Rhode Island Bar Association Leadership Q&A

Christopher Gerlica, Esq.



Christopher Gerlica (he/him/his) is currently an Assistant Director of Career Development at Roger Williams University School of Law. Prior to joining the RWU Law staff, he had a solo practice based in Newport County focused on insurance subrogation and family law. He was originally a Michigan native, but has happily made Rhode Island home for the last 12 years. He is a graduate of Grand Valley State University and Roger Williams University School of Law. Since joining the Bar Association, Christopher has been an active member of a variety of committees and is currently a Co-Chair of the LGBT Legal Issues Committee.

What do diversity and inclusion mean to you, both personally and professionally?

Diversity, equity, and inclusion issues have been near to me for most of my life. I consider myself lucky that I grew up in a part of the country that while somewhat segregated due to issues like red-lining, it was still relatively diverse. I grew up seeing signs in Arabic or Spanish, seeing political leaders in my area on tv who did not look like me, and had friends of many different faiths. I think I first realized how unique my upbringing was during my freshmen year at a predominately white university and it was so obvious to me that my lived experiences were not the same as everyone else's. Growing up with such a variety of opinion and experiences allowed me to start seeing how the world looked through other people's eyes and how important and valued that perspective is. Not everyone has had my experiences, and that does not make their experiences or mine lesser or better, just different and with value.

Further, I am an out gay man. When I was in college, my home state passed a Constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. Up until last year's *Bostock* decision, just by being out publicly and by doing this Q&A, I could have been fired from my job there. To me, being able to be your authentic self in private and public is so important and is not guaranteed to everyone. To know the feeling of having to hide parts of yourself to appear "professional" is painful and damaging. This is why diversity, equity, and inclusion issues are so important in our profession, the feeling of not being excluded or "othered" is so paramount to being a successful person.

What does it mean to you to have a commitment to diversity and inclusion in the workplace?

Simply put, a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace means that you value everyone in your workplace. By promoting these qualities, you can show that everyone's opinions and experiences are worth listening to. It all comes down to whether or not you respect your colleagues' lives.

What is your approach to understanding the perspectives of colleagues from different backgrounds?

Listening. As a cis-white man, I know that I carry certain privileges and because of that, my best first step is to listen to the concerns of my colleagues who have different gender identities or racial backgrounds than I have. On the flip side, it is what I expect from my colleagues in return when I discuss my lived experiences as an openly gay man.

I believe that only by really listening and believing other's lived experiences, can we work toward understanding and combating our unconscious biases to create a more inclusive environment that everyone can feel comfortable in. It's also important to not feel personally attacked when someone points out an unconscious bias or privilege you have, this is often known as "white fragility". It is not an attack on you as a person if the impact of a statement or action you've done is harmful in some way. Often someone's intent will not be malicious, but the impact is, nonetheless. It's really important to think about impact over intent in these situations and to make sure you correct yourself in the future. Mistakes will happen, (I know because I've made them) but if you come across as trying to grow, that often will be very impactful.

What do you think the Bar can do to raise awareness regarding Diversity & Inclusion?

This is a great question because I think the Bar can have a really large impact on making the entire judicial system more equitable and inclusive. Starting with expanding from just thinking about inclusion (making sure people have a seat at the table) to also including equity (making sure we are listening to the people at the table now) and justice issues. One of the Bar's goals from our 2017 Strategic Plan is to "advocate[e] on behalf of access of justice", which dovetails with this expansion. Oftentimes, BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities feel that the judiciary and lawyers are not with them, but in fact are antagonistic. By using the Bar to work with community partners to highlight ways that the judicial system and, by extension we as attorneys, can help strive for a more equitable and accessible justice system to help create a better Rhode Island. This is of course a big lift that I do hope the Task Force is up to.

That said, as members of the Bar we can help attain these goals by our daily actions. Some of these are small, but impactful decisions, like being mindful of the conversations and jokes we make, and normalizing pronoun use and other terms like "Mx." or "folks" to make trans and gender non-binary colleagues and clients feel more included. If we truly want a diverse, vibrant, inclusive, and equitable Bar Association, it's not for us to wait for a Task Force to tell us what to do, but to put in the work ourselves to build the community we want.