# An Inclusive Interview

Equity in Justice

## with Abby Lewis, 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."

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 non-profits.

This Inclusive Interview is with Abby Lewis, an attorney who has practiced law for almost 15 years, and currently serves as the Equity in Justice Attorney at the State Bar of New Mexico.

**Q:** What is your background?
**A:** I am from Albuquerque, graduated from UNM School of Law, and was admitted to practice law in 2007. For the majority of my career I practiced education law and administrative law. I am also Autistic, LGBTQ+ and disabled.

**Q:** What made you want to become a lawyer?
**A:** My mom was an attorney. She was also a single mother without much money to spare for daycare or afterschool care. And so I grew up in law offices, courtrooms, as well as the chambers of judges who were kind enough to let me hang out in their chambers while my mom appeared in front of them. When people asked me if I wanted to be a lawyer like my mom when I grew up I would answer with a polite version of "heck no!". But then in my junior year of college I took a constitutional law class. I loved it so much I followed it up with an internship at the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York City. It was then I decided to go to law school.

**Q:** What has been your greatest accomplishment or what are you most proud of in your legal career?
**A:** I am most proud of being an advocate. In the almost 20 years since I was admitted, I have, through the practice of law, advocated for public education, Indigenous peoples, government transparency and environmental justice.

**Q:** What has been the biggest challenge you have had in your legal career?
**A:** When I was 16 I was hit by a drunk driver and have since then, and will for the rest of my life, be disabled from that accident. And so the biggest challenge in my legal career has not been one particular job or client; it has been asking for and receiving reasonable accommodations for my disabilities. If you are the person in your organization of whom folks with disabilities request accommodations, please don't make it difficult. As I heard Katy Ellis, a New Mexico disability rights advocate, express on a CLE: when we ask for accommodations we are coming to you on one of our most vulnerable days. So, employers, please do be kind and do not make it difficult to ask for or receive reasonable accommodations. Thankfully (and finally) I have found in my current employer one who made it easy for me to ask, and then provided the accommodations I requested.

**Q:** What is your favorite part of your current position?
**A:** Hands down it is building and nurturing relationships. Relationship building is integral to anything and everything I want to accomplish with the Equity in Justice Program. And in this building and nurturing I also really get to experience the depth and breadth of diversity we have in New Mexico. One minute I may be collaborating with a lawyer in Tucumcari, the next with a New Mexico Supreme Court Justice in Santa Fe, and then the next with a paralegal in Gallup. All with the common vision of a legal profession that truly reflects all of the people of New Mexico. So my favorite part of this position is to get to connect with and work with these remarkable professionals.

**Q:** What is your advice for new lawyers who are also Autistic?
**A:** I would say to consider using your law degree in a non-traditional way. I have not always practiced law since being admitted to the Bar. At one point in my career I spent about 2 years working for non-profits using my persuasive writing skills for grant applications instead of pleadings. At another point I spent about 2 years working for a U.S. Senator in a position where my job to become a content expert in various subject areas and to then keep him informed on and advise him in those areas. And now I administer the Equity in Justice Program at the State Bar! I would also say that no matter how you use your degree, it is vital to safeguard your mental health. Being Autistic is a world that was not built for us and, often built in ways that exclude us, is a very taxing way to move through life. So for new lawyers who are Autistic I would tell them to be aware of the toll this takes on them and make their mental health a priority.

**Q:** If you could trade places with any other person for a week, real or fictional, with whom would it be and why?
**A:** Okay so I realize this isn't a "person" but if I could I would trade places with one of my own dogs! Sleeping whenever I wanted to (on the couch or in the bed of course!), having my meals prepared for me (with plenty of treats coming my way also!). And, of course, having the undying unconditional love of someone with opposable thumbs to do everything for me.

**Q:** What is something the legal profession in New Mexico can do to be more inclusive?
**A:** Offer partial or full remote work. Remote work is a need I have with my disability that I have struggled over the course of my career to find. Thankfully the State Bar of New Mexico embraces remote work and I am able to work 100% from home. The requirement to be in an office full time is an unnecessary barrier for folks with disabilities. There are very few jobs in the legal profession for which one would need to be in an office full-time. Especially in the age of technology in which we are currently living. Legal employers who make it easier for folks with disabilities to work for them will attract and retain skilled and talented employees to their employ that they would have otherwise missed out on; not just folks with disabilities, but also caregivers and parents for whom remote work is a necessity.