

Out and About

**THE LGBT EXPERIENCE
IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION**



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Printed in the United States of America.

17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-1-63425-128-0

e-ISBN: 978-1-63425-129-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Out and about : the LGBT experience in the legal profession / published by American Bar Association's Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) and the National LGBT Bar Association.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-63425-128-0 (alk. paper)

1. Sexual minorities—Legal status, laws, etc.—United States. 2. Gays—Legal status, laws, etc.—United States 3. Bisexuals—Legal status, laws, etc.—United States 4. Transgender people—Legal status, laws, etc.—United States 5. Transphobia—Law and legislation—United States. 6. Homophobia—Law and legislation—United States. I. American Bar Association. Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. II. National LGBT Bar Association

KF3467.5.O98 2015

331.5'30973—dc23

2015027707

Discounts are available for books ordered in bulk. Special consideration is given to state bars, CLE programs, and other bar-related organizations. Inquire at Book Publishing, ABA Publishing, American Bar Association, 321 N. Clark Street, Chicago, Illinois 60654-7598.

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SARAH SCHNORR

My name is Sara Schnorr, a senior partner in the Boston office of Edwards Wildman. An increasing rarity in the profession, I'm still practicing with the same firm I joined directly out of law school 33 years ago. A former member of the firm's hiring committee, I'm currently a member of the firm's diversity, pro bono, and legal opinion review committees.

Like many who suddenly found themselves at the same firm for 20 to 25 years and struggling with the changes in the legal industry over that period, I needed to do something to reengage in, recalibrate, and reinvigorate my practice. I also needed to resolve a deeply personal issue with which I had been wrestling for most of my life. I needed a change.

But unlike those in my cohort who pursued mid- to late-career change by moving to a different firm, or by retiring to teach or become a sailmakers, I chose to follow—with a grateful nod to Robert Frost—the road “less traveled by, and that has made all the difference” in my life.

My different road? After having spent 20+ years of paying therapists to “cure” me of the gender dysphoria I had battled with for over 50 years—mostly by repressing and feeling guilty about it, but by never being able ultimately to escape its imperative—I finally accepted that I was a transsexual.

Though designated at birth as male, my innermost identity and the sensibilities that I used to deal with life, to solve problems, to develop interpersonal relationships, had always been those of a female. From age 4 until I finally embraced that fact early in 2009, I had lived with my body sex and the gender of my soul in constant conflict. To resolve that conflict, the medically approved “Standards of Care” for treating transsexuals called for me to take controlled, progressive steps, both medically and socially, to transition to living completely as a female, a lengthy and complex transition process I began in January of 2009.

I disclosed my gender transition plans to firm management and to my three most significant clients in mid-July of 2009. Firm management and my clients all had essentially the same response to my news: “Of course we’ll support you!”

By August of 2009, I was living as a female 7 days a week, except for the hours I worked at Edwards Wildman’s offices. In September 2009, Probate Court approved my name from Tom to Sara Schnorr; I obtained a new driver’s license identifying me as female; and I changed my name with the Social Security Administration. On November 14, 2009, I underwent extensive “facial feminization surgery” in Chicago. And with the support of my firm, my colleagues, my clients, and the Boston legal, governmental, and affordable housing communities I had worked with for 30 years, on my return from Chicago in

December, I began to practice law as Sara. My transition to being Sara, my true and authentic self, had achieved initial success. To my knowledge, I'm the first person who underwent a "sex change" while a partner at an AMLaw 100 firm.

My transition has gone much better than I ever could have expected.

Since my transition in 2009, my metrics—those billable hours, billings, and collections that big law lawyers deal with daily—have increased about 10 percent year over year—despite the recession and the weeks that I spent recovering from extensive additional transition-related surgeries in 2010 and 2011. And I have acquired new clients, and I have received more internal referral work from other practice areas within the firm than I have in years.

Once of my partners recently told me I've noticeably changed for the better: pretransition, I was perceived as an amiable, hardworking, and solidly reliable partner; but since my transition, I had morphed into a more personable, happier, engaging, and outgoing lawyer! Other lawyers in my firm now tell me that they really don't remember me as Tom, but rather only as Sara, someone they feel like they've known for years.

When I disclosed to my key clients that I was transitioning to a female, each one told me that "why would that make a difference to us? You've represented us for years. You understand our business, you are responsive to our legal demands, you solve problems creatively, and our staff likes and respects you. To retain you as our lawyer, we will gladly learn to call you Sara. Now let's talk about the latest matter the company is facing. . . ."

I think my transition has been successful for a number of reasons.

I had spent 30 years developing specialized practices in the acquisition, development, permitting, and financing of affordable housing and community development project, an industry—at least here in Massachusetts—that involves predominately diverse, progressive, and open-minded professionals who realized that my transition did not affect my legal abilities. Too, my firm has always been culturally progressive. When I joined Palmer & Dodge in 1979, the firm had three women and two openly gay partners; and several years before I transitioned, had "gender identity and expression" was added as a protected class to the firm's equal employment opportunity and nondiscrimination policies.

I was—and continue to be—a contributor to my firm's economic bottom line, to associate hiring and training, and a huge promoter and supporter of pro bono work.

And in many ways more important than I wish, I present convincingly as a stereotypical, professional 60+ year-old woman who is physically indistinguishable from and blends in with the other "older" female lawyers in Boston. In other words, I don't embarrass my firm or my partners, since new clients and new partners—who were not connected to my firm in 2009 when I "made the change"—frankly have no idea that I'm not a genetic woman.

Based upon my rather unique perspective of having been on both sides of the gender divide, I've learned a lot about the dynamics of the legal practice.

Many male lawyers and clients do in fact treat female lawyers differently than they do male lawyers. Males approach female lawyers with less respect, often with a mildly condescending attitude, and typically assume the female lawyers really don't have the same skills that men do. It will likely take several more generations before that changes.

Physical attractiveness of women lawyers is overly important to males still in control of big law; gender discrimination remains pervasive in the profession. Women associates who meet traditional notions of being attractive progress much more rapidly in the associate ranks than do their sisters who are more "plain" in their presentation. That remains one of the shames of the profession.

Even though I dropped several rungs on the status and privilege ladder merely by changing my gender, and even though I often find that male lawyers and clients treat me in ways they never would have done while I was practicing as Tom, I'm now very healthier, happier, and more productive as a human being and as a lawyer than I ever was before.

As wonderful as my successful gender change has been, I'm deeply saddened and upset to report that the large majority of other lawyers who attempt transition in the legal workplace meet with no success, but rather typically themselves out of a job. That's an issue crying out to be addressed by the profession.