarity with their queer students and faculty, other local universities jumped at the opportunity to express their own support.



After the first Y lighting, Utah State University, The University of Utah, and Utah Valley University all decorated their own campuses in rainbow colors in direct support of LGBTQ+ BYU students.

Fast forward less than a year and BYU was again in the news, this time for canceling services to transgender students receiving voice therapy at their speech clinic. Around the same time, friend of the Exponent blog (and personal friend of mine) Kris Irvin passed away – a former BYU student and transgender/non-binary Latter-day Saint themselves. ([Click here to see Exponent's tribute to Kris.](#)) At Kris' memorial, I was slipped the secret information that Bradley Talbot (now graduated) was again coordinating not only another rainbow lighting of the Y but an additional lighting in the colors of the transgender flag (blue, pink and white). I begged to be added to the secret notification list and was thrilled to add my name to it the day it posted – in the #2 slot directly below Bradley Talbot himself. I was so excited.



The trans flag has two traditional light blue stripes for baby boys, pink stripes for baby girls, and a white stripe in the middle for those who are transitioning, feel they have a neutral gender or no gender, and those who are intersex. There are a lot of really, really cool people who spend at least some of their lives in that white strip.

At first there were rumors the police might get involved if we hiked to light the Y again, but that seemed unlikely because what we were doing (shining flashlights) hardly amounted to any level of vandalism, and BYU had been allowed to purchase Y Mountain only with the express promise that they would always allow public access to it. But as the date of the hike approached, these rumors turned more scare inducing, and they were updated to say that if we agreed to hike and light the Y we would be risking arrest, a \$1,000 fine and a class B misdemeanor.

First grader Abby would've been horrified at the prospect, but forty year old me didn't mind at all. I'm a stay at home mom. I manage my own rental properties. Who's going to fire me or care if I have a criminal record? Will my family not let me make them Sunday dinner if I have a rap sheet? Will my tenants run a background check on *me*? I had little risk.

Meanwhile, many people who did have things to risk dropped off the list (single parents, licensed therapists, high school teachers, etc). BYU students and faculty were also no longer allowed to participate because of concerns that the university would withdraw their employment or enrollment, so those signed up were now mostly parents of LGBTQ kids and allies.

BYU took a step further in anticipation of us lighting the Y again and placed an orange fence on the trail at the bottom and top of the Y to keep everyone (hikers or demonstrators) off of it. I read explosive posts in my local online hiking groups complaining about the situation, with debates over people like me being hailed as either heroes or villains and garnering hundreds of comments.

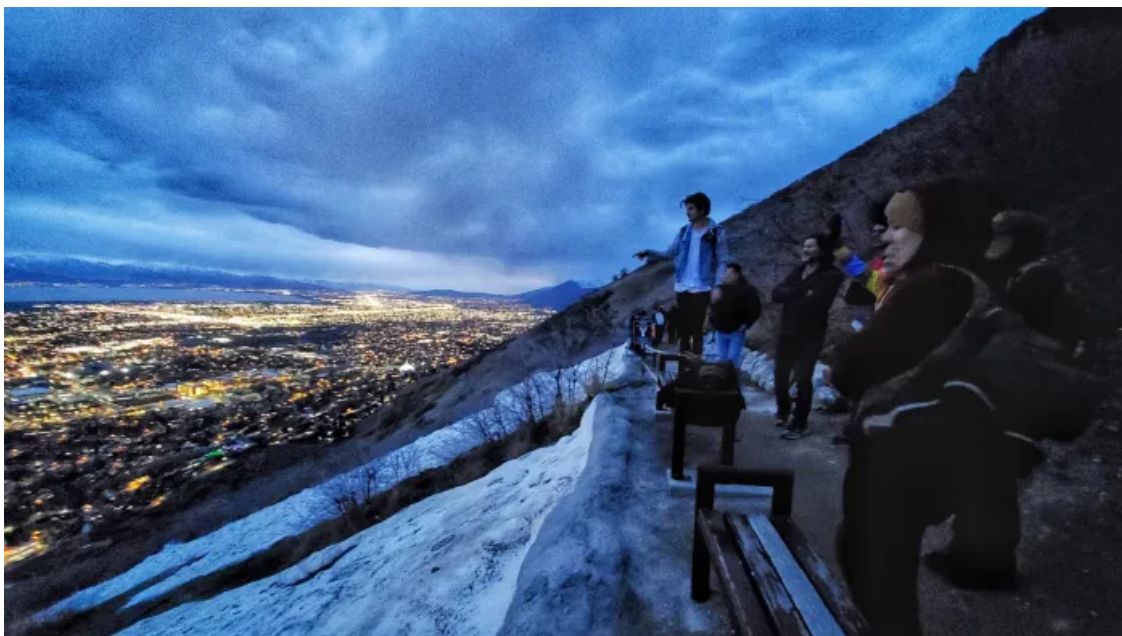
The first scheduled hike date arrived... and then had to be postponed for weather. We rescheduled for the next weekend... and had to postpone AGAIN for weather. Each time it was rescheduled, more people dropped off the list. Bradley joked that God was testing him when his next rescheduled date showed rain and snow once again in the forecast. They decided to reschedule it a third time, and moved it one day up – with only about half of the volunteer slots filled a few hours before go time. By this time absolutely no one I had originally signed up with was still able to come and I had a tight turn around having been out of town until only an hour or two before... but Saturday night I packed my backpack, fought down my nervousness, and headed to Provo to collect my colored lights and hike the mountain

