



SPECIAL REPORT: DIVERSITY IN LAW



Inclusive environments

Diversity starts with small steps, says Jody Briandi of Hurwitz & Fine PC. Learn what WNY law firms are doing to make initiatives a priority.

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Making inclusion commonplace



Jody Briandi, member at Hurwitz & Fine PC

BY PATRICK CONNELLY
Buffalo Law Journal

Netflix regularly makes headlines, but a recent story highlighted a piece of news outside its usual activity of turning the TV industry on its head.

The company announced that Verna Myers was appointed to a new executive position. She will serve as Netflix vice president for inclusion strategy and will help devise and implement strategies that integrate cultural diversity, inclusion and equity into all aspects of the company's operations worldwide, reports said.

The move is one of the more recent among a changing guard in the business world that has made diversity and inclusion a priority.

It's part of a growing movement, no doubt spurred by millennials, that takes employers to task with a desire to see action rather than regurgitated fluff in how they treat acceptance in the workplace.

Western New York law firms have taken heed of that mindset and made initiatives a focus.

Jody Briandi, member at Hurwitz & Fine PC, is one of the people in Buffalo who lead diversity initiatives for their respective firms.

"I think you actually have to take it a step back and you have to, as a firm, understand why diversity and inclusion is important," Briandi said. "You have to recognize that within your organization by being more diverse. (Then you will see) that we as lawyers are going to better serve our clients, who are also diverse."

She and the firm view certain initiatives as building blocks toward D&I, such as hiring practices; networking with groups such as the Minority Bar Association of Western New York; and the establishment of a relationship with students while they're still in law school.

"(D&I is) a hot topic right now, and I think we all see that. But as a firm, we recognized

a long time ago that if we all looked the same, if we all had the same backgrounds, if we all came from the same place, we were not going to be able to serve our clients in the creative and innovative way that we want to be," Briandi said. "It's not always easy to accomplish.

"I think you have to understand it's a process and that it doesn't happen overnight. ... You have to commit to it and you have to have those building blocks along the way to hopefully achieve the end result."

Workplace initiatives require a company to be committed to the endeavor and completely invested, said Rekha Chiruvolu, Nixon Peabody LLP's director of D&I.

"It really is something that is an ongoing process with no one-size-fits-all answers," she said.

The firm set up D&I groups in its offices around the country. Attorneys schedule lunches to discuss issues and areas that need improvement. They talk on conference calls with corresponding groups at

other offices to hear what they've done that was effective.

"We allow each office on a local level to figure out how they want to engage," Chiruvolu said.

Different initiatives have worked well but various others didn't so the firm moved on.

Nonetheless, they helped Nixon Peabody earn a perfect score on the Corporate Equality Index for 13 straight years. The index is an annual report produced by the Human Rights Campaign that evaluates LGBTQ-related workplace policies and practices.

D&I is part of the firm's strategic plan and an important part of recruitment and both professional and business development, Chiruvolu said.

"It is seen as part of every one of those functions. ... What we've done here is really try to integrate it (into everything)," she said.

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REKHA CHIRUVOLU



JODYANN GALVIN



ROBERT HEARY



KIMBERLY NASON



LISA SMITH

Barclay Damon LLP

About 10 years ago, a committee comprised of partners at what is now Barclay Damon LLP started to examine what the firm could do internally and externally to build on efforts, partner Robert Heary said.

Now there's a quarterly newsletter devoted to a topic in the D&I realm that's used to educate attorneys and staff. There also are lunch-and-learn discussions that feature an expert for added perspective, Heary said.

"We've learned over the years (that D&I is) something that requires continual focus," he said. "You need to have leadership. And by that I mean the highest levels of leadership ... be supportive. ... We have very strong support in our leadership."

A lot of that has been fueled by younger attorneys at various offices who have organized discussions, workshops and more, he said.

"We think it is that important to get everybody fully engaged in the process," he said.

The partner committee and practice group leaders use retreats to learn from resources on what the firm can do better. They incorporate what they learn into the hiring process, too.

"We work with the firm's recruitment partner and also with the associates' committee in terms of trying to ensure that we're casting a wide net to bring in diverse candidates," Heary said. "We have increased our outreach beyond sort of traditional avenues for recruitment to ensure that we're reaching out to diverse groups to try and have the widest candidate pool we can."

Hodgson Russ LLP

Attorneys at the firm are long-

time supporters of Buffalo Prep, an enrichment program that helps middle and high schoolers learn study skills and more as they get ready for the next step in their education.

That involvement and more led the firm to devise D&I initiatives in three areas, said Jodyann Galvin, partner and chair of Hodgson's committee for attorney recruitment, development and diversity.

