

# AN INCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



with Leon Howard, Esq.



The mission of the State Bar of New Mexico's Equity in Justice Program is to cultivate and grow a legal profession in New Mexico that is representative of and reflective of the people of New Mexico. As part of that mission, we bring you the series "Inclusive Interviews." We call these *inclusive* interviews both as a play on words and as a contrast to the term "Exclusive Interview."

Because legal employers with inclusive hiring and employment practices have a bigger talent pool from which to hire and access to a larger client base, these interviews serve to amplify that growing and cultivating inclusivity in our profession is beneficial to all legal employers, be they private firms, government entities or nonprofits.

This *Inclusive Interview* is with Leon Howard, Esq. Leon has been a practicing attorney for 16 years and is the Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico.

**Q:** What is your background?

**A:** I was raised in Albuquerque's International District. My initial exposure to the legal field came as a teenager when my high school basketball coach's wife helped me secure a job as a runner at a law firm, Freedman Boyd Daniels Hollander Goldberg & Cline (at the time).

**Q:** What made you want to become a lawyer?

**A:** While I had incredible mentors at Freedman Boyd, I noticed a lack of representation—few, if any, looked like me. This realization became even more pronounced during visits to Metro Court, where I saw many individuals from my neighborhood facing legal challenges without adequate representation. These experiences solidified my commitment to pursuing a career in law.

**Q:** What has been your greatest accomplishment in your legal career or of what in your legal career are you the most proud?

**A:** Perhaps recency bias, but one of the most impactful cases I've worked on is *Johnson v. The Board of Education for Albuquerque Public Schools*. This lawsuit addressed discrimination against Native American students and led to a significant shift in New Mexico law, recognizing public schools as public accommodations under the Human Rights Act. The case challenged the longstanding precedent that public schools weren't considered public accommodations under the New Mexico Human Rights Act. In January 2025, the New Mexico Supreme Court overturned this precedent, marking a significant shift in protecting students from discrimination.

**Q:** What has been the biggest challenge you have had in your legal career?

**A:** The current moment feels like the biggest challenge I've faced in my legal career.

From a personal standpoint, I've spent much of my career working to diversify the legal field, not just who enters, but who thrives and leads. Seeing those efforts under attack is disheartening. As lawyers, we swore to uphold the Constitution and equal protection, yet it's become politically convenient to oppose the very principles that make our profession worthy of trust.



From an organizational standpoint, the work hasn't gotten any lighter. We're in a moment where the volume and intensity of threats feel unrelenting. I never thought I'd say the words, "I'm helping our team file a TRO to prevent the transport of our clients to Guantánamo," and yet that's where I was, reviewing a brief on this issue during the Super Bowl earlier this year. We've watched international students in New Mexico stripped of their visas without process or notice. But even in all of this, I feel lucky to be in the fight and I hope I'm doing my part to help our organization rise to meet the moment.

**Q:** What is your favorite part of your current position?

**A:** Leading the ACLU of New Mexico means I get to be part of defining what fairness look like for communities that have too often been left out or left behind.

Also, I get to work alongside a brilliant, dedicated team that shows up every day with a deep sense of purpose. I've also been incredibly fortunate to have mentors and colleagues who have had my back throughout my career, people I can call at any hour and who never hesitate to offer wisdom, encouragement or just a reality check. That kind of support isn't common, and I don't take it for granted.

And I'd be remiss not to shout out our Legal Director, Maria Martinez Sanchez who has worked for our organization for over 10 years and has become one of my best friends. She brings such clarity, conviction and courage to her leadership of our legal department. Working with Maria is both grounding and energizing, she's someone who pushes the work forward while staying rooted in why we do it.

**Q:** What is your advice for new lawyers who are from diverse backgrounds? What do you wish someone had told you when you were starting your legal career?

**A:** Embrace your unique perspective, it's a strength, not a liability. Your background and experiences enrich your approach to the law. And find mentors who keep it real with you, who'll be honest when you need it, but also push you to keep growing. You never know which piece of advice will be the one that sticks and helps you level up. For me, it came early in my career when I was a new staff attorney, still pretty self-conscious about my legal writing. Then-Legal Director Laura Schauer Ives once absolutely tore apart a brief I'd written. But after pointing out all the things that needed work, she looked at me and said, "You write with passion, never lose that. Everything else we can work on." That one line gave me the confidence I needed to keep improving, and I've carried it with me ever since.

**Q:** If you got to choose a song that would play every time you entered a room, what song would you pick, and why?

**A:** "Hate It or Love It" by The Game and 50 Cent. I've always said it would be my walkout song if I played baseball. They're not my favorite rappers, but that track hits—it's gritty, determined and quietly confident. I played it on repeat while studying for the bar exam. It helped block out doubt and reminded me that no matter where you come from, you can still show up and make your mark..

**Q:** What is something the legal profession in New Mexico can do to be more inclusive?

**A:** The profession must break down barriers for underrepresented groups by rethinking success metrics, building real mentorship and ensuring leadership reflects our communities. Inclusion should be systemic, not symbolic. We also need to reach those who might self-select out—people with records, immigrants, survivors, community college grads. Their perspectives add depth and drive change. If we keep looking in the same places, we'll keep getting the same answers. Real solutions come from getting closer to the ground.

*Interested in being the subject of an Inclusive Interview?*

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