

Morrison & Foerster Partner Advocates for LGBTI Lawyers Around the World

Randy Bullard became co-chair of the International Bar Association's LGBTI Law Committee this year.

By Amy Guthrie

Randy Bullard, co-chair of the Latin America desk at Morrison & Foerster, has built an enviable decades-long career as an openly gay lawyer working in a region and practice area that's known for macho attitudes. Along the way, he abided by what he calls the 120% rule—as in performing above and beyond. He also found mentors who helped him advance: two women from minority ethnic groups that are under-represented in corporate law.

Now he says it's time to pay it forward. In January, Bullard, who is based in Miami, became co-chair of the International Bar Association's LGBTI Law Committee, building on years of work as an evangelist for the community.



Randy Bullard

Morrison & Foerster is particularly well-suited to advocate for LGBTI lawyers around the globe. The San Francisco-based law firm embraced matters of sexual orientation long before those topics were even on the map for many companies and law firms. In 1984, it added sexual orientation to



People waving gay rainbow flag at an LGBTI gay pride march in London.

its nondiscrimination policy. Nine years later, the Am Law 100 firm expanded benefits to same-sex partners. In 2001, Morrison & Foerster became the first major law firm to boast an openly gay leader when Keith Wetmore became chair.

Around the world, LGBTI legal practitioners face varying degrees of hostility. Homosexuality is considered a crime in much of the Middle East and Africa, while animosity toward gays remains high in countries such as Russia and China.

Latin America is comparatively progressive. Argentina legalized same-sex

marriage in 2010—five years before the U.S.—with Brazil and Uruguay following suit in 2013, Colombia joining in 2016 and Costa Rica coming on board in 2020. In the region's largest economy, Brazil, several top law firms have set up LGBTI affinity groups in recent years to foster inclusion among staff. Still, the region as a whole leans conservative. Being an LGBTI attorney in Latin America requires a bit of ingenuity.

To help mark Pride Month in the legal community, Law.com International asked Bullard to discuss how firm-wide efforts such as affinity networks can

create welcoming spaces for lawyers, effect external change and deepen client relationships—in Latin America and beyond.

The following has been edited slightly for length and clarity

What inspired you to take on the role of vice chair of the International Bar Association's LGBTI Law Committee?

As one gets older, you self-evaluate and say: Who helped me along the way? What impediments were in my way? How did I get around them, and who helped me do that? Once I got to a position of being an established attorney, I felt the need to make the road easier for people coming up. In the legal profession, people advance not only because of hard work, not only because of dedication and intelligence. They need sponsorship. They need mentors. They need rabbis and people to help them. I don't think historically the LGBTI community has had that within large law firms. But I did have that. So I wanted to make sure that I was that person going forward and that I became an example for people to see that it is possible to succeed in Big Law and in a practice—M&A—which is not necessarily the most friendly or most facilitating for LGBTI people to participate in.

What would be your elevator pitch for law firms on why they should establish LGBTI affinity groups?

It sets firms apart from their competitors. Diverse working groups lead to better decision-making and less group

think. It also creates a compounding effect: it assists in attracting the best talent, and creates the best culture for true quality practitioners to be retained and elevated.

Law firms are scary places for people who are different, and they tend to leave Big Law faster and more often than others—talent and capabilities notwithstanding. Corporate boards and general counsels' offices are also changing. They are asking, if not demanding, that their law firm providers change as well. And they should.

Aside from helping law firm culture, how are LGBTI affinity groups good for business?

At least in the U.S.—and we're seeing it a lot more filter through to Latin America—tech companies and very, very 21st century companies want to see diverse representation in their legal teams. It helps to have LGBTI people included. Having diverse people of all sorts as part of a real business engagement has helped us [at Morrison Foerster] get a lot of very large, premium client work. Last year, a very significant U.S.-based client switched to MoFo for a specific engagement because the company felt its prior legal team had not met established criteria for diversity. [He did not disclose the name of the client.]

How would you compare the working environment for LGBTI lawyers in Latin America with other parts of the world?

I'm not Latin American and I don't live there. I grew up in the South, in a very

religious area of North Carolina. I think it's still very similar to what I experienced in the 70s and 80s. It's just not talked about, it's hidden. And there's still a lot of religious and conservative family status. Obviously in larger cities, among educated populations, it's different. I think it's still tough. People are not as accepting. People in the U.S. know they're not supposed to be anti-gay. They might be and hide it, but they're not vocally anti-gay in the same ways that they were 20 or 25 years ago. I'm not confident that's completely true in other places.

What is it like to be an openly gay practice head/senior lawyer in Big Law?

For me, at this point in my career, this is a non-issue. It is who I am and who I have always been. My obligation is to make sure that, for younger attorneys just starting out or in the practice-growing phase, that this is a non-issue for them as well. The toll that segmenting your life has—hiding it or not talking about your personal life and not talking about your personal obligations or what you do on weekends and just presenting an alternative personality—creates an enormous amount of stress and exhaustion in anybody. Those stresses take tolls on people and people leave regardless of how well regarded they are, how successful they are. People cannot be their best selves, their best employees, if they cannot be authentic. It's just human nature.