at sunset.

At our secret meeting location, I immediately found friends I'd known from years of participation at Pride Festivals with the group Mormons Building Bridges. We signed up for light positions near each other at the top of the Y and carpooled to the trailhead where we began the hike up. The time went quickly and before we knew it we were in place, waiting for instructions from an entertaining guy who announced to us he was our "Top Leader".



My hiking group on the way to the top. (I'm in the red shirt.) This is at the bottom of the Y, where you can see how easily you can just walk around the orange fencing. At the top the fence was rolled up and we just walked right through to our assigned spots.



Here we are getting our instructions from our Top Leader on the bench. The anticipatory mood was excited, nervous, and fun.

Before getting our lights at the park we'd had to agree that we knew the risks involved with our participation that day, including arrest and a steep fine (although kind donors had promised to cover those and lawyers had promised to represent us). We were given instructions on how to speak to police officers, how to ask to leave, to request to speak with our lawyer (who we'd never met but they promised us existed), and not to consent to a search of our backpacks. After all of this buildup and while joking about the matching tattoos we'd get in prison, we noticed police cars pull into the trailhead below.



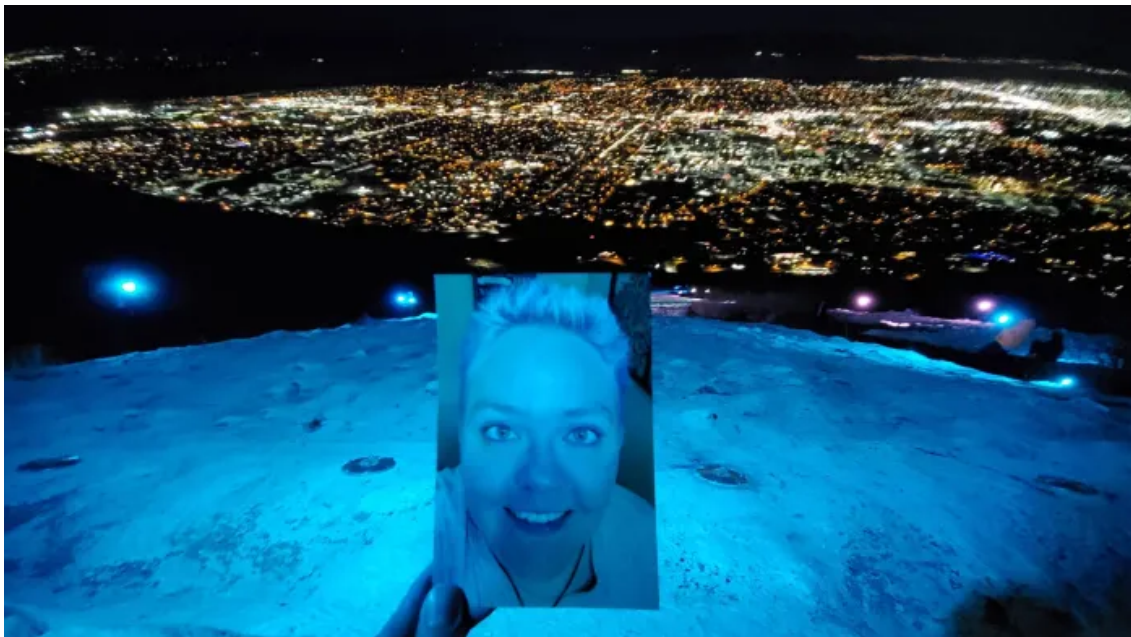
This was my view as the sky darkened and we waited for the lighting to start. The white material that kind of looks like snow is actually the top right-hand section of the 380 foot tall Y.

