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Q & A

DOING HIS

PART By Dustin Seibert

**Cozen O'Connor's
Gassman always
trying to help
fellow LGBTQ+
attorneys thrive**



Gary Gassman was motivated to become a lawyer by his parents. But it was his mother, Judy, a fellow lawyer, who is likely most responsible for him spending most of his 28-year career as an openly gay attorney in an industry that still has work to do with social progressiveness.

Instilling her values into Gassman paid off. He's a shareholder for the Chicago office of full-service firm Cozen O'Connor and the chair-elect of the American Bar Association Tort Trial & Insurance Practice Section. In both roles, as with every professional leadership role he's adopted throughout his career, Gassman has made it a point to propagate his mother's values throughout the industry and remain consistently vocal about his sexuality in the interest of normalization.

"My mother is a super liberal, progressive thinker when it comes to people and disenfranchised communities. And here she had a gay child," Gassman said. "Doing good, supporting disenfranchised communities, lifting them up and helping them get to equal ground as best as you can was instilled in me, my brothers and sisters by our mom."

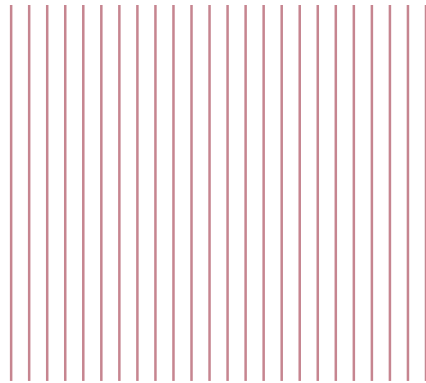
The 1993 John Marshall Law School graduate talks to *Chicago Lawyer* about his path in big law as a gay man and how far the legal industry has to go in inclusiveness of minority and disenfranchised communities. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Chicago Lawyer: You came out to your family at a young age?

Gary Gassman: I didn't sit them down and verbalize it to them until I was 25 years old, after I had graduated from law school, passed the bar and gotten my first job. Regardless of how irrational it might have seemed to anybody who knew my relationship with my parents and my extended family, I did it like that because I knew that if there was any love lost, I was at a place that everybody wanted me to be. It doesn't seem like the most rational thing, but you're not thinking rationally when you feel like an outsider, regardless of the level of disenfranchisement. I'm a Caucasian male, so if I shut up and wear a blue suit, does anybody really need to know? But the goal is always to get to a place where you can be your authentic self, and that was a very different thing in the '80s and early '90s than it is today.

CL: What's it like being out at Cozen O'Connor?

GG: Cozen is extremely supportive of diversity and inclusion initiatives. They allow me to champion not only other LGBTQ+ people, but lawyers in other diverse communities. These efforts are so important to my law firm that it's always about making initiatives better and broader. I'm currently the only shareholder who is self-identified openly gay, but there are many other self-identified LGBTQ members and associates at Cozen, and ultimately there will be other LGBTQ shareholders. Cozen is championing all of these efforts, and



it's wonderful. I can't imagine being at a more supportive place.

CL: You've been a musical theater buff your whole life. How did that inform your legal career?

GG: For somebody like me who was a very insecure kid and felt like an outsider, it was an outlet to be someone else. A lot of us create personas so that we can cope and we can succeed. Thankfully, I had that as an outlet so that I didn't retract into myself, but a lot of gay people who do that can lose sight of their authentic selves.

[Through performing arts] I created this person who was confident and outgoing and could talk about business, ask clients for work and toot his own horn... all of the things that today can still be somewhat uncomfortable to do. People have said to me for years, "why don't you get involved in community theater?" Not that it doesn't interest me, but you have to choose where you put your time.

CL: What are some differences between your experiences and those of younger LGBTQ+ members in the legal industry?

GG: The numbers are much better today than they once were in terms of the representation of minority or any disenfranchised people at big law firms. But we still lag behind in partnership. It's still hard to get real numbers with respect to the LGBTQ community, because it requires people to self-identify, and there are still a lot of LGBTQ people in the workforce who fear self-identifying with their employer, and that fear is justified.

Everybody at my firm knows I'm the co-chair of the LGBT attorney resource group. I cannot emphasize enough how important I think it is for people from disenfranchised groups to see themselves in leadership positions. Somebody who looks like them making it to the top of the food chain is the only real way to send a message that they're welcome.

If a person of color doesn't see him or herself in the boardroom, they're not going to feel welcome. They're not going to know necessarily who to turn to for assistance. I make it a point anytime that I'm asked to speak on something — whether it has anything to do with diversity, equity or inclusion is immaterial — that the audience knows that I'm a gay male, then I'm a shareholder and co-chair of

the resource group at Cozen O'Connor because I want people who are like me in every audience to know that they're represented.

CL: Is the industry getting any closer to where it needs to be in terms of inclusion?

GG: I won't say we're close to where we need to be until we can stop talking about it. We still have a lot of work to do, and I always fear that the moment we stop talking about it, we're just going to backtrack.

Things are improving, certainly with younger practitioners coming out of law school who are out and feel confident and free to be their authentic selves in every way and won't accept anything less. We have very few statistics about solo practitioners or small law firms; what the industry seems to track is what's going on in the big law firms that make a lot of money, so we definitely see numbers increasing at the associate ranks.

CL: What could our readers do on an individual level to improve the industry for disenfranchised groups?

GG: Sometimes it's just about having conversations, opening their eyes to things that they might not be aware of, or asking them to engage in self-reflection regarding how they act in certain circumstances.

I think it's important for any member of a minority group or disenfranchised group — but particularly allies who have made it to leadership ranks in a firm — to pay it forward. Assist the people behind you in getting to the table. Outreach to people that don't look like you and who come from different experiences.

The truth of the matter is that disenfranchised groups are in need of a straight white male ally. I hate the thought of people spending hours in a conference room or at a bar association meeting talking about the issues and coming up with a plan on how to get past them, and then not exercising those types of initiatives in their personal lives. I think it's inconsistent.

I don't want you to stop thinking about this when you go home. I don't want you to stop considering those issues and the impact on people that can trickle down from your own behavior.

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