



# FROM OUTSIDER TO INSIDER

Why Do I Share My Journey of Personal Acceptance? Because It Leads to Positive Change

By *Gary Gassman*

**F**or as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a lawyer. It was ingrained at an early age, along with the knowledge that I was different—an outsider with my own voice that, in time, helped with the realization that I was gay. Since then, the journey has been interesting, and not without its hurdles. But, with far

more successes than setbacks, I am very proud to share the path I have forged.

My mom was, and still is, a progressive thinker who taught me to respect others and different perspectives, to provide opportunities and a voice to people from marginalized communities, and to promote fairness and help other diverse people gain equal ground. But when I was a young lawyer, in the early

1990s, being “out” in this profession—being free to be myself and speak my personal truth—seemed like a dream. At that time, it felt like something I could not realize without suffering great consequence in my career. And so, many like me lived two different, separate lives—one personal and one professional—never feeling comfortable in either place. In some ways, we felt



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luckier than other diverse communities, as we were able to hide who we were and steer clear of unfortunate and debilitating prejudice.

Whether in the law firm setting, the judiciary, corporate America, or at an insurance company, those of us who were from “other” marginalized communities learned to overcompensate for our differences. Many of us became overachievers, took on every major project, and worked late as well as every weekend. We did things to stand out from our peers in terms of production so that our otherness was not the basis for comparison and would not provide the pretext for criticism. “Let the work speak for itself and the rest will follow,” was the credo for many of us and the only thing that kept us going.

Achievement stimulates confidence, and, as my career developed, I found allies and champions who could assist me, speak for me, and help lift me up. The more successful I became, the more accolades I received, and, in turn, the more honest I became with myself and everyone around me. Through those supportive relationships, I slowly became secure enough to live life in the open and begin to chip away at the barriers that those in my generation faced, and I learned the importance of doing more to champion those following behind me. I have made a point of being an outspoken advocate for living personal truth.

As a law firm partner and bar association leader, I have taken on the charge of helping younger lawyers and other professionals navigate law firm and bar association issues while being authentic and true to themselves. I am consistently vocal about my sexuality—and about diversity, equity, and inclusivity as a whole—to ensure that all people have equal opportunities to succeed. The quality of the work speaks for itself and should be the benchmark against which all lawyers are judged. In my experience, the best work comes from people who are not burdened with the stress of hiding who they are or who fear for their livelihood if they do not

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satisfy some antiquated societal norm.

Admittedly, we are in a vastly different world today. Younger generations have greater freedom to be themselves. They revel in it, and in many aspects of our society, diversity is sought, encouraged, and required. However, the legal community still has work to do. It remains difficult for many to navigate the line between personal and professional life and finding a work-life balance. I am fortunate to be at a law firm that is extremely supportive of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and my passion in that space. Cozen O’Connor not only encourages me to champion LGBTQ+ lawyers, but also those from other marginalized and diverse communities. We are continuing to increase the number of diverse lawyers at every level, which is exciting. Our summer associate classes are overwhelmingly diverse. I never thought I would see that day. It’s exhilarating.

I am an insurance coverage lawyer. I counsel insurance clients about coverage, litigation, claims exposure, and resolution. I communicate with in-house insurance professionals, other lawyers, judges, and mediators virtually every day. While I have had several LGBTQ+ clients over the years, not surprisingly, the vast majority of my clients are straight, white, and know that I am gay. Though I assumed I would be more comfortable with gay clients, speaking freely about our lives, struggles, and triumphs both professionally and personally, I have made refreshingly similar connections with all of my clients. In fact, I have found insurance claims operations to be particularly welcoming in their interactions, as they actively seek a diversity of perspectives

from their outside counsel. They expect and highly value counselors whose experiences are not the same and who have faced different hurdles with varying trajectories, as long as the quality of the work is at the highest level.

As a member of Cozen O’Connor’s diversity committee and leader of our LGBTQ+ attorney resource group, and as the American Bar Association Tort Trial & Insurance Practice Section (TIPS) diversity officer, vice chair, and chair-elect, I find my clients regularly seek my advice on issues impacting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Just having these conversations opens the door to a greater understanding of other people’s experiences and perspectives, which enhances the interpersonal relationships of all those involved.

We have come so far and yet we have so much more to do at every level, in every workplace, to protect our future. As we all struggle with an evolving workforce and the current challenges in hiring and retaining lawyers and other professionals, it is imperative to remember how important it is for diverse individuals to see people who look like them in leadership positions, whether in a law firm or an insurance claims organization. That is the truest way to make people feel welcome and non-marginalized, and to support personnel recruitment and retention. I hope that I can continue to make a difference in the lives of everyone I encounter—be they client, colleague, or friend—and further champion my fellow “others” to ensure that we all reap the benefits of broader and more diverse perspectives in our futures. ■