"Our approach is ... a combination of education on a regular basis, with a reasonable dosage, combined with providing all manners of different opportunities to partake in activities (that attorneys and staff) otherwise wouldn't engage in," she said.

Programs are organized into buckets for internal education, community involvement and student outreach to the next generation of legal professionals, Galvin added.

"Diversity and inclusion is a self-perpetuating issue for law firms of all sizes," she said. "I think we had a lot of catching up to do as a profession, but we're making good strides."

In one program, Buffalo Prep students and alumni interested in legal careers visit Hodgson for an internship day full of workshops.

"It's great helping them to get their networks off the ground and talking about some of the challenges ... they will face," Galvin said.

The firm has a college scholarship in which attorneys stay in contact with the student through their education, as well.

For LGBTQ awareness, attorneys annually march with employees of M&T Bank for the Pride Week Parade in June.

In women's initiatives, Galvin said attorneys from her firm and others helped launch the WNY Women's Foundation's "All In" initiative, which is focused on making Buffalo and beyond a more

vibrant space where women can reach their professional potential.

"I think 'All In' is going to be a very interesting and groundbreaking place for us to have an impact when it comes to gender equality," she said.

Hurwitz & Fine

To pair with her double major while in college, Briandi took classes in women's studies toward a minor.

"I became really interested and involved in women's issues," she said. "I became passionate about my advancement professionally as a woman and I wanted to understand what challenges I would face and how I should handle those challenges. I also wanted to know what needed to be changed (when I finished law school) moving forward as a female attorney."

Years later, that drive prompted her to be part of Hurwitz & Fine's D&I initiatives.

"We're not just dealing with gender issues. This goes beyond gender issues and diversity and inclusion," Briandi said. "I think at the very core of that is the idea of engaging all and bringing everyone to the table, regardless of gender, race, your ethnic background, your sexual orientation. ... I think now we take it from a more holistic viewpoint and we want to engage with all of these people."

Part of the firm's strategy is to have everyone be involved, she said. The firm encourages attorneys to be active in bar associations, nonprofits and community groups so they can bring ideas back.

Briandi said she's learned quite a bit from the Buffalo Niagara Partnership's D&I committee — namely, that education is imperative.

"We're lawyers; we're not nec-

essarily experts in this field," she said. "By having our lawyers out there, that brings the information back."

Nixon Peabody

Chiruvolu, an attorney, has been Nixon Peabody's director of D&I since 2015. It was a newly created position at the time.

She is based in the Los Angeles office and brought with her to the job what she learned about D&I while working in career services at the UCLA School of Law.

"They were open to fresh ideas," she said of Nixon Peabody. "Sometimes we try things and they don't work. We are OK with that."

A newer activity at the firm's offices around the country is designed for women, she said. The firm invites special guests, clients and other contacts for a networking reception that features a "talk show" format Q&A panel.

Guests so far have included people from a variety of industries, such as entertainment, media and the restaurant world, Chiruvolu said.

D&I is part of the firm's mission to improve retention of employees and recruitment. The firm tries to incorporate the themes into everything it does, she said.

She sees more firms with a devoted executive overseeing D&I.

"It is a growing trend," she said.

In getting started with new initiatives, it's crucial for teams to set realistic goals and have a list of action items they aim to achieve.

"There are a lot of small victories in this," Chiruvolu said.

Phillips Lytle LLP

Partner Lisa Smith and Senior Associate Kimberly Nason co-chair the firm's Women's Resource Group.

"That's one of many initiatives we have regarding diversity," Smith said.

Phillips Lytle is nearing the 30th anniversary of a scholarship program it has with the University at Buffalo School of Law for minority students with financial needs, one of the first of its kind at its advent.

Other programs at the firm are what Phillips Lytle considers "pipeline" programs, Smith said.

In one program, attorneys visit schools and help with a mock trial for students.

"They are a lot of fun for us and hopefully they are meaningful for the kids," she said. "The whole idea is to encourage students to think about law as a pathway."

Phillips Lytle also has an annual leadership conference at its Buffalo offices and invites students from inner-city schools and rural areas. The firm hosts resume and interview workshops and has a panel of attorneys discuss their journey to a legal profession. This year's event featured Lt. Gov. Kathleen Hochul.

The women's group is a newer project but so far staff has been highly engaged, Nason said.

"It's creating a platform for discussion of issues that female attorneys may face throughout their careers and coming up with different initiatives," she said. "It's aimed at promoting the development of female attorneys. ... The group is meant to be a resource, like its name, to provide mentoring opportunities for other females at the firm and host events that are open to the entire firm."

On June 11, the firm will sponsor a diversity reception in conjunction with the New York State Bar Association.

"It's just a casual get-together and another way we want to encourage and support diverse attorneys, not just within the firm but out in the community," Smith said.