

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Fishing Fearlessly & Generously

Posted: 21 May 2009 11:14 AM PDT

My friend Noreen jumped right into her kayak upon her arrival in Provincetown, paddled out into the choppy waves of the harbor where the sea birds were congregating, and caught a 35-inch striped bass. It was one of 12 (keeping three) such fish that she hauled into her small boat over a day and a half, somehow managing not to tip over into the icy waters of Cape Cod Bay. She's fearless and she's generous. She shared filets of the bass, our favorite fish, with Ray and me.

Noreen is an openly gay FBI agent who is also fearlessly and generously creating change in attitudes and behaviors toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in her agency. With a small handful of other agency members, and with the strong support of U.S. Congressman Barney Frank, Noreen is navigating waters where most others wouldn't dare paddle, row, sail, or motor. At a Gay Awareness Month breakfast at the FBI in June, which will feature Barney Frank as the speaker, Noreen Gleason is bringing her family—her spouse of 21 years, Jennifer, and their 10-year-old daughter.

As we all know, changes in company policy and practices regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people can be slow in coming and require enormous hard work and patience in the best of circumstances. But when change in attitudes is sought in a U.S. government agency, where the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) forbids recognition of same-sex relationships, and all military groups require gay and lesbian employees to remain closeted ("Don't Ask, Don't Tell"), it is a heroic act to take on the challenge.

Nevertheless, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and straight people in government agencies are doing it with remarkable success. From my experience, making progress requires fearlessness and generosity on the part of at least three groups of people: Gay and transgender people who step forward and put faces on the issues, strongly supportive heterosexual senior managers who commit the agency to action, and the open-minded heterosexual employees who choose to move forward rather than resist change.

Noreen is a wonderful example of the first group, as is Kim Nelson at the National Security Agency (NSA), Christopher Bannochie at Savannah River Nuclear Solutions (SRNS), and countless others from the departments of Justice, Defense, Energy, Health and Human Services, and Agriculture with whom I have worked or from whom I have heard over the past few years. Of these, the agencies with the most floating mines in the water are those involving the military or which are paramilitary in nature. For that reason, it's particularly gratifying to get a strong statement of support from a heterosexual director of an agency concerned with national defense.

"On a personal note," wrote Chuck Munns, CEO of SRNS in his recent memo to all employees on the formation of the gay employee resource group, "I have spent my professional life dedicated to protecting this country and the freedoms that it affords its citizens. A particular strength of the

American people is the tolerance—indeed, the advocacy—of divergent viewpoints, even when those views may be in conflict with our own. That is one aspect that makes us strong. Even when viewpoints may be in conflict with our own, we should remember that freedom from discrimination—of any kind—is a principle that is important to us all."

Similarly powerful statements of endorsement for creating a safe and productive work environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees have been made by the directors at most government agencies at which I have spoken, including the NSA. Such strong personal messages from executive leadership make it clear to all employees that the decision to be inclusive and to value the diversity represented by gay and transgender employees is not open to debate.

What must happen next for all businesses to move forward is for heterosexual employees to proactively support their gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender colleagues. This happens most successfully when the company or government agency provides education on the issues. It is only with education that any of us are able to move out of the ignorance that breeds fear, and the fear that breeds hatred. As some of you may recall, a year ago I was brought into the NSA to provide such training for all senior managers. Because I understand that information on the challenges that we gay and transgender people face in our lives is not only professionally relevant to members of the audience, but also personally relevant, I urge them each to go home and discuss the presentation I made with their families.

As I have related to audiences globally since that talk at the NSA, I heard the day after my session there from a senior manager who did as I suggested and discussed with his family that evening my presentation on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. A couple of hours later, his college-age daughter, feeling that she could now do so safely, came out as a lesbian to her father.

In today's e-mail, I received an update from the father. He wrote to say that as a result of the training and of his daughter coming out, he has now taken an active role at NSA in promoting gay and transgender issues, and in effectively creating further understanding in the agency. This wonderful man is a great example of the heterosexual government or corporate employee who was required to attend a diversity presentation on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender workplace issues and who, as a result, found himself or herself gladly and eagerly navigating the waters of cultural change.

While my friend Noreen was in her kayak, alone with the striped bass that were drawn to the herring and sand eels that had attracted the attention of the birds, she was approached by boatloads of men fishing without the same success.

"How are you doing it?" they asked.

"You have to be quiet," she advised the group whom she felt were making too much noise moving around the boat, talking to each other, and constantly changing their gear. They were scaring the fish.

As they moved on in search of fish, leaving Noreen alone with her thoughts about the changes she was seeking to make at the FBI, I hope that she took comfort in knowing that there were others like

her, fishing waters in other places, fearlessly facing the challenges, and generously giving it all that they had. Thank you all for sharing the catch of your labors with us.