We weren't sure what would happen next, as the BYU police had access to ATVs that could get them up the trail in a matter of minutes. We were sweaty from the hike up and the temperature was dropping, so we pulled out our sweatshirts and jackets and waited for instructions to turn on our lights.

When the word came, I turned on my blue light at the top of the trans colored Y and heard cheers explode from down below. There were two teenage boys sitting on a bench near me, who'd happened to hike to the Y at the exact same time as us and stayed to watch the show. One called his mom and told her to look at the mountain. She said to him, "I hope every person up there gets arrested!" Despite her misgivings he must've not been too intimidated by my criminal activity, because I asked him right after to hold my light while I took a picture and he said, "Sure".



The silhouette in the middle of this picture is the nice teenager holding my light.



Before taking the light back I took this photo of the late Kris Irvin, knowing they would want to be there for this moment, too.

Sometime during all of this BYU security arrived at the bottom of the Y, too far away from me to see or hear at first. While we'd worried about multiple police officers on ATVs coming to arrest us, it turned out to be one lone security guard on foot. He started at the bottom of the Y and worked his way up to the top where I was. At first people shouted instructions, "Don't talk to him! You have the right to remain silent! Don't answer his questions!", but I was told he kindly and calmly said to everyone, "I'm sorry. I'm not a bad person. I'm just doing my job. I have to tell you to cease and desist or you will receive citations." Then he professionally and courteously moved from group to group, engaging in conversation and not demanding we shut our lights off immediately or escalating the situation in any

way. We had hoped to light the Y for an hour (30 minutes trans colors, 30 minutes rainbow), and were able to do about half of that before shutting everything down and leaving.



The red at the top of the rainbow Y, my second color assignment.

My own interaction with the BYU security guard came at the very end, as he told me, "I just want to make sure everyone gets down safely. There's a lot of loose rocks and it's dark. If anyone needs help, we have an EMT in the parking lot." Then he hiked down alongside our group members, deep in conversation with a gay former BYU professor who he'd met on the opposite side of the Y from me named Kendall Wilcox. Kendall posted in detail about their interaction on his public Facebook wall, including a video recording of the officer sitting down next to him on the Y and beginning to cry. [I highly recommend checking Kendall's experience out at this link.](#)

As we hikers approached the trailhead parking lot, we heard cheers and hooting and whistles. As word spread that the Y was lit up, people had jumped in their cars from as far away as Spanish Fork and hurried to the trailhead to greet us as we returned. Some had brought their gay or trans kids to see it in person, and others had come simply to give us hugs and tell us thank you. A woman shouted to my group, "Yay! Whoo hooo! Good job hiking!", while clapping enthusiastically. I was told that one Provo cop remained in the parking lot, staying behind in case of any trouble, but not interfering in any way. We'd been told to act inconspicuous and return our lights before leaving quietly (so my friend zipped his coat up over his bright rainbow shirt), but the groups cheering at the bottom made for a party-like atmosphere, like finishing a race or being in a parade. It felt so good to have been there, and I was grateful everything had gone so incredibly well.

I didn't help light the Y as a protest or to embarrass BYU or the church. I did it because when I was a student at BYU twenty years ago I didn't think I knew a single gay person, and I'd never even heard the

word transgender. My favorite sociology professor once told my class about a secret “gay underground” at BYU and I’d laughed, because I literally couldn’t imagine someone being LDS and gay. But in the years that have passed many friends from my college years have come out, and they’ve spoken about how terrifyingly alone they’d felt in Provo. I loved BYU, and realizing that my blissful ignorance happened in the same environment that some of my peers contemplated suicide is heartbreaking to me. There were plenty of queer students at BYU with me back then, and there are just as many of them now. I don’t want any of them to feel as painfully isolated as my closeted friends did in the past.

