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December 4, 2019

Law School News

Broadening the Perspective

One of the nation's first out transgender law partners in BigLaw talks about making a place for trans lawyers – and what the profession stands to gain from the effort.



Blake Liggio, a transgender law partner at Goodwin Proctor LLP in Boston, delivers the 3rd Annual Stonewall Lecture at RWU Law.

Image Credit: RWU Law/Andrea Hansen

December 4, 2019

Michael M. Bowden

The third annual Stonewall Lecture at Roger Williams University School of Law was unusual in that it played out more like a conversation, with a sizeable audience of students, faculty and staff driving the discussion through an engaging series of questions and answers, while the prepared remarks of this year's speaker, Blake Liggio, Esq., served as more of a prologue.

Liggio, a [partner](#) with [Goodwin Proctor LLP](#) in Boston, is one of the nation's first out transgender law partners in [BigLaw](#). His professional focus is on mergers and acquisitions, as

well as the intersection of real estate and technology. He received his bachelor's degree from Colby College in 2003, and his J.D. from Northeastern in 2009.

Liggio opened his comments with a reference to the 50th anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, which marked a critical turn in the fight for LGBTQ rights, serving as the impetus for the formation of several gay, lesbian and bisexual civil rights organizations. He noted that currently "the legal industry is experiencing a similar moment and time of positive change," and suggested that his experience in the decade since his law school graduation illustrated that evolution.

"The legal industry has traditionally been a relatively homogenous profession," Liggio said, but today, it is in the process of opening up to new perspectives and experiences, and "many organizations now are really realizing the benefits of diversity and equity and inclusion in all different subsectors of lawyering."

He went on to narrate this evolution through the prism of his own experience.

"These environments should be able to withstand you being who you are. That's true equity, true inclusion, and really where we're trying to get to."

~ Blake Liggio, Partner, Goodwin Proctor LLP

Liggio first worked for Goodwin Proctor as a summer associate in 2008. He decided not to come out at that time, however, because (1) the Great Recession of 2008 was looming and jobs under any terms were precious, and (2) he could find "no precedent" for how a trans person coming out might be treated in BigLaw.

After receiving a hard offer from Goodwin, however, Liggio "started to talk to the firm gradually about the fact that I'd be coming back as a male named Blake, and what that meant."

The firm, it turned out, was open to assisting Liggio in the transition, but it was still very much "a learning experience," he said, with much of the burden for driving the process resting squarely on his shoulders. "It was a sharp learning curve, and we basically created a policy that helped facilitate my integration. We had some hiccups along the way, but generally I went in with a positive attitude, and it was a collaborative process."

Today, Liggio said, things are a bit easier for trans lawyers in BigLaw.

"Certainly since I started my career, organizations have made a ton of progress on not having that burden of integration rest on the employee," he said. "For example, I'm proud what we've accomplished at Goodwin, because I know that the next trans employee coming through the door is going to be able to just get down to work. These environments should be able to withstand you being who you are. That's my goal for the work that we're doing. I think that's true equity, true inclusion, and that's really where we're trying to get to. And I will continue to devote a lot of energy to making that process better."

He is gratified to see more and more legal organizations following suit.

“Law firms – and law schools, for that matter – are starting to preemptively address these issues, preparing in the abstract to welcome trans students and trans employees,” he said. “I think best practices require preparation, not just waiting to address the issue when it occurs.”

Liggio explained, “It’s about not being reactive, but rather proactively creating that type of inclusive environment – that’s what’s really key. Some of it involves policies, too. A checklist of all the things we do – for example, bathroom equality. That may sound silly, but for trans people it’s complicated. Or making sure that the IT people know. Or that your building badge is changed. All of these things that you wouldn’t necessarily think about – those are precisely the types of things we need to sit down and really weed through.”

In the end, however, the effort yields benefits not just for the trans community, but for the legal profession as a whole.

“What we do as lawyers, no matter what our specialty, is to solve people’s problems,” he said. “And for that, ensuring the presence of different experiences and various viewpoints is invaluable. It’s much more preferable to have a team that with a diversity of viewpoints. It makes us, and the fabric of our organization, deeper and more capable of effectively solving our clients’ problems.”

‘Just Showing Up’

Navigating the administrative aspects of integration with a large law firm, however, is just the beginning of the challenge for trans lawyers.

“I’m not going to sit here and tell you that today, as a trans person, you’re going to walk into that large of an organization, and everybody is going to understand you, or have experience working with or being exposed to a trans person,” Liggio said.

Rather than taking an “activist” approach, however, and trying to force people to confront their prejudice or discomfort, Liggio chooses to simply let his presence, qualifications and skills do the talking.

His approach is “just showing up to work and showing people that trans people are there,” he said. “That we just want to have jobs, have families, live the life that we’ve always wanted to have in the absence of the potentially burdensome condition of our identity.”

Of course, the process isn’t completely friction-free. But today, Liggio feels fully accepted as an integral part of Goodwin Proctor’s leadership.

“There were certainly people whom I had to educate and bring along,” he said. “But generally I would say the effort has been a tremendous success for the firm.”

One audience member asked Liggio how enlightened corporate policies translate into actual interactions with perhaps less-enlightened clients. The questioner noted, “Sometimes it seems like a firm would say, ‘We’re happy with you, but we have to make our clients happy too.’”

Liggio acknowledged it was an issue.

“One of the challenges for trans people is maneuvering situations like that,” Liggio replied. “Unfortunately, I think it’s a burden that we bear right now, that we have to just get through. You become very perceptive about your environment. You start to read relationships with clients, and you sit back and observe. For me personally, when I ‘show up,’ it’s always with authenticity. I mean, I don’t have a little note pinned to my back when I walk into a client meeting – but clients can ascertain this information about me.”

In fact, most clients arrive with this knowledge at the first meeting.

“Nowadays, they Google you,” Liggio explained with a smile. “When they hire a lawyer, that’s what they do.”

In professional interactions, the fact that he is trans is “never something that is directly addressed until I really get close with a client,” he added. “I do sometimes pick up on some awkwardness at the beginning of relationships, but as soon as you start to demonstrate that you’re doing the job, it goes away. Because at the end of the day, what clients want is the best lawyer. So that’s where I try to get to.”

As Liggio’s meteoric rise at Goodwin suggests, he is prodigiously capable of getting there.

“I love mergers,” he said. “You’re working with these big companies, you’re combining them, you’re in corporate boardrooms – it’s a high-octane job, and I’m a high-octane person. Certainly, in the environment of a BigLaw firm, you’re going 100 miles an hour from day one.”

But the nagging sense that he has to prove himself can still persist.

“I often feel that I have to do everything three times better than the next person,” Liggio said. “And I know that other people who happen to be minorities – specifically in the legal profession – also grapple with that feeling. But I think that clients – like law firms – are gradually coming around to the idea that having diverse lawyers is very valuable.”

He added, “I lived a tremendous amount of my life as a woman, and women solve problems very differently than men do. So in a way, I feel almost like it’s a blessing that I got to experience both ways of thinking.

“I think it makes me a better lawyer.”