I know there are people who (like the mom of my teenage friend who held my light) will wish we’d been arrested. I also know there will be people sympathetic to the cause, but (just like my first-grade self refusing to move my desk) not be okay with trespassing no matter how noble the reason.

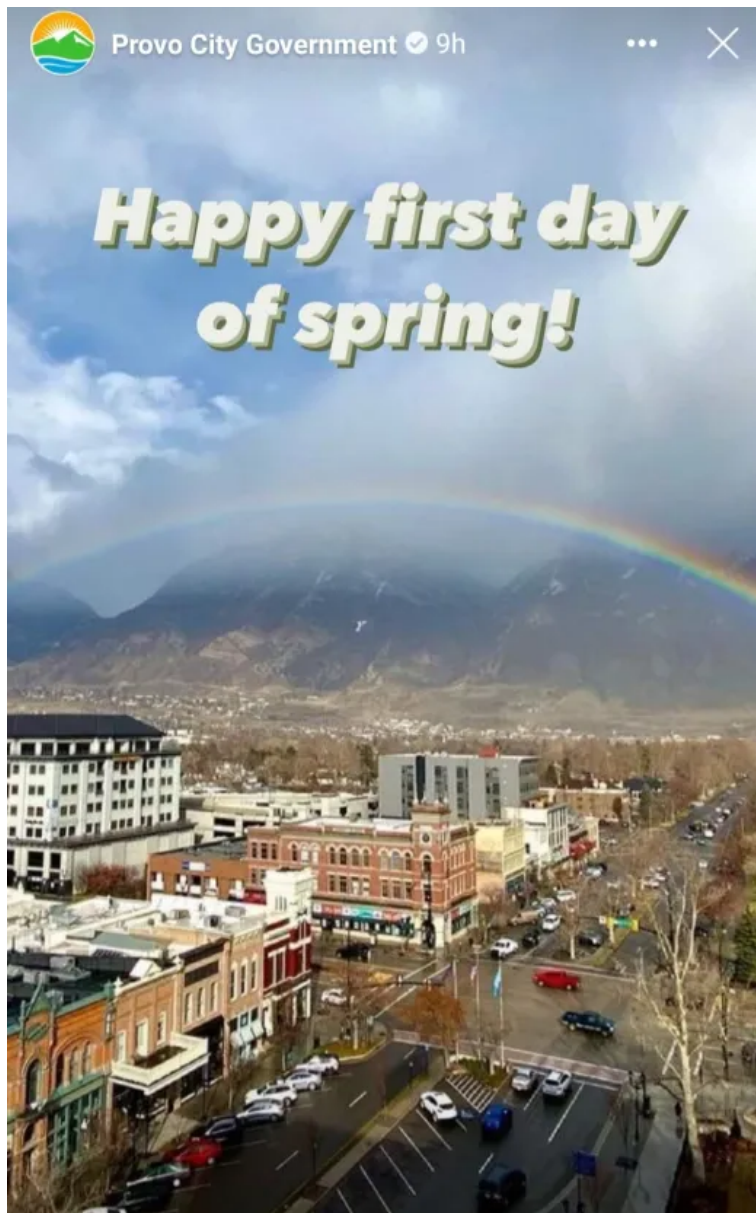
That’s okay. You don’t have to love what we did or how we did it, but no matter what side of the issue you’re on, I sincerely hope you’ll choose to show love to every single queer person within the reach of your voice. Even if there’s nothing else that we can agree on, I hope we can agree on the one most important thing of all – showing Christ-like love to the very least of these.



You can see with the arrows I drew where my lights were in both the trans and rainbow parts of the light display.



At the far right is Bradley Talbot, the BYU grad who led this whole event, and who we should all probably be voting for as American president somewhere down the road. Hulu was there filming a documentary featuring him, and we had to agree on camera that we understood recordings of us could be subpoenaed into a court of law if BYU pressed charges. (Which thankfully didn't happen.) I can't wait for his streaming debut, and I'm so glad I got to be part of his event!



The day after the rainbow lighting, Provo City Government posted a photo of the Y with a large rainbow across the entire Y Mountain. Maybe this was complete and total happenstance, but I like to imagine we have a secret fan on the